

# **Silk Study Guide**

**Silk by Alessandro Baricco**

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## Plot Summary

Hervé Joncour travels the world buying silkworm eggs and eventually travels as far as Japan. He buys eggs from Hara Kei, a French-speaking nobleman. Joncour falls in love with his mistress. During his second visit to Japan, Joncour learns about the aviary of exotic birds that Hara Kei has built; he leaves a glove for Hara Kei's mistress to find in a pile of clothes. Hara Kei's mistress gives him a love note written in Japanese that says, "Come back, or I shall die."

During Joncour's third visit to Japan, Hara Kei's mistress releases the birds from the aviary. Joncour and Hara Kei's mistress have sex by proxy. Hara Kei conducts the silkworm egg transaction via an associate and does not say goodbye when Joncour leaves. When it is time for Joncour to make a fourth trip to Japan, war has broken out. He finds Hara Kei's village burned to the ground. A young boy appears and gives him the glove that he had dropped on the pile of Hara Kei's mistress's clothes. He follows the boy to the place where the refugees from Hara Kei's village are camping.

Hara Kei denies Joncour welcome but Joncour refuses to leave. The next morning, Joncour sees the body of the boy hanging from a tree; Hara Kei has executed him for carrying the glove to Joncour and bringing him back to the village. Joncour hastily procures a supply of eggs but leaves far too late in the season to transport them to France. The silk mills sit idle that year.

One day, he receives a letter written in Japanese. He takes it to Madame Blanche. It is an erotic love letter from a woman to her beloved master. Madame Blanche gives him some of her trademark blue flowers. Joncour retires from the silkworm egg business; he and Hélène have three daughters. Baldabiou leaves Lavilledieu suddenly and is not heard from again. Hélène dies of a fever several years later. On a visit to her grave, Joncour sees Madame Blanche's blue flowers there. He visits her and learns that his wife is the author of the letter.



# Chapters 1-3

## Chapters 1-3 Summary

Silk is a novel about a man who travels the world, falls illicitly in love, succumbs to obsession, and learns the true worth of the woman he already has. The bulk of the story covers the years 1861 to 1865, but there are a few chapters that address the personal history of some characters and follow more extensively the lives of others. It is set primarily in Lavilledieu, in a small town in France. It describes the romantic adventure of a traveling silkworm egg trader, Hervé Joncour, a Frenchman who falls in love with the mistress of a Japanese man.

The novel opens in 1861. Thirty-two-year-old Hervé Joncour is a silkworm trader. He lives in the town of Lavilledieu in the south of France with his wife, Hélène. Each January, Joncour travels thousands of miles across Europe and Asia to purchase silkworm eggs. He returns by the end of April and spends two weeks preparing the eggs for sale to regional silk manufacturers. He does no more work for the rest of the year.

When a silkworm egg hatches, the larva eats mulberry leaves and spins a cocoon around itself. Two weeks later, the worm abandons the cocoon. Silk producers unravel the cocoons, which is a single thread of silk about a thousand meters in length that can be woven into silk cloth.

## Chapters 1-3 Analysis

The first three chapters of the novel introduce its historical setting, explain the process of extracting silk fibers from silkworm eggs, and describe the main character, Hervé Joncour. Joncour is married but has no children; he is away from home one-third of the year with a wife alone. His wife, Hélène, thus has a great opportunity to commit marital infidelities, although nothing in these first chapters suggests that she takes advantage of the separation. The possibility, however, exists and colors the reading.

The action of the book is located chronologically by references to Gustav Flaubert and his novel *Salamambo*, and Abraham Lincoln and the American Civil War. Flaubert is famous in modern times for *Madame Bovary*, a novel of infidelity; *Salamambo* is an historical novel about the Punic Wars, the theft of a sacred veil from a religious shrine, and how death comes to whoever touches it. Scarves, curtains, and veils play important roles in the Baricco's novel, *Silk*.



# Chapters 4-5

## Chapters 4-5 Summary

Hervé Joncour is made fairly wealthy by silk trading, and lives in relative luxury with his wife in their country town. He is untouched by his experiences traveling the world, and does not tell exciting stories about adventures to people who ask. He owns the house he lives in and a laboratory.

Joncour's calm way of living is disrupted by an epidemic of pébrine, a disease that makes silkworms unable to produce silk. The disease has affected silkworms in every region from which the French silk traders customarily purchase silk. Baldabiou, however, hints that there may be other sources of silkworm eggs.

## Chapters 4-5 Analysis

Chapters 4 and 5 contrast the passive serenity of Joncour's nature with his role as the savior of the town of Lavilledieu. He is a discreet man who enjoys his simple luxurious without great passion, but he is also a world adventurer who retrieves silkworm eggs from exotic locales. Joncour's private and public selves are quite disparate, which later explains how he is able to conduct two romances simultaneously. Joncour is the hero of the adventure, but he does not know it yet.

The story of Jean Berbeck illuminates the dangers of silence, and its lingering effects. Joncour's love affair with the Japanese woman will be conducted completely in silence, in part because he is, as described by the narrative, a man who prefers to observe rather than participate in his life. The failure to communicate will become an issue several times in the novel, and serves to introduce the element of danger into the adventure.



# Chapters 6-7

## Chapters 6-7 Summary

Twenty years prior to the start of the novel, Baldabiau arrives without introduction in the town of Lavilledieu and drops an orange silk scarf on the mayor's desk. The mayor dismisses it as "woman's stuff" and Baldabiau informs him that it is "money." Baldabiau builds a silk mill, builds a shed for raising silkworms, and builds and dedicates a chapel to Saint Agnes. Seven months later, he returns to the mayor's office and shows him 30,000 francs. The mayor calls it "money" and Baldabiau said that it is proof the mayor is a "blockhead." He suggests that the mayor keep his nose out of Baldabiau's business. Baldabiau prefers to share secret knowledge than to suppress competition, and when other men follow him into the silk business, he provides information and creates no obstacles. As a result, within the next five years seven silk mills open in Lavilledieu and the town becomes one of Europe's leaders in silk production and silk spinning.

Eight years prior to the start of the novel, Baldabiau recruits Hervé Joncour as a silk trader because the first outbreaks of silkworm diseases are starting to affect silkworm supply. Baldabiau is at the Café Verdun when Joncour passes in his army uniform while home on leave. He suggests that Joncour become a trader; Joncour declines because he has already begun a military career per his father's wishes. (His father is the mayor.) When Baldabiau and Joncour appear in front of the mayor and invoke the name of Saint Agnes, the mayor does not argue about his son leaving the military. Joncour sets out to collect silkworms one month later.

## Chapters 6-7 Analysis

Chapters 6 and 7 present what personal history there is of Baldabiau. They focus on how he helps the town and becomes Hervé Joncour's mentor instead of how he knows about silk.

Baldabiau is guided by his devotion to the Catholic Saint Agnes. Her feast day is January 21. It is not possible to determine the exact date that Baldabiau convinces the mayor of Lavilledieu—Joncour's father—to allow Joncour to work as a silkworm egg trader, but the mayor refers to Saint Agnes and the conversation took place sometime in mid-January. It is possible that this saint determined Joncour's future because it was on her saint's day that both his father and his mentor invoked her name.



# Chapters 8-11

## Chapters 8-11 Summary

In August of 1861, Baldabiau and Hervé Joncour talk in the Café Verdun, long after the owner is ready to close. Baldabiau insists to Joncour that they must seek silkworms in Japan if they hope to find healthy ones. Joncour asks where Japan is and Baldabiau says at the end of the world.

Baldabiau has heard rumors that Japan is producing the finest silk in the world, even though no European silk manufacturers have heard of Japan. He wants Joncour to smuggle silkworm eggs out of the country against Japanese laws. Although the men of Lavilledieu are in great respect of local law, Baldabiau and Joncour have no qualms about breaking the laws of a nation far away. Joncour leaves on October 6, 1861 on a purchasing mission financed by all the local silk manufacturers. He tells his wife Hélène not to worry while he is gone.

## Chapters 8-11 Analysis

Chapters 8 through 11 emphasize how foreign Japan appears to the French businessmen. Most of the townsfolk of Lavilledieu have not even heard of Japan and accept without remark Baldabiau's comment that it is at the end of the world. Some historical background explains how isolationist the Japanese were at this time period, and portrays the opening of Japan to foreign traders in terms of military conquest. The casualness with which the silk manufacturers consider the risks of traveling to Japan to procure silkworm eggs (under the penalty of death to the trader) underscores how little they regard the laws and customs of the Japanese people.

Baldabiau is the person who hatches the plan to send Joncour on this journey. The word "destiny" is used to describe Joncour's journey, which lends to his journey the aura of a mythical adventure to the "end of the world." "The end of the world" alludes to the way that this journey, especially meeting a woman in Japan, ends his peaceful domestic life.





# Chapters 12-16

## Chapters 12-16 Summary

Hervé Joncour leaves Lavilledieu, France for Japan with 80,000 gold francs and the names of three men. He travels overland through Europe and northern Asia to Lake Baikal, down a river to the Pacific Ocean, and then rides on a Dutch smuggler's ship to Japan. He travels inconspicuously through Japanese villages, until he is met and blindfolded by a man who keeps his own face hidden until the exchange of gold for silkworms has been made and Joncour has gone away. As Joncour leaves the outskirts of the village, he is stopped by a man speaking only Japanese and is escorted to the home of Hara Kei, the local nobleman.

Hara Kei receives Joncour while sitting on the floor of a room with a woman lying with her head in his lap. The woman is wearing a red dress. Hara Kei speaks to Joncour in Japanese as they drink tea together; while listening, Joncour sneaks a look at the woman's face. She is very young. When he just as quickly returns his eyes to Hara Kei's, Hara Kei pauses and then addresses Joncour in French.

In French, Joncour explains to Hara Kei the details of his life that have created him as a man. During this speech, the girl in Hara Kei's lap opens her eyes. Joncour notices that her eyes do not have the characteristic shape of the Japanese; the discovery flusters him. He struggles to continue his narrative without betraying the emotion he feels. He drinks from his teacup to steady himself, replaces it to the floor, and resumes talking.

The girl slides a hand out from the folds of her dress, reaches over Hara Kei's teacup, and picks up Joncour's. She then very deliberately turns the cup, closes her eyes, and sips from the exact spot on the rim his lips had touched. She returns the cup to the floor and her head back into Hara Kei's lap. She keeps her eyes on Joncour until he is finished.

Hara Kei invites Joncour to return and informs him that the eggs purchased already are nothing more than fish eggs. Joncour lifts his teacup and drinks from the spot she drank from. He answers that he already knows about the fish eggs (which explains why he paid in counterfeit money). Hara Kei promises him silkworm eggs; Joncour promises to pay him after leaving Japan alive.

## Chapters 12-16 Analysis

Chapters 12 through 16 follow Joncour from France all the way to the forests of Japan by train, horseback, ship, and on foot. The description of this journey reads like a list and is rather tedious, but the reader who reads every word will have a good sense of just how long it takes Joncour to arrive at his destination and how far he goes. When the narrative returns to its usual pattern of describing people and scenery, the reader will



really pay attention to the details. It is like seeing Japan with the same fresh eyes with which Joncour sees Japan.

The cloak-and-dagger antics of having contact names, using blindfolds, and wearing masks remind the reader that an adventure tale lies beneath this story of commerce. In contrast, when Hara Kei suddenly appears, he seems the picture of great civility. He has a home and a female companion, he serves tea, and he speaks French. Hara Kei is portrayed as a landed gentleman rather than a shifty foreigner. Joncour is not even his peer—Hara Kei rules his home like a castle and has the authority of a king although he wears no outward symbols of his power. He is a man who communicates very well through posture and silence as well as in words.

Hara Kei's mistress wears bright colors that stand out against Hara Kei's somber tunics and the shadows of the trees that surround the house; in fact, she is described as a flame on a bed of ash. Fire represents passion and destruction, both of which are themes of this novel. Hara Kei is associated by default with ash.

She also communicates very well, albeit through posture and silence. She commands Joncour's attention merely by opening her eyes and she is the one who initiates the love affair that blossoms with herself and Joncour. Literally beneath Hara Kei's nose, Joncour and this woman share a teacup in a manner that is flagrantly sexual. The professional banter between Hara Kei and Joncour suggests that Hara Kei is unaware of the exchange between his mistress and his guest, although he may just be ignoring it.



# Chapters 17-18

## Chapters 17-18 Summary

Hervé Joncour returns home three months later. He brings his wife Hélène a tunic made of silk. The eggs he purchased turn out such a high quality and quantity of silk that two more mills open in the village of Lavilledieu. Baldabiou adds on to the chapel of Saint Agnes. Joncour purchases thirty acres of land and spends the summer designing gardens for it. He passes his time at the Café Verdun and listening to Hélène read aloud.

## Chapters 17-18 Analysis

Joncour's wife's refusal to wear the silk tunic that he brought to her and Joncour's comment to Baldabiou about how the end of the world is invisible are examples of how Joncour has compartmentalized his experience in Japan. The tunic is of such a fine cloth that it is like being woven out of nothing at all; Japan is invisible because Joncour spent so much time blindfolded but also because he cannot allow himself to think about what happened there. It would interrupt his peace.

Baldabiou's insistence on dolphins instead of the customary bulls on a cloister added to the chapel of Saint Agnes is an example of a man imposing his own symbolism onto an established tradition. His selection of dolphins instead of standard Christian animals further removes him from the realm of ordinary person.

In contrast to the silent tea "ceremony" that Joncour enacted with the mistress of Hara Kei during the winter, Joncour spends the summer listening to his wife read aloud. This difference in communication underscores the polarization of Joncour's affections: silence, speech; viscera, intellect; home, abroad.



# Chapters 19-20

## Chapters 19-20 Summary

Hervé Joncour travels again to Japan in September of 1862. He is escorted to Hara Kei's village and taken to greet him. Hara Kei is on the shore of a lake facing the water. With him is the young girl wearing an orange dress. The girl sees Joncour approach. Joncour walks to the lake through the thick of some trees; when he reaches Hara Kei, there is only an orange dress and sandals where the girl was standing. The two men talk. When they get up to leave, Joncour discreetly drops one of his gloves on the pile of clothing.

Hervé Joncour spends four days in a guesthouse on Hara Kei's estate. Servants and even villagers see to his every need and desire. On the second day, an Englishman selling arms shares a dinner with Joncour. Joncour inquires about a white woman who lives nearby but the Englishman says that no white women live anywhere in Japan.

## Chapters 19-20 Analysis

When Joncour returns to Hara Kei to buy silkworm eggs the following year, he interrupts the intimacy of the Japanese couple in two ways: he actually stumbles on them when the mistress is swimming naked in a lake, and he propositions the mistress by leaving a personal object for her to find. Joncour's first act upon arriving in Hara Kei's village is to betray the man who has been friendly and generous, and upon whom the economy of Lavilledieu relies.

Joncour has become obsessed with Hara Kei's mistress. He is also careless about his interest in the woman—when another European arrives in the village, Joncour inquires about the presence of a European woman locally. He does not identify her, but he does not really know this trader with whom he dines. Broaching the subject is risky and it is possible that word somehow gets back to Hara Kei about this conversation, although the possibility is not addressed explicitly in the book. Joncour is, after all, accompanied everywhere by Hara Kei's servants, who probably are spies.

The Englishman's denial that no European women live in Japan could mean one of two things: 1) Hara Kei's mistress is not European, although she has round eyes, and Joncour is so ignorant of this culture that he does not know that there are people in other Asian nations who have round eyes. 2) Hara Kei has a mistress of European successfully hidden from the public at large, which would be a testament both to the remoteness of Hara Kei's province and the deference he receives from his villagers who have not spoken a word about this woman to outsiders. The former scenario would lessen Joncour's authority; the latter would enhance Hara Kei's. In either case, this scene pushes the two men away from the relationship that had seemed quite equal during the previous visit and places them in a situation in which Hara Kei has control

over Joncour. Joncour is staying, after all, in Hara Kei's guesthouse and being tended to and bathed by his servants.



# Chapters 21-23

## Chapters 21-23 Summary

On the third day of his visit, Hervé Joncour and Hara Kei take a walk to the crest of a hill and watch a flock of birds. Hara Kei says that the local people read the future in the birds' flight and that he once brought down a blue bird with an arrow to find his fortune, at his father's prompting. The two men spend the afternoon together. When they are making their goodbyes, Joncour asks Hara Kei about the girl. Hara Kei behaves as if the question was never uttered.

On the last day of his visit, Joncour examines Hara Kei's aviary of rare birds. He recalls a story about how men in the East honor the fidelity of their mistresses with exotic birds rather than jewelry. On his way back to the guesthouse, he watches the shadows cast on rice paper walls of Hara Kei's house.

The evening before he is to leave, Joncour packs his bags and acquiesces to the bathing rituals. He is surprised when a veil covers his eyes. He realizes the hands that are bathing him are not the hands of the older woman who has previously carried out this task. At the last moment, the hands place something in his palm before the person disappears altogether. It is a scrap of paper with a message written in Japanese characters.

## Chapters 21-23 Analysis

Hara Kei pretends not to hear Joncour's question about his mistress partly because it is more genteel to ignore Joncour's bad manners; Joncour should have known that if Hara Kei wanted him to know about his mistress, he would have introduced or explained her to him at their first meeting. Twice during one visit Joncour has inquired about her; Hara Kei is certainly suspicious now of the Frenchman's intentions. Immediately after this conversation, Hara Kei shows Joncour the elaborate aviary. If, according to Eastern lore, an aviary is a tribute from a man to his mistress for her fidelity, then such a large and well-stocked aviary is a signal that the woman belongs completely to Hara Kei. Symbolically, the caged birds represent a lack of freedom. With her bright clothing and her seclusion, the mistress is as much Hara Kei's pet as his lover. Showing Joncour the aviary is yet another way that Hara Kei communicates to Joncour that he has no business pursuing such thoughts.

As Joncour has been blindfolded during the bathing ritual, he cannot see what young woman actually bathes him. He assumes that the folded note pressed into his hand is certainly a message from Hara Kei's mistress. The silk veil that covers his body serves in place of the woman's body. The very first chapter of this book alludes to the feminine associations of silk; in this chapter the silk actually represents the physical body of a female. Looking backward in the book to the gift of a silk tunic Joncour presented to his



wife, the reader can find another reason why H el ene refuses to wear it—not because it shames her modesty but because her husband has brought another woman into her life.

Fire is again associated with women. Joncour stares at the flame in his room, because he cannot gaze at Hara Kei's mistress.



# Chapters 24-25

## Chapters 24-25 Summary

Hervé Joncour leaves Hara Kei's village with thousands of silkworm eggs. Approximately three months later he is home. His wife Hélène runs to meet him with an embrace and twice states aloud, "You're back."

For forty-one days, Joncour resumes the peaceful life he leads during the summers. Then, he seeks Baldabiou at Café Verdun, who is playing billiards against himself. Joncour asks where he can find someone to translate Japanese into French. Baldabiou directs him to Madame Blanche, a brothel owner in the city of Nimes.

## Chapters 24-25 Analysis

Joncour is escorted away from Hara Kei's village by two men who surely will report to Hara Kei, yet Joncour pauses to stare at the houses one last time. He is again making his personal interests obvious to the wrong people. He arrives back home several weeks later without incident and notices the velvety texture of his wife's voice. Velvet and silk are very different types of fabrics, although both represent great wealth. Hélène, Joncour's wife, repeats her greeting to him—"You're back"—as if she must convince herself that it is true. Very little information has been given about her, but she has not been presented as a superstitious person or someone particularly prone to worry (especially because Joncour has been journeying afar for many years). She perhaps is relieved that she did not lose him to another woman or another life, or perhaps reminding herself that the life she leads in his absence is over.

Baldabiou plays billiards against his "handicapped" self, or by shooting alternately with one hand. His manner of playing billiards also foreshadows his eventual departure: when he announces that he will leave town when "handicapped" wins a game, the reader knows that he will someday leave Joncour.





## Chapters 26-28

### Chapters 26-28 Summary

Hervé Joncour tells his wife, Hélène, that he must travel to Nimes for the day on business. In Nimes, he seeks out Madame Blanche. When he is finally allowed to see her, she is dressed in a white kimono with blue flowers around her fingers as jewelry. He asks her to read the note he brought back from Japan: "Come back, or I shall die." Madame Blanche tells him to forget it. He thinks she means not to pay her, but she says that he should forget the woman.

Baldabiou observes that men sometimes travel from as far away as Paris to visit Madame Blanche, who would give them the blue flowers from her fingers to wear in their buttonholes.

### Chapters 26-28 Analysis

Madame Blanche is an expatriated Japanese woman with a mysterious past. She has inside knowledge of Japan's foreign culture but she despises it. She tells Joncour that pursuing Hara Kei's mistress would be of no benefit and that of course the woman would not die if he does not return. Hers is the voice of logic but not passion. Brothel owners deal in the business side of sex, not the passionate side, so her advice is consistent with her position.



# Chapters 29-30

## Chapters 29-30 Summary

Hervé Joncour takes his wife, Hélène, to the French Riviera for two weeks. They spend time imagining the son that they hope they will conceive there. They socialize with other guests during the day and then joke about them privately at night. One of these guests is a fur trader who has been to Japan. The night before the Joncours leave the Riviera, Hervé gets up and watches Hélène sleep. She opens her eyes and he tells her that he will always love her.

In September, the silk manufacturers of Lavilledieu meet to decide what to do for the next year's supply of silkworm eggs. The French consulate in Japan has suggested that commercial transactions be halted until Japan is no longer on the brink of a civil war. Medical researcher Louis Pasteur is using the latest technology—microscopes—to study and hopefully solve the silkworm epidemic problems. The Lavilledieu silk manufacturers want to rely on the import of eggs from the Middle East by large traders instead of paying Hervé Joncour to travel to Japan again. Baldabiou is given the authority to decide. He looks at Joncour, who tells him to make the choice for him.

## Chapters 29-30 Analysis

Hervé Joncour takes his wife on their first vacation because he feels guilty about betraying her in his mind. The encounter with the trader who has been to Japan awakens his desire to see Hara Kei's mistress, and goes so far as to interrupt his sleep. It seems like he is reiterating his commitment to his wife, but Hélène is reclining in her bed much in the same way that Hara Kei's mistress reclined in his lap when Joncour first met her. Hélène and the mistress both have long, dark hair. When the Japanese woman opened her eyes, she commanded Joncour's attention. When Hélène opens her eyes, she prompts Joncour to speak words of love, but those words could apply to either woman.

The Lavilledieu manufacturers are torn about spending the money to send Joncour all the way to Japan; it seems like a needless expense if Pasteur's research yields results and a dangerous risk if Japan is truly on the brink of war. It is Joncour's decision to make, because he would be the one who has to travel. Joncour is paralyzed, however, by having to choose between the passive security, prosperity, and peace he enjoys and embarking on a dangerous adventure to claim another man's woman. He turns to his mentor, Baldabiou, for guidance. It will be the last time that he asks the man for help, even though he maintains a friendship with Baldabiou as long as Baldabiou is in town.



# Chapters 31-33

## Chapters 31-33 Summary

Hervé Joncour accepts the mission to travel to Japan and arrives in a country on the verge of a civil war, in such chaos that he does not have to travel in secret because the local seats of power are too distracted to pay attention to one man. He is nonetheless met, in the usual custom, at the rendezvous in Shirakawa and escorted to Hara Kei.

Instead of being hosted in one of Hara Kei's guest houses, Joncour is brought to a house on the very edge of the village, high up on a hill. From there he has a view of the trees that surround Hara Kei's residence, but not of the residence itself. Suddenly, the sky erupts in a flurry of color and music; the exotic birds have escaped from their aviary.

Joncour walks slowly but directly to the aviary. He sees the girl with the round eyes standing in front of the open door and shows her the Japanese note he has kept with him. She smiles, grasps his hand, and removes the note from it just before Hara Kei arrives. He tells Joncour that the birds have always returned in the past and summons him away from the aviary. Joncour bows to the girl and bids farewell in French. Hara Kei remarks that she does not know that language.

## Chapters 31-33 Analysis

Japan is a nation in disarray about the question of letting foreigners come into their country. Joncour's European presence in Hara Kei's Japanese home in a private way reveals the danger of opening the border. Hara Kei houses the trader (and traitor) in a building at the edge of his village instead of a guesthouse because he does not want the man near his mistress. Hara Kei cannot completely cut off all forms of communication, however. The mistress releases the birds in the aviary—a gift from Hara Kei to celebrate her fidelity—to let Joncour know that she has accepted his suit.

By taking from Joncour the physical evidence he has of her existence, she leaves him without any token to remember her by. At this moment, her character ceases to be a real person and instead becomes a perfect symbol of desire.

Joncour is oblivious to any lessons in the short term. Hara Kei remarks that caged birds always return home, but the underlying meaning is lost on Joncour. Even when Hara Kei tells Joncour bluntly that he should not talk to the woman, Joncour does not hear him. His failure to heed Hara Kei's warning to stay away from the woman will eventually lead Joncour into danger.



# Chapters 34-35

## Chapters 34-35 Summary

That night, Hervé Joncour attends a social function at Hara Kei's house. Joncour spends his time making eye contact with Hara Kei's mistress. He excuses himself from the party and walks around the village. When he finally arrives at his quarters, the mistress is waiting for him with another young girl. She kisses Joncour's hand, places it in the hand of the other girl, and then leaves them alone. Joncour spends the entire night making love to the girl.

## Chapters 34-35 Analysis

Hara Kei invites Joncour to his party for the sake of showing himself and his mistress in their roles as host and hostess. Joncour is faced, in public, with the harsh reminder that the woman is paired with Hara Kei, and he is the outsider. The woman understands this too, but nonetheless tries to give herself to Joncour by proxy.

The girl that Hara Kei's mistress brings to take her place in Joncour's bed wears all white. She is a blank canvas upon which Joncour can project any desire. Still, he only has eyes for the orange flame that Hara Kei's mistress carries, and he watches it disappear into the night before he turns his attention to the girl. He expresses with physical love everything he wishes he could say to the mistress of Hara Kei but cannot.



# Chapters 36-38

## Chapters 36-38 Summary

The next morning, Hervé Joncour negotiates with Hara Kei's representative a price for fifteen strips of mulberry bark with silkworms. Hara Kei and his household have gone away. Joncour looks in vain for a personal message to him. He sees that the birds have returned to the aviary and are locked inside again.

Two days later, Joncour leaves the village. He sees a flock of birds resting in the trees and fires six shots from his revolver to startle them. The birds burst into the air in such a large group that a person could see them even from a distance several day's travel away.

Joncour returns to Lavilledieu in time for High Mass. Baldabiou asks him if he saw the war, and Joncour answers that he did not see the war he was expecting. That night he makes love to his wife, Hélène, so impatiently that she cries. She explains that her tears are of happiness when he asks.

## Chapters 36-38 Analysis

Hara Kei does not participate in the silkworm egg negotiations this time. In fact, he has packed up his entire household and left the village without saying goodbye to Joncour or leaving word of where they have gone. Good manners do not allow a host to banish a businessman before business has been conducted, so Hara Kei excuses himself. Joncour has been officially shunned. He is shaken by the disappearance of his lover and looks everywhere for a sign or message from her to him. He finds nothing from her but Hara Kei has left a message for him: the birds have been locked back in the aviary where he cannot get to them. During his departure from the village, Joncour startles a flock of birds into the air to signal Hara Kei's mistress. He is answering her message to him in kind.

The rest of Joncour's journey home is uneventful, although he is as drained in spirit as would be a veteran of a war. He is a veteran of a war, in a way—Hara Kei has victoriously claimed the mistress and Joncour has slumped home in defeat. Hélène knows immediately that he has betrayed her because he makes love to her almost punitively. He is upset that he cannot have the mistress of Hara Kei. Hélène is lying about the source of her tears.



# Chapter 39

## Chapter 39 Summary

After handing over the silkworm eggs to the silk manufacturers, Hervé Joncour is not seen again in town for several days (which is unusual behavior for him). He surprises everyone when he purchases the house of Jean Berbeck, the man who stopped speaking, and perplexes them when he does nothing with it.

Joncour brings Baldabiou to the house. They discuss why Berbeck might have stopped speaking. Joncour suggests that Berbeck had encountered something in his life that left him with nothing more to say about it. Baldabiou suggests that the house was too grim to tolerate, much less speak of.

Joncour busies himself with his plans for a garden, and makes sketches of a strange structure. His wife asks what they are. He answers that they are plans for an aviary to fill with birds, and then to open when something good happens so they can all fly away.

## Chapter 39 Analysis

Joncour does not return to his normal patterns of life because he is depressed. He purchases the Jean Berbeck house because he can sympathize with the man's lack of interest in speech. Joncour had a long-term, wordless love affair about which he can confide in no one. His grief at losing her tempts him to withdraw from the world, too.

Joncour's explanation of the aviary to his wife reveals that he has been obsessed with Hara Kei's mistress as an object rather than as a person. His attraction to her overshadowed his ability to understand her. He fails to grasp the significance of why she released the birds from the aviary. She did not release the birds because she was happy to see Joncour; she released the birds because she no longer deserved to have them—she has betrayed Hara Kei.

It is possible that Hara Kei's mistress is trying to extricate herself from the affair. There are alternate explanations for and speculations about her behavior that would not indicate true love for Joncour: She retrieves her note from Joncour's hand, because she is ashamed of having printed evidence of her infidelity. She watches him during the party out of fear that he will embarrass her in public. She brings a girl to him as a consolation prize. She proposes to Hara Kei that they leave without saying goodbye to Joncour in order to avoid a scene. The woman has her own desires and regrets, but they are not voiced in the narrative because it is told from Joncour's perspective, and he does not really perceive her as a person.



# Chapter 40

## Chapter 40 Summary

Hélène Joncour hopes that time away will lighten Hervé's depressive mood. They spend three weeks in Nice. One night, they accept an invitation to celebrate the birthday of an Italian baron. During the dessert, Hervé watches his wife engage in cheerful conversation with another man. The man whispers in her ear and she responds with laughter; her loose hair touches his shoulder. The gentleman is wearing a garland of blue flowers in his buttonhole. Hervé's hands shake. In the smoking room after dinner, a drunk Hervé Joncour approaches a man and tells him that all people are marvelous and disgusting.

Hervé and Hélène Joncour return home with regret as it had been so easy to love each other while they were away together.

## Chapter 40 Analysis

Joncour experiences jealousy for the first time in his marriage with Hélène. She is having a conversation with a man who is wearing one of Madame Blanche's blue flowers. The reminder of the brothel as a setting for non-marital sexual transactions turns a petty jealousy into a sexual one. Joncour's response is to drink heavily to avoid the feelings of guilt that he experiences for actually betraying her.

This event opens Joncour's eyes to Hara Kei's perspective, and he realizes the full scope of his behavior in Japan. He is disgusted by his hypocritical response and by his infidelities, but he believes strongly that to feel great passion is a marvelous thing. In contrast to the dinner party in Japan in which Joncour's visit to Hara Kei was ended abruptly, this dinner party in Nice enabled Joncour to appreciate and enjoy his wife's company. They extended their stay to spend more time with each other.



# Chapters 41-42

## Chapters 41-42 Summary

That autumn, Baldabiau tells Hervé Joncour about the progress Louis Pasteur has made in his research of the silkworm epidemic. He tells him about the war that has finally broken out in Japan and how foreigners there have had their throats cut. He reports on two Italian silkworm traders that have brought back from China eggs of the finest quality. He wonders aloud if the supply of eggs they could gather from sources other than Japan would keep the mills running. He finally expresses the fear that if Joncour goes to Japan he will never return. Joncour states firmly that his is going and will buy the Japanese eggs with his own money if necessary. Baldabiau is startled by Joncour's uncharacteristic decisiveness.

Baldabiau suggests to the Lavilledieu silk manufacturers that Pasteur's methods are unreliable, that the Italian silkworm traders are untrustworthy, and that the war in Japan is almost over. They agree to finance the journey. Baldabiau cannot, however, lie to Joncour's wife, Héléne, when she asks if Hervé's trip to Japan is necessary. The night before he leaves, she insists that he promises to come home. Joncour promises.

## Chapters 41-42 Analysis

Joncour insists on traveling to Japan because he is pretending that the object he seeks is still waiting for him there and does not realize that he lacks only wisdom to understand the significance of his last three journeys.

Baldabiau is stunned by Joncour's vehemence. He thinks of the situation as unlikely as "handicapped" winning a billiards game. This is the second reference to the eventuality that Baldabiau will leave when he has fully guided his protégé towards the realization of his destiny. He lies to the local silk manufacturers on Joncour's behalf so that they will finance this fourth trade mission to Japan.

Héléne finally confronts the reality that her husband is pursuing another woman in Japan when she asks aloud if his trip is necessary. Baldabiau cannot lie to her. This is the first indication that these two people have a close relationship beyond that of wife and friend. This relationship is probably not a sexual one but it is undefined in the book. Héléne can only bring herself to voice her insecurities to her husband when it is too dark to look at him, and even then, she only indirectly broaches the subject of his love interest. She wants him to return more than she wants him to be faithful, and confronting him about another woman would remove some incentive for him to come back to their home.





# Chapters 43-44

## Chapters 43-44 Summary

When Hervé Joncour arrives in Japan at his regular rendezvous, no one comes to meet him. After waiting for five days, Joncour wanders around until he stumbles on the location of Hara Kei's village. It is burned to the ground. It looks like the end of the world.

Joncour sits for three hours among the ruins of the town, unable to come to terms with the scope of this disaster: he has no silkworm eggs and, even if he did, he has spent so much time in Japan that he risks not being able to bring them home before they hatched (and became useless for silk production). A boy appears carrying the glove that Joncour had dropped on a pile of clothes on the shore of the lake during his second visit to Hara Kei. Joncour claims the glove and identifies himself to the boy as "the Frenchman" despite the barrier of language. The boy indicates that Joncour should follow him into the woods and sets off on a path towards the mountains. Joncour waits a long moment and then follows him.

## Chapters 43-44 Analysis

The devastation of the Japanese cities through which Joncour travels should have prepared him for the devastation of Hara Kei's village, but it does not. The leveled village is a profound symbol of failure: the failure to procure silkworm eggs and the failure to see his beloved. He has reached the "end of the world" because all of his immediate goals have been thwarted. The blanket of ash that remains is also reminder of Hara Kei's victory—he was associated with ash on their first meeting and everything that Joncour was hoping to find in the village has been replaced with ash. It is as if the flame of desire between Joncour and Hara Kei's mistress destroyed the only place it could flourish.

The appearance of the boy carrying his glove is reminiscent of the myth of the phoenix. The phoenix is a bird with red and orange feathers that burns to death so that the next generation bird can be born from the ashes. The imagery of Hara Kei's mistress amidst the destruction stirs new life into Joncour. For the first time, Joncour manages to convey a clear message to a person, but he is no longer certain that his harbored goals are what he wants. The glove is a souvenir from a vanished world, but it is also one of a pair. The glove also signifies his wife and his life in Lavilledieu. He has reached the ends of his past world and his fantasy world.



# Chapters 45-47

## Chapters 45-47 Summary

Hervé Joncour follows the Japanese boy for five days. Joncour and his guide do not speak to each other, although the boy merrily plays on a musical pipe. On the fifth day, they reach the top of a hill and see a giant procession of Hara Kei, his villagers, and their livestock. With the procession is a litter with all four sides covered in drapes.

The boy leaves Joncour to follow the caravan of villagers. When it stops to make camp, Joncour tries to come closer and is met by three armed men, who commandeer his horse and baggage and take him to Hara Kei's tent. Hara Kei asks how he came to find them but Joncour does not answer. Hara Kei tells him to leave the Japanese to fight their wars. Joncour empties a purse of gold onto the ground with an offer to help him financially but Hara Kei leaves it there.

Joncour lurks at the outskirts of the procession and is ignored by everyone. Only two tents have been erected at the campsite, and the empty, curtained litter is next to one of them. Four small cages of birds are attached to the corners of the litter and festooned with bells.

## Chapters 45-47 Analysis

The boy takes on the qualities of an unfettered bird, expressing joy and making music despite the grim setting. The boy brings color and light into the text, and is an exotic thing that seems out of place. He is the human shape of one of the birds that Hara Kei's mistress set free from the aviary. His character is the opposite of Hara Kei's mistress. He is young, male, free to interact with whomever he chooses, at liberty to follow his own path, and exuberant. She is trapped in a litter, obscured from view, speaking and interacting with no one. She is still associated with bright colors, but she no longer has the freedom to move around the village. Worse, there are four reminders of the aviary attached to her conveyance. No matter how far she travels, she travels in the company of captives.

Joncour travels as if he is in suspended animation, reserving all reactions to his surrounding until he knows what awaits him. He is so numb that he does not notice how quickly the boy disappears upon arriving at the village's encampment, and he does not leave when Hara Kei tells him to go. His stated reason for traveling to Japan is so far removed from his actual reason for going that he has no plan for what to do now that he has found Hara Kei. All he can do is insult the man by flinging money at him and retreat to the periphery.



# Chapters 48-49

## Chapters 48-49 Summary

Hervé Joncour awakens at the periphery of the campsite of Hara Kei's village procession. The body of the boy who brought him to the camp hangs from a tree. He unties the boy's body from the tree and stares at it to the exclusion of all else, so he does not see the procession of villages leaving the campsite.

Hara Kei approaches and explains that Japan is an ancient country with laws that allow the death penalty for servants who carry love notes for their mistresses. Hara Kei forces Joncour's head to the ground with a rifle as the procession passes by. Joncour hears the tinkling of small bells and lifts his head to look. The litter is decorated with the finest silks of many colors, leaving no opening through which to glimpse its occupant. When the sounds of the bells fade, Hara Kei releases Joncour and tells him never to return. Joncour kneels by the boy's body until nightfall.

## Chapters 48-49 Analysis

It takes the execution of the boy to shock Joncour back to reality. His wits gathered once again, he finally starts to behave like a rational person again and is able to fall back on the habits and instincts that have enabled him to conduct business in foreign nations and that make him the type of man a woman like Hélène could love. The general melee of village people packing to go would probably have provided him the opportunity to search Hara Kei's mistress to see her one last time. Instead, he removes the boy's body from the tree he had been hanged from and sits a vigil. When reality and fantasy collide, Joncour returns to real life and fulfills his responsibilities to others instead of indulging himself in dreams.

Hara Kei invokes ancient custom to justify the execution of the boy who led Joncour to his mistress, but it likely projecting his anger at Joncour onto the boy and hanging him to make one final gesture of dominance. It would be too risky to attack Joncour personally, because Hara Kei does not know who waits for Joncour or might investigate his disappearance or death. Executing the boy, with all his bird imagery, is an act parallel to hunting the bird with blue wings in order to discover the future. In both these cases, these deaths communicate potent messages. What Hara Kei learned from the death of the first bird cannot be known, but the message he sends to his village and his mistress by killing the messenger is crystal clear: Hara Kei owns his mistress and will keep her by whatever means necessary.

It is possible that Hara Kei has executed his mistress as well, because she is not seen at all in the crowd and her litter is first shown empty and then obscured. This is not the most probable scenario, because a reader would have to find an explanation for why her body is not hanging from the tree too, but the text could support such an argument.



# Chapters 50-51

## Chapters 50-51 Summary

Hervé Joncour travels for eleven days to the Japanese port city of Yokohama and bribes an official for sixteen boxes of silkworm eggs from the southern part of the island. He tries to hurry across the northern parts of Asia and Europe in hopes that colder weather will delay the hatching of the silkworm eggs. He fills a ship with ice to chill the eggs for a six-day journey. He boards a train that stops on a summer day to take on water, and the remainder of the ice melts in the heat. All of his eggs hatch, and all of the silkworm grubs die.

Nine days later, Joncour arrives in Lavilledieu. He travels home by carriage. His wife, Hélène, sees the carriage from her door and resolves not to run away or cry. When her husband emerges, she greets him with a smile. They sit in the yard late into the night, and Hélène tells him that she thought he was dead and that no beauty was left in the world.

## Chapters 50-51 Analysis

Joncour has faced the worst and passed a test of character. Instead of dwelling on his failure to meet Hara Kei's mistress and buy silkworm eggs, he not only procures a supply of silkworms but also finds his way home long after his usual transportation vessels have left without him. He knows from the outset that the silkworm eggs are unlikely to make it all the way to France without hatching, but he tries anyway. He has left his obligations and responsibilities long enough. He encounters and solves problems with extravagant means and only gives up hope for the silkworm eggs when it becomes silly to hold onto it. He almost evades failure, which is the flip side of almost losing everything over Hara Kei's mistress before coming to his senses.

Joncour's wife has assumed he is dead as he is very late coming home from a journey that is usually (and astonishingly) quite predictable. She assumes that the carriage approaching her door brings bad tidings and steels herself to react with dignity. When Joncour himself rises like a phoenix from the dead, she is shocked beyond the point of joy. She too has seen the end of the world. Joncour and Hélène have undergone similar challenges and tests, and both are rewarded with each other.



# Chapters 52-54

## Chapters 52-54 Summary

The silk manufacturers of Lavilledieu cannot find enough eggs at the last minute to keep the silk mills operating. Joncour hires the unemployed mill workers to construct the estate park he has been planning for years. Men and women establish gardens, build fountains, construct mazes, and erect an aviary. Rumors fly about what Joncour did with the silkworm egg money. He is called alternately a hero for employing the townsfolk and a swindler for losing their investment. Joncour only ever said that the eggs hatched near the town of Cologne.

Four months after his return, Joncour tells the story of his love for Hara Kei's mistress to Baldabiou. Joncour admits that he has never even heard her voice and that it is painful to die of yearning for something he will never experience.

At the start of the next year (1866), Japan lifts its ban on silkworm egg exports. In 1869, the opening of the Suez Canal reduces the journey from France to Japan to twenty days. In 1884, artificial silk is patented.

## Chapters 52-54 Analysis

Joncour is busier than usual, because he is paying the unemployed silk workers to create the garden he has been planning. His adventurous self and his placid self have balanced each other out in his mind, but the two personalities have taken on lives of their own in town gossip. The people of Lavilledieu cannot decide if they love him or hate him for giving them work or taking it away.

Joncour dwells again on what he had, or never had, and lost. He confides awkwardly in Baldabiou, telling him the tale of the woman in the flame-colored clothes as the autumn leaves change in France. The return to normalcy has undermined what personal gains he has made. He is still blind about what items and people are really valuable. He thinks he is dying of longing for something he will never have not realizing that he already has it—Hélène. Baldabiou, having fulfilled his tasks as Joncour's mentor, is unable to respond in any meaningful way. He can only comment about the weather.

The Japanese ban on silkworm egg exports ends within months of the conversation between Joncour and Baldabiou. Joncour really did travel to the end of the world—the end of an isolationist Japan. Engineering and technological advances serve to make Joncour one of the last adventuring silkworm traders before they become obsolete. Consistent with the themes of the novel, Joncour's career as a silk trader will soon die spectacularly in flames, only to give way soon after to his second career as a father.



# Chapters 55-57

## Chapters 55-57 Summary

Six months after returning to Lavilledieu, Hervé Joncour receives in the mail a letter. It consists of seven sheets covered in Japanese ideograms. The postage suggests that the letter came from the town of Ostend (in Belgium). The ideograms remind him of the tracks of bird feet.

Joncour keeps the letter on his person day and night. One night, his wife Hélène enters a room where he sits examining the letter. She kisses him and her nightdress gaps, revealing that she is wearing nothing underneath. Five days later, he sets out to visit the French town of Nimes for the day. His destination is the brothel of Madame Blanche, the Japanese draper who translated his note. The reception room is unchanged, although the piano player seems withdrawn compared to Joncour's visit three years prior.

## Chapters 55-57 Analysis

The mysterious letter that arrives in the mail is compared directly to bird tracks, leading the reader to identify the anonymous author as Hara Kei's mistress. Joncour carries the letter with him at all times and makes no particular effort to hide it from his wife. The secret to his life's happiness is contained within those Japanese characters but he cannot decide what to do about it. Joncour is torn between reading a final message from Japan and continuing on with his peaceful ways.

Hélène deliberately exposes herself beneath her nightclothes, because she is competing with the letter. Joncour sees her young skin and white breasts and thinks of Hara Kei's mistress. He seeks out Madame Blanche again for a translation. Joncour thinks that the piano player at 12 Rue Moscat in Nimes looks less enthusiastic and more despondent than when he visited, but Joncour is projecting his feelings onto him. Joncour is the one who has been wearied by the last three years.



# Chapters 58-59

## Chapters 58-59 Summary

Madame Blanche receives Hervé Joncour in her room, and he hands her the letter. She agrees to read it on the condition that Joncour will never again ask her to translate a document from the Japanese.

The letter is a love note from a woman to her master and beloved, describing private and shared sexual acts in great detail. Madame Blanche reads the letter in a child-like voice. The letter ends with the anonymous writer urging the recipient to be happy with what they have had and to seek happiness without her. She gives him permission to forget her.

When Madame Blanche finishes reading, she stares at the pages, and Joncour stares at the pleats of his pants. She gives him a ring of blue flowers from her finger and exits the room. Joncour sits and fiddles with the flowers, listening to the piano music, for a long time before collecting the pages and going home.

## Chapters 58-59 Analysis

Madame Blanche does not want to read the letter not because she wants to forget Japan but because she already knows what it says. It is an extraordinarily personal and explicit letter. Establishing the condition that performing this translation will be the last time she will help Joncour is her way to give him independence. If Baldabiou as a mentor has been a father figure to Joncour, Madame Blanche is playing the part of a mother letting go of her adult child. This scene, more so than the scene in Japan with the girl that Hara Kei's mistress brought to Joncour, illustrates his sexual awakening. It is up to him to seek his own destiny now.

When Joncour watches Madame Blanche read the letter to him, he is reliving the evening he spent at Hara Kei's party watching Hara Kei's mistress. Madame Blanche is Japanese, she is wearing white, and she has a childlike voice (compare to the childlike face of Hara Kei's mistress). The difference is that when he and Madame Blanche part, she gives him a pledge of her faithfulness—a blue ring to wear. It is very matrimonial. Joncour is finally able to really consummate his love for Hara Kei's mistress.



# Chapters 60-62

## Chapters 60-62 Summary

Hervé Joncour adopts the lifestyle of a wealthy man pursuing his leisure and feeling no extreme emotions. He and his wife, Héléne, begin an annual ritual of traveling abroad, making it as far as Prague one year. They find new happiness together. Joncour seems to be perfectly at ease. On windy days, he sits at the shore of his lake and watches the ripples on the water move and shine on the surface.

In 1871, Baldabiou deeds two silk manufacturing mills to Hervé Joncour and leaves Lavilledieu for good. He makes no clear explanation for his abrupt departure or destination but rather alludes cryptically to Saint Agnes. Joncour and his wife, Héléne, accompany Baldabiou to the train station. He makes a casual goodbye and walks away. Héléne suddenly runs after him. She embraces him and bursts into tears. Joncour sells the mills for a nominal price to Baldabiou's former dominoes partner. Hervé and Héléne conceive and bear three daughters; the youngest is named Agnes.

In 1874, Héléne Joncour falls ill and dies of an undiagnosed fever. All the townspeople of Lavilledieu attend her funeral. Her husband, Hervé, carves the single word "Helas" on her tomb. He continues his life in the same measured pace he has maintained for the past several years, although he is struck suddenly by the vastness of his home and the randomness of his destiny.

## Chapters 60-62 Analysis

Hervé Joncour retires completely from trading silkworm eggs. With the stress of traveling alone and negotiating deals behind him, he and his wife are able to find real happiness with each other. In this stress-reduced environment, they finally conceive the children they had wanted for years. Only occasionally does he lapse into moments of melancholy; staring at the ripples on the lake probably reminds him of the day he encountered Hara Kei's mistress at the lake and left behind his glove.

Settled at his manor and in his garden, Joncour becomes very much the nobleman who has children of his own to guide. He has grown past the need for mentors, and so the extremely unlikely event of Baldabiou's "handicapped" billiard's player winning a game occurs. True to his word, Baldabiou moves on. He vanishes from Lavilledieu. Héléne's unexpected parting embrace again suggests that she had a relationship with him beyond that of "wife of coworker," although it is hardly a definitive statement of a sexual affair. The youngest Joncour daughter is named Agnes, after the saint for whom Baldabiou felt so much regard. The name is a tribute to the man.

Héléne's symbolic death (she burns up with fever) makes Joncour feel far more alone and lost than did leaving Hara Kei's mistress in Japan. The word carved on her tombstone, "Helas," is a French word that means "alas" or "woe is me." It is also the title





of a sonnet by Oscar Wilde that expresses regret and the price of unchecked passion. The sonnet was written in 1881—seven years after Hélène dies—so Joncour is not alluding to it, but the author of *Silk* is. The reader is left to wonder if, as the poem suggests, Joncour's dalliance with the Japanese woman and the harm it caused his wife was worth the adventure.



# Chapters 63-65

## Chapters 63-65 Summary

Two months after his wife Hélène's death, Hervé Joncour discovers blue flowers on her grave. He thinks about the flowers for days afterwards.

Joncour returns to Madame Blanche's brothel in Nimes but finds a tailor shop instead. He learns that she moved to Paris and is the mistress of an important figure. Joncour searches for her in Paris for six days and. When they meet, she is wearing fashionable Western clothing instead of her white kimono. Her fingers are bare of flowers.

Joncour asks Madame Blanche if she wrote the letter per his late wife's request. Madame Blanche answers that Hélène had composed the letter and that she (Madame Blanche) had merely transcribed it. She suggests that Hélène really wished that she had been the woman Hervé pined for. Joncour leaves Madame Blanche for good.

Joncour lives for another twenty-three years in serenity and industry. He manages his estate so that he will never have to perform any work other than keeping up his park and gardens. He discovers the joys of storytelling and relives his adventures through the eyes of his audiences. He visits the silk manufacturing mills each year to touch the fresh harvest of raw silk. He establishes a set of routines and rituals to ward off sadness, visits Hélène at the cemetery to talk when loneliness overtakes him, and watches the ripples on the water of the lake on windy days.

## Chapters 63-65 Analysis

Joncour recognizes Madame Blanche's flowers as he has seen her with them twice, and because he probably has kept the flowers that she gave him the day she read him the letter. Joncour takes so long to contact Madame Blanche afterwards because he does not really want to hear the truth. If Hélène is the author of the letter and not Hara Kei's mistress, then he has lost two women forever. He is also reluctant to face his guilt for hurting the woman who not only loved him but who was his constant companion. What is interesting is why Madame Blanche pays a visit to Hélène's grave in the first place; perhaps she remembers Hélène as a passionate and loving wife and seeks her out for advice before committing herself to one man.

Madame Blanche no longer manages prostitutes, she no longer deals in cloth, and she no longer dresses like a Japanese woman. She has given up wearing blue flowers because she has promised fidelity to an important man; her current position is in fact very similar to that of Hara Kei's mistress. Joncour does not ever return to visit her because he has had all his questions answered, but also because he has learned his lesson about paying too much attention to women that do not belong to him.



Joncour's realization that he has misunderstood the most important parts of his life has prompted him to reconsider what else has happened to him. He finally appreciates that he has been a man who has had marvelous adventures and accepts his role as an important person in Lavilledieu. He performs unofficial but ceremonial rituals like handling the raw silk once a year. He goes out of his way to seek happiness and does not dwell in melancholy. Watching the ripples on the lake is a tribute to the mistress of Hara Kei, the woman who taught him, in a roundabout way, to love his wife fully.



# Characters

## Hervé Joncour

Hervé Joncour is the son of the mayor of Lavilledieu. He had begun a military career to please his father but was recruited at age twenty-four by Baldabiou to procure silkworm eggs for the local silk manufacturers. He is a passive, peaceful man. He has enough money to support himself and his wife, Hélène, in modest luxury. He travels four months out of the year trading for silkworm eggs and rests during the rest of it. He spends a lot of time designing gardens and parks for his lands. He and Hélène have no children at the start of the book but end up with three daughters.

Joncour is immediately attracted to the mistress of a Japanese silkworm egg trader, Hara Kei, on his first voyage to Japan. The attraction becomes an obsession that carries him three more times to Japan even when there is no sound reason for him to go there. He does not attempt to hide this love affair from his wife and does not see how it frightens her. Joncour is a quiet and peaceful man but he is not particularly reflective. Life happens to him and he does not appreciate its variety. He makes fantastic journeys across Europe and Asia but he describes them to others as if they were but ordinary trips to silkworm stores. His lack of reflection seems to be a result of habit than inability—when he is overwhelmed by experience or anguished by disappointment, he spends a lot of time thinking about what has happened. By the end of his life, he has learned to appreciate and even enjoy all the wonders that he has seen and all the love he has been given.

## Baldabiou

Baldabiou is a man with no history and no future, so far as the novel is concerned. He appears one day in the town of Lavilledieu and single-handedly begins its silk manufacturing industry. His first major act is to insult the mayor by telling him to keep his nose out of Baldabiou's business and then by calling him a blockhead; his second major act is to seduce the mayor's son, Hervé Joncour, out of the military and into the silk trade. For all practical purposes, he rivals the mayor for influence and power, but he does not use his authority to hurt others. Rather, he enjoys his role as a mentor and leader and a cooperative association of silk manufacturers develops around him. He owns two silk mills.

He is a frequent patron at Café Verdun and drinks Pernod, a beverage made with absinthe that has a green tint. He plays billiards against himself and avoids serious and philosophical discussions. He is a good friend to both Hervé and Hélène Joncour for the duration of his residence in Lavilledieu. He is superstitious and devoted to Saint Agnes. When he leaves town, it is suddenly and after cutting all ties to it. He does not even bring his possessions with him



## Hélène Joncour

Hélène Joncour is the wife of Hervé Joncour. She is tall with long black hair that she always wears down. She moves slowly and has a beautiful voice, and is well-liked by the people of Lavilledieu. Hélène Joncour never ceases to support her husband's work, and helps him prepare for his long journeys even though they cause her pain.

When her husband is home, they have a cheerful and easy relationship and get along well in each other's company. She is an astute woman who figures out almost immediately that Joncour is obsessed with another woman, and she worries that he will go to Japan and stay there. She is able to keep Joncour from suspecting that she knows about the other woman. Nonetheless, she is expressive and passionate and exhibits her own emotions without reserve.

## Hara Kei

Hara Kei is a Japanese nobleman who deals silkworm eggs on the black market. He presides over a rural village situated in the mountains. He speaks French and carries a rifle, which suggests that he received Western militia training after Japan opened up to foreigners in 1854—probably naval training conducted by French officers. He has a female companion, who could be either a wife or a concubine. Hara Kei is associated with dark, somber colors. He becomes a refuge when his village burns; the fact that he is still alive suggests that he fled with his villagers and destroyed the town instead of waiting to fight an invader and being conquered. It is a coincidence the character shares the name with a real Japanese historical figure.

## Hara Kei's Mistress

Hara Kei's mistress is an unnamed woman with round eyes and a young face who holds a formal position of respect in his household, either as wife or concubine. She may be of European descent or be descended from other Asians. She is literate but speaks no European languages. She is associated with the colors red, orange and gold.

## Madame Blanche

Madame Blanche is a Japanese woman who lives in France and does not like to be reminded of Japan. She owns a brothel and a draper shop in Nimes, France. She is literate in French and Japanese. She wears a white kimono and wraps blue flowers like rings around her fingers, and is known for giving them to her clientele. At the end of the novel, she has given up her shop, brothel, and Japanese attire and has become the formal mistress of an important Frenchman in Paris.



## **The Japanese Boy**

A Japanese boy leads Hervé Joncour to Hara Kei's village procession when Joncour is lost among the burned ruins of the village. He is exceedingly gleeful; he dances and hops around and plays on a flute. His sounds and movements are very birdlike. He is described as a "little boy," but he is capable of traveling several days through the forest without supplies. His age is later given as "no more than fourteen." He is executed by Hara Kei for bringing Joncour to the village's campsite.

## **Saint Agnes**

The Catholic saint Agnes does not appear in the book, but Baldabiau is devoted to her. Hervé Joncour's father considers her point of view when granting Baldabiau permission to recruit Joncour as a silkworm egg trader. Saint Agnes was a virgin who declined marriage; the nobleman father of her intended had her dragged by soldiers naked to a brothel so she could be raped as the death penalty did not allow the execution of virgins. Hervé Joncour's youngest daughter is named Agnes.

## **Jean Berbeck**

Jean Berbeck has already died by the time the novel begins, but he is still notorious for abruptly giving up speech and never explaining why. Hervé Joncour purchases the empty house.

## **The Mayor of Lavilledieu**

The mayor of Lavilledieu is the father of Hervé Joncour. He had hoped that his son would pursue a career in the military but does not actively try to prevent him from working as a silkworm egg trader.



## Objects/Places

### Lavilledieu

Lavilledieu is a town in the southern part of France. Baldabiou arrives there as a stranger; Hervé Joncour is a long-time resident who was probably born there.

### Shirakawa

Hara Kei's village is located near Shirakawa. It is where Hervé Joncour meets the men who escort him to Hara Kei.

### The Aviary

Hara Kei builds an aviary in his village and stocks it with exotic birds. His mistress unlocks the aviary to set the birds free but they eventually all return.

### Lake Baikal

Lake Baikal is the largest freshwater lake in the world (by volume). It is located near the border between Russia (a European culture) and Mongolia (an Asian culture). It is given four different nicknames: "the sea" in Chapter 12, "the demon" in Chapter 19, "the last" in Chapter 31, and "the holy" in Chapter 43.

### Café Verdun

Café Verdun is Baldabiou's favorite establishment; he visits it so often that when Hervé Joncour is looking for him he seeks him there.

### 12 Rue Moscat, Nimes, France

12 Rue Moscat is the address of Madame Blanche's draper shop and brothel. In the 19th Century, the city of Nimes was renowned for its textile manufacturing.

### Chapel to Saint Agnes

The chapel to Saint Agnes is built by Baldabiou. He later adds a circular cloister decorated with sculpted dolphin heads.



## **The House of Jean Berbeck**

The house of the late Jean Berbeck is purchased by Hervé Joncour after his third journey to Japan. It is still furnished but Joncour neither cleans it out nor tears it down, but rather visits it periodically and wanders around the rooms.

## **The Glove**

Hervé Joncour drops his glove on a pile of clothing that Hara Kei's mistress had left on the ground during his second journey to Japan. During his fourth visit, she sends the glove back to him via a messenger.

## **The Letter from Ostend**

After his final journey to Japan, Hervé Joncour receives a lengthy letter written entirely in Japanese. It arrives with nothing to identify the sender; it appears to have come from the city of Ostend in Belgium.

## **Helas**

Helas is the single word carved on Hélène Joncour's gravestone by her husband, Hervé Joncour.





# Themes

## [i]Silk[/i] and the Mythological Tradition

Silk, ostensibly an historical romance, participates in the classic mythological tradition. The story contains many elements that are found in myths, from a protagonist on a hero's journey (Hervé Joncour), an item of great value (the mistress of Hara Kei), an evil king (Hara Kei), a mysterious mentor (Baldabiou), a mother figure (Madame Blanche), and a faithful wife (Hélène Joncour). The hero heeds a call to adventure, makes a journey to a fabled land at the ends of the earth, makes great sacrifices, saves his people, and acquires wisdom.

Like many heroic figures of myth, Hervé Joncour is a soldier when he is called by destiny. Destiny, in this case, is Baldabiou, who appears from nowhere, shares arcane knowledge about the silk industry, deals in puzzles and symbols (like his interest in dolphins and his "handicapped" billiards "opponent"), and nudges Joncour on the path to adventure when he stalls or falters. Baldabiou gives faithful counsel and friendship to Hervé and Hélène Joncour for more than twenty years, but he disappears completely when Hervé completes his quest and he is never heard from again. Baldabiou drinks Pernod, an absinthe drink, a substance with the reputation of causing hallucinations in imbibers; in classic mythology, such hallucinations are represented as speaking to the gods.

Hara Kei represents the evil king who is holding captive a beautiful maiden. He, too, is a military figure and functions as the antagonist to Hervé Joncour. He rules over an entire village and dispenses death. Hara Kei and Hervé Joncour begin as friends but battle over the possession of the object of value: Hara Kei's mistress, a woman with no name and few human qualities. Like Baldabiou, she communicates in symbols but she disappears when Hervé Joncour comes to claim her. Rather than the object of romance, she is the obstacle that prevents Joncour from realizing the value of what he already has—Hélène. By conquering his desire for the mistress of Hara Kei, Joncour proves himself worthy of the wife he already has. When he proves himself worthy, he breaks free of the numbness that has prevented him from fully enjoying his life.

It is the mother figure, Madame Blanche, who provides the clues that the hero, Hervé Joncour, needs to complete his mythical journey. She is a mysterious figure with no past, too. She balances the negative effects of Hara Kei, a man who limits sexuality. Madame Blanche, as a brothel owner, dispenses it. Hara Kei wears dark colors; she wears white. Hara Kei lives in the outdoors; she lives in the heart of a city, above a shop, in well-ordered rooms. Hara Kei kills a flute player; she employs a piano player. She is a counterpart to Baldabiou as well: he speaks in symbols; she translates them. He nudges Hervé Joncour on the path to adventure; she guides him back home. When Hervé Joncour completes his quest and learns his lessons about life, Madame Blanche loses her mystery and sexual power, and adopts the Western clothes and habits of fidelity required of a Parisian woman.



Hervé Joncour does pass all the tests required of him during his journey and applies what he learns to benefit his wife, his family, and his community. Reading *Silk* within the mythological tradition adds depth and complexity to a tale that outwardly appears to be a brief tale of idealized true love.

## Names As Destiny

The names of the characters of *Silk* direct the courses of their lives and supply the reader with information about their motivations and history that the narrative does not. Such information enables the reader to treat the characters as fully developed people rather than flat figures in a simple tale. Without such information, the novel is just an outline of a story. With it, however, it becomes a rich tale of love, jealousy, betrayal, patience, and redemption.

Hervé Joncour is named in the very first sentence of the book. "Hervé" is a name that means "warrior." Joncour is a modification and combination of two different words. The first is "jonc," an archaic French word for "reed" or "penis." The second is an adaptation of "coeur," which is the French word for "heart." He is a man of seeming contrasts: he is a warrior working in the silk trade (a fabric with highly feminine connotations); he is a man in whom the desires of illicit sex compete with the desires of faithful love. These contrasts war inside him even as he leaves the military as a profession. The dramatic tension of which side of his character will triumph is far more compelling than the tension surrounding Hara Kei and Joncour's conflicting claims to Hara Kei's mistress.

Baldabiou is the man who grooms Hervé Joncour for a life in the silk trade. He is a man so mysterious that he has no other name. "Baldabiou" is decidedly non-French in origin and has some interesting similarities to words that have been connected to the silk trade throughout history, from many languages. "Baldaquino" is a Spanish word for "canopy" and, according to the *Folk-Etymology dictionary* by Rev. A. Smythe Palmer, likely evolved into the old English word "bodkin," which used to indicate a cloth woven of silk and gold threads. "Baldaquino" is also thought to be a corruption of "Baghdad," the city in Iraq. Such an Arabic reference explains Baldabiou's extensive knowledge of alternate sources of silkworm eggs—he may be from there.

Hara Kei, the antagonist of the novel, possesses a name remarkably similar in sound to "Haragei," a Japanese tradition of intuition and interpersonal communication. This name suggests that Hara Kei can sense the emotional affair between his mistress and Hervé Joncour even though the virtual lovers do not act upon their desires. (Admittedly, Joncour does not attempt to keep his emotions a secret.) He is also skilled at communicating his thoughts and feelings without having to speak them. His points may be lost on Joncour, who is too concerned with the doings of his heart and his genitals to listen, but the reader understands that he talks of birds when he means his mistress, and his villagers understand the rules he sets regarding his mistress.

Madame Blanche—"blanche" is the French word for "white"—is a blank page upon which Hervé Joncour can read (literally) his desire for Hara Kei's mistress. She is also a



woman who behaves as if her past were a blank page, too. In the western world, white signifies purity, but Madame Blanche is a brothel owner and Japanese. In Asia, white rather than black is funereal. The white Madame Blanche wears is to mourn what she has given up or lost; she abandons it when she becomes the mistress of a Parisian man and starts living in the present.

The name "Hélène" means "torch." Hélène Joncour's name calls to mind Helen of Troy and the Trojan War, and all its attendant destruction. Hélène herself is the beacon that summons Hervé Joncour back home, directly and indirectly. The name also provides a counterpoint to the images of flame that accompany the unnamed mistress of Hara Kei. The mistress sits in the seat occupied by Helen of Troy, in which her male companion (Hara Kei) fights for her with an interloper (Hervé Joncour), but she has no name of her own. She is a symbol of desire and possession, and serves to illuminate the ambitions and motivations of other characters instead of expressing her own. She is not a person. She is a goal and a dream.

The names even of secondary characters flesh out the world of Lavilledieu. The Joncour daughters—Florence, Sylvie, and Agnes—represent people who have influenced the lives of their parents. Florence represents "flowers," and suggests the cultivated order of the estate park that Hervé Joncour establishes when he is at home with Hélène. Sylvie calls to mind the sylvan woods and the unnamed woman that inhabits them in Japan. Agnes is named for the saint that Baldabiou—a friend to husband and wife—cherished and dedicated himself to. Jean Berbeck, the man who gives up speech and with whom Hervé Joncour finds a strange kinship, has a foreign last name; he signifies the alienation of the outsider.

Over all of these people and all of these names lies the town of Lavilledieu: God's town. Hara Kei's village has no name. It is a dark place that burns to the ground. Lavilledieu is its opposite. It thrives with neighborliness and commercial prosperity, and it offers a home to people who arrive there no matter how long they stay.

## Culture and Imperialism

Baldabiou and Hervé Joncour are two men who arrive from distant lands and interfere with the culture and economics of the communities that greet them. Both men exhibit their power with gold and make claims to privilege even though they are strangers to the people they work with. Baldabiou and Joncour effect wildly divergent outcomes. However, when Baldabiou interferes, the town of Lavilledieu thrives, brings prosperity to many people, and makes a few of them rich. When Joncour interferes, he makes an enemy, Hara Kei's village burns to the ground, and a child dies.

The radical differences in how the appearance of an outsider affects a culture serve as specific examples for the difference between imperialism and acculturation. Baldabiou proceeds directly to the seat of power, the mayor, and makes demands of him, but the demands he makes are negative ones: Do not interfere with what I am doing. He does not demand payment from the town but rather invests money in it. The power he holds



over the town is in the form of competence. He shares knowledge and works cooperatively with other businessmen. He demands, in a way, the sacrifice of a favored son, but rather than destroy Hervé Joncour he adopts him as his heir. When Baldabiou has accomplished everything he can in Lavilledieu, he leaves and does not attempt to control the local silk industry from afar. He acclimates to the culture of the town and the townsfolk acclimate to him. Baldabiou's influence transforms the people and the culture of Lavilledieu to the point where they approach economic crisis when they have no silkworms, but he has also taught them resilience. His cultural impositions are not a veneer but rather a framework upon which a new society has been built.

Baldabiou and Hervé Joncour are good friends, but they have very different backgrounds. This difference affects how they approach new communities and subordinate them. Baldabiou is an outsider, and a competent one. He cows the mayor but does not bully him, and he comes not only with expertise but also with physical evidence of the goals he hopes to accomplish—a silk scarf. He does not worry about the reactions of the larger group to the changes he introduces, but the town is not defensive. He is just one person. His role is that of ambassador from a faraway land rather than conqueror. He also has the benefit of age and experience to guide him through his negotiations. As a result, he is able to leave Lavilledieu better than he found it. He has brought them successfully through the process of acculturation.

Hervé Joncour, however, is the personification of the European practice of entering countries to culturally or materially exploit them with no regard for the welfare of the local populations. His name actually means "soldier," and he represents every army that ever appeared in an Asian, African, or American nation. His stated goals are to take a valued resource from Japan—silkworm eggs. He pays in gold, but Japan treasures the quality of its silk. By removing eggs from the country, Joncour reduces the value (by eliminating scarcity) of the eggs that remain behind. It is a transaction that, in the long term, benefits only one side.

He also attempts to impose his cultural values on Hara Kei, despite Hara Kei's efforts to educate him on preferred modes of interaction. They first meet as equals, but Joncour immediately begins to test the boundaries that Hara Kei has established and ignores Hara Kei's warning signals. He threatens Hara Kei as a leader and a man by inveigling his way between Hara Kei and his mistress, and doing so in public. He asserts himself so strongly on Hara Kei that the man is threatened enough to resort to violence. Baldabiou invigorates a small town economically; Joncour reduces one to ash. Furthermore, Baldabiou takes a local boy and trains him as a replacement; Joncour takes a local boy to the executioner. Commodore Perry made a conquest of Japan; Joncour might as well be his local agent.

Baldabiou's example illustrates the possibility of diverse cultures combining resources to create new ones and Joncour's example illustrates how the wealth of one nation is not always applied to create more. The novel *Silk* reminds readers of the historical "Silk Road"—a trade route that connected Europe to Asia economically for centuries—and encapsulates how mutually beneficial practices evolved into the exploitative ones that marked the Colonial Era of the nineteenth century.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is presented from the point of view of Hervé Joncour, with the exception of a few chapters that outline how Baldabiou came to reside in Lavilledieu. That is, the novel is presented from the point of view of Hervé Joncour in that the bulk of the chapters follow his character—very rarely does Joncour speak aloud or express thoughts. Still, what narration there is tends to focus on what Joncour does and how the people around him react to it. From these reactions, the reader can deduce Joncour's behaviors and attitudes.

All of the narration is presented in the third person. Readers learn primarily about events; the book is very heavy on plot and very light on insight into characters' motivations or commentary about the world. What dialogue exists is primarily a conclusive statement from a conversation that is noted but not recorded. The reader does not usually learn what the characters really talk about, but rather only what they learn from their experiences or each other.

The novel begins with a brief list of global events concurrent to specifically establish the historical setting of the novel (the mid-19th century). It ends, however, with scenes of very general and timeless events: an old man telling stories to young children, visiting his late wife's grave, attending church, and reposing in nature. This transition from the specific to the universal moves the text from historical novel to instructive fable. The book ends up being not so much about the protagonist Hervé Joncour as it is about appreciating the value of true love and the dangers of passionate obsessions.

## Setting

The setting of the novel alternates between Lavilledieu, France and the village of Hara Kei, near Shirakawa, Japan. The landscape of Lavilledieu is only perfunctorily sketched out. It is near water, there are hills, it has a commercial/urban center and a scattering of rural residences, and it hosts several silk manufacturing mills. It does not have a train station, although it is readily accessible by road. In Lavilledieu, scenes are set inside buildings: Café Verdun, in the Joncour home, in the deserted house of Jean Berbeck, at the mayor's office, and a meeting space large enough to fit all the silk manufacturers at once. The largest outdoor space is a garden and estate park that Hervé Joncour has designed and hires townspeople to develop; Joncour and his wife, Hélène, sometimes sit together on their lawn.

The village of Hara Kei is tucked away among the forests and mountains of central Japan. The scenes set in Japan are primarily outdoors. The Japanese scenes take place on hilltops, during walks through the woods, at the shore of a lake, and in front of



the aviary. Joncour and Hara Kei's mistress generally interact indoors; Joncour and Hara Kei generally interact outdoors.

Of all the settings in the book, the scene on the train platform is the most vivid. It contains details not found in any scenes in the book. There are descriptions of the heat, how individual characters react to it and how they interact with each other. There's suggestion of the length of the train as Joncour walks to the end of it, a notation that fish and meat are standing out in the sun, and the sound of melted ice rushing from the spaces of a train car. There's also an image of a stopped train surrounded by wheat fields, and the sound of the train leaving Joncour behind as people call for him to board.

## Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is extremely sparse. Few details are provided about the novel's places, people, and events. The author provides mostly plot and the reader has to deduce the significance of events and how characters are transformed by them. Occasionally, however, a vivid image or symbol bursts from the page. Because the narrative lacks literary devices as a rule, when one appears it is important. There is very little dialogue in the novel and some chapters contain none at all.

Visual imagery imparts information about the characters and their relationships to each other. Three characters—Baldabiou, Madame Blanche, and Hara Kei's mistress—are associated with specific colors. Baldabiou is associated with green; Madame Blanche is associated with white and blue; Hara Kei's mistress is associated with the colors of flame, frequently orange. Madame Blanche, Hélène Joncour, and Hara Kei's mistress all have long, dark hair. Madame Blanche has a young voice, Hélène Joncour has young skin, and Hara Kei's mistress has a young face.

## Structure

The bulk of the novel spans four years, presented chronologically, from 1861 to 1865. Exceptions include a few chapters that take place twenty years earlier and eight years earlier; they tell the story of how Baldabiou came to Lavilledieu and how Hervé Joncour came to work for him. The last final few chapters jump ahead to 1871, then 1874, and then refer to the last twenty-three years of Hervé Joncour's life. Most of the novel, with the exceptions noted above, narrates events as they happen to Hervé Joncour. He is the character that is most fully fleshed out, and it is his growth that the reader is expected to assess.



## Quotes

"He was one of those men who like to be observers at their own lives, any ambition actually to participate in them being considered inappropriate." Chapter 4, pg.

"Baldabiou had divulged the secrets of the trade without making difficulties. He derived far greater amusement from this than from making a sackful of money. Teaching. Having secrets to impart. That's the way he was." Chapter 6, pg. 8-9

"He had once held between his fingers a veil woven out of Japanese silk thread. It was like grasping in your fingers... nothing." Chapter 10, pg. 14

"The silk manufacturers of Lavilledieu were all gentlemen, more or less, and it would never have crossed their minds to break any law of their country. The notion of doing so on the other side of the world, however, struck them as entirely reasonable." Chapter 10, pg. 15

"The only visible sign of his authority was a woman lying beside him, motionless, her head in his lap, eyes shut. Her arms concealed in the folds of an ample red dress which spread out about her on the ash-coloured mat like flame. He was slowly running a hand through her hair: it was as if he were stroking some luxurious, sleeping animal." Chapter 13, pg. 18

"All was so silent and motionless in the room that what next occurred, though nothing in itself, seemed quite momentous." Chapter 14, pg. 19

"This man around whom the entire village revolved always moved about inside an empty bubble. As though an unwritten law required him to be alone." Chapter 21, pg. 29

"There were no doors, and on the paper walls there was a play of shadows that appeared and disappeared leaving not a trace of noise. It bore no resemblance to life; if there were a name for all this, it was: theatre." Chapter 22, pg. 31

"He bent his head and watched his steps, for this helped him to avoid thinking." Chapter 22, pg. 31

"The sky above the palace spotted with thousands of birds in flight, as though they had exploded from the earth, birds of every kind, flying all over the place in frantic terror, singing and crying, an explosive fireworks of wings, clouds of colour shot against the light, sounds of terror, music in flight, fleeing through the sky. Hervé Joncour smiled." Chapter 32, pg. 43

"He left the house and on his way back to the village passed the huge aviary. The doors were once ore closed. Inside, hundreds of birds were flitting about, sheltered from the sky." Chapter 36, pg. 49



"Perhaps sometimes life shows you a side of itself which leaves you with nothing more to say." Chapter 39, pg. 52

"Behind him lay a road eight thousand kilometers long. In front of him, nothing. He had a sudden glimpse of what he had considered invisible. The end of the world." Chapter 43, pg. 59

"The boy had a great lark shouting incomprehensible remarks at their backs. He was no more than fourteen years old. He was forever blowing into a little reed pipe, drawing out of it the calls of every bird in the world. He looked like a person engaged in the happiest act of his life." Chapter 45, pg. 62

"He [i]was[/i] a billet-doux." Chapter 48, pg. 65

"They said he was a swindler. They said he was a saint. Somebody said: There's something about him, like some sort of unhappiness." Chapter 52, pg. 72

"It looked like a catalogue of the footprints of little birds, fanatically meticulous in its compilation. It was surprising to consider that in fact these were signs, that is, the embers of a voice destroyed by fire." Chapter 55, pg. 76

"Hervé Joncour spent the years that followed adhering to the limpid style of living that pertained to a man who stood in need of nothing. He passed his days in a regime of measured emotions." Chapter 60, pg. 84

"Insomuch as despair was an excess that had no part in him, he concentrated on what was left of his life and began once more to give it his attention, with the unshakeable tenacity of a gardener back at work the morning after the storm." Chapter 62, pg. 87

"In time he began to allow himself a pleasure that hitherto he had always denied himself: he would talk of his travels to those who came to call on him. As they listened to him, the folk of Lavilledieu discovered the world, and the children learned what it was to marvel. He would tell his tales slowly, seeing in the air things that the other did not see." Chapter 65, pg. 91





## Topics for Discussion

Hélène Joncour is the portrait of the loyal and loving wife. Is her loyalty admirable? Is it understandable? Is the reader given enough information about her to make an accurate judgment of her behavior?

Why did Hervé Joncour make such a feeble attempt to hide his attraction for Hara Kei's mistress from Hara Kei or his villagers?

To which qualities of silk fabric does the title of the novel refer?

Does Hara Kei's explanation for why he killed the boy suffice? Is he merely following ancient Japanese law?

Why does Hervé Joncour feel kinship to Jean Berbeck, the man who gave up speaking?

In what ways, if any, would Hervé Joncour have behaved differently if his daughters had been born before he traveled to Japan?

Why does the mayor of Lavilledieu acquiesce to Baldabiou's request to allow his son, Hervé Joncour, to leave the military to work as a silkworm egg trader?

Why does Madame Blanche keep secret the identity of the letter-writer the day she reads it aloud to Hervé Joncour?

What is the significance of the estate garden and park that Hervé Joncour spends so many years planning? Do you think he ever stocks the aviary he builds?

Hervé Joncour and Baldabiou were friends and business partners for more than twenty years. Why does Baldabiou vanish completely from Joncour's life after he leaves Lavilledieu?