

# **Spring Snow Study Guide**

## **Spring Snow by Yukio Mishima**

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# Plot Summary

"Spring Snow" is the first in a series of four novels collectively called "The Sea of Fertility." The other novels in the cycle are "Runaway Horses," "The Temple of Dawn," and "The Decay of the Angel." This novel demonstrates the impacts of the "modernization" of Japan from a feudalistic, patriarchal, and aristocratic society into something more fluid and democratic. These changes are revealed in the story of a pair of lovers, one from an old aristocratic family and the other from upwardly-mobile middle class origins. The complication is that Satoko, the young woman, does not want to marry Prince Harunori Toin to please their families but is afraid of her growing passion for Kiyooki. Her subsequent flight from reality into a convent, probably symbolizing the way that Buddhism provides stability for Japanese in a time of social upheaval, causes great distress for everyone and is a plot device to lend their plight a tragic hue.

Since this is a work in translation, it is difficult to know whether the English translation fails to do justice to the original work, or whether the author has failed to present his characters as anything more than two dimensional. This is a truly tragic love story of the same order as "Romeo and Juliet" that somehow fails to arouse deep emotion or even much empathy on the part of the reader. There may be both a linguistic as well as cultural barrier between the novel and English-speaking readers, but because of this failure the story seems driven by the author's need to present old and new patterns in Japanese society in conflict so that the characters become secondary to the plot design. The novel's forward momentum derives from conflicting structural patterns as much, or more, than from genuine human feeling.

Of course, that may well be the author's intention: to show how a paternalistic, hierarchical, rigid society distorts and drains away real emotion and demands of its citizens a kind of kabuki dance in relationships of the heart. When the lovers, Kiyooki and Satoko, indulge their passion for each other, tragedy ensues, perhaps because they are so ill-equipped to deal with their powerful emotions because of their rigidly-controlled upbringing. Kiyooki, as a youth of 18 in his first serious love affair, plays out a futile effort to somehow make Satoko his own, while she enters a convent, breaking off her arranged engagement to a member of an aristocratic family and making herself completely inaccessible to her lover, who falls ill from self-neglect in her pursuit and dies at the age of 20.

Possibly the author intended to show that true passionate love between people in Japan of 1912 was doomed. However, after all the twists and turns of the narrative, Kiyooki's death at the end of the novel seems absurd rather than tragic because of the author's failure to bring these two lovers to life in three dimensions throughout the narrative. As a sociological work, "Spring Snow" is quite informative and engaging because of its presumed historical accuracy. However as a story of flesh-and-blood young lovers, it fails to deliver the full impact of real tragedy perhaps because there seems to be nothing at stake in their relationship except a juvenile type of willfulness. A more nuanced approach that showed the emotional contradictions of the characters—their

fears, pride, and frustrations—would probably elicit the missing element of reader empathy.



# Chapters 1-5

## Chapters 1-5 Summary

### Chapter 1

The Matsugae household is abuzz with preparations for the 1912 New Year's ceremonies at the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, where 18-year-old Kiyooki Matsugae is to serve as a royal page and lift the empress' train as she enters the banquet. The women of the Matsugae clan are awash in perfume, white face makeup, hair styling and dressing. His father, the Marquis of Matsugae, revels at the attention his son garners because of his almost too perfect handsomeness, but his satisfaction turns quickly to uneasiness when he compares Kiyooki to his two brothers who sacrificed their lives for the empire in the Russo-Japanese War. Their manliness is captured in an old photo of 1904 memorial services for the war dead that adorns the Matsugae residence.

### Chapter 2

Kiyooki's secret obsessions begin to isolate him from his schoolmates, except for his pal Honda who exhibits a calm, steady demeanor of total devotion to his friend. Honda frequently visits Kiyooki at his estate on Sundays, but Kiyooki never takes an active role in suggesting activities, which puzzles Honda. Kiyooki's only conscious purpose in life is to distill the poison from his own demons to be a thorn in the side of his family. The thorn represents Kiyooki's elegance and refinement, his decision to never get his delicate white hands dirty. Honda suggests they go for a boat ride; with Kiyooki's reluctant agreement, they paddle over to a small island in the lake and get out. In their conversation, Honda is revealed as a pragmatist while Kiyooki has the character of a sprite, always flitting in the direction of his labile emotions.

### Chapter 3

The two young men notice a group of women laughing as they climb down beside a waterfall that empties into the pool. Kiyooki focuses on the beautiful young woman wearing an aquamarine kimono who is attended by her servants, and realizes that it is Satoko. Kiyooki emerges from the tree branches where he and Honda are hiding and shouts "hello" to Satoko on the far shore. Her cool indifference only rouses Kiyooki's determination; she exhibits the same detachment as Kiyooki—both raised in the same household of nobility as children. Satoko is two years older than Kiyooki. As they row back to shore, the two boys notice the presence of the Abbess of Gesshu who is Satoko's great-aunt. The group on the other side discusses what is causing the water to dam up the channel of the highest waterfall, when Kiyooki tells them it is the body of a dead dog. Once the body is removed for burial, Kiyooki and Satoko rush off to the hills to pick flowers for the dog. As they climb, Kiyooki notices for the first time Satoko's bountiful hips and her sparkling eyes. Teasingly, she asks him: "What would you do if suddenly I wasn't here any more?"



## Chapter 4

Satoko's penchant for asking riddles in an insincerely grave manner seems perfectly suited to activate Kiyooki's nervous insecurity, and he worries about what she means by her question. Kiyooki's growing emotional entanglement with Satoko is eclipsed by a conversation at school with his friend Honda, who asks him what he thinks of the sermon delivered at the Matsugae home by the abbess on consciousness and distinctions. He cites the parable of a sleeping man who gets thirsty and scoops water up from a nearby hole. It tastes clear and refreshing. In the morning, he sees that he has taken the water from a human skull. Honda wonders whether the man could ever drink from the skull again with his newfound knowledge. Honda castigates Kiyooki for his indifference to the sermon and to his curiosity. Preoccupied with Satoko, Kiyooki presents a distressed, pleading countenance.

## Chapter 5

At dinner with his parents, Kiyooki learns that Satoko has declined an offer of marriage from the scion of a prominent family. He narcissistically concludes that it is because Satoko is in love with him. His sudden elation seems to escape notice by his self-involved parents. After dinner, Marquis Matsugae invites his son Kiyooki to a game of billiards and tells him that two Siamese princes are coming to his school and may stay at their estate for a few days; Kiyooki is further pleased by this news. The marquis invites his son to walk with him in the cold November night, on the path to his mistress's house. When his father wonders at Kiyooki's seeming lack of interest in women, he offers to throw a party for him and his friends and have lots of geishas on hand. Kiyooki politely declines, then turns back toward the mansion. Kiyooki tosses and turns all night, obsessed with Satoko, like someone in love.

## Chapters 1-5 Analysis

In the first five chapters, the author creates the social background against which the love affair of Satoko and Kiyooki will play out. Initially, both seem the shallow and egotistical children of wealth and privilege. Kiyooki has known Satoko as someone akin to an older sister when, by his father's devices, he comes to live with her family, the Ayakuras, so that he can be exposed to the manners and refinement of the aristocracy. However, when he encounters her later as a teenager, he notices that she is now a beautiful woman who causes the first stirrings of deeply masculine instincts. His foil in the person of his friend Honda, a schoolmate at the elite Peers School, is, by contrast with Kiyooki's mercurial nature, a steady, reasonable young man who is a good student of a practical turn of mind. The novel opens with Kiyooki and Honda scrutinizing an old photograph of Japanese soldiers from the Russo-Japanese War—a glimpse back at imperial might on the cusp of major sociocultural changes that will reshape Japanese society in the 20th Century.



# Chapters 6-10

## Chapters 6-10 Summary

### Chapter 6

The two Siamese princes—Prince Pattanadid and Prince Kridsada—arrive at the Matsugae residence. They are cousins, both 18 years old like Kiroaki. The two speak perfect English, which they often use to converse with Kiyooki and his family. They will study Japanese before enrolling in the Peers School in the spring. Kiyooki has a preference for Prince Pattanadid ("Chao P") because he seems to have a dreamy nature like himself. Kiyooki writes a long letter to Satoko in which he fabricates his experiences with a geisha, his loss of innocence and ascent to manhood. He also chides her for her constant use of riddles to communicate, saying that this sort of insincerity is typical of all women. After he mails the letter, he calls her and implores her to destroy the missive before reading it. She agrees, and accepts his offer to attend a performance at the Imperial Theater. Kiyooki sends her tickets for herself and her mother near, but not adjacent to, the seats he purchases for himself, the two Siamese princes and Honda. Satoko and Kiyooki thus plan a "chance encounter" with each other.

### Chapter 7

While doing his homework, Honda reflects on the fact that while his household seems steeped in the Japanese lifestyle, the family itself is quite western in its attitudes and preferences—possibly reflecting the fact his father studied law in Germany and admires the logical turn of the Teutonic mind. On the other hand, Kiyooki's home seems on the surface to be also quite westernized but in fact is bound by strict Japanese traditional values and customs. Honda recalls a recent memorial service for his grandmother during which the atmosphere of mourning is interrupted by life, as relatives talk about their children and their own lives. At the ceremony, his beautiful second cousin Fusako collapses with fatigue into the couch where he is sitting and rests her head on his lap. They are quite comfortable when a door opens and his mother, aunt and uncle enter and are startled. Honda realizes that his feelings for her come from "something far more elemental than a desire for flirtation."

### Chapter 8

Kiyooki takes the two princes to a pair of kabuki plays, and his anxiety is relieved when he sees that Satoko is also in attendance. His fear that she might have read his letter dissipates when he sees her, looking more radiant than ever. In seeing her smile, he realizes that she loves him without ever having consulted him. Kiyooki makes a pretense of excitement when he introduces Satoko to the princes, but also realizes that he is not in love with her. Honda, on the other hand, is quite smitten by Satoko's beauty and charm. Kiyooki is hypervigilant as he searches her every move for any sign she



might have read his letter. As he translates the compliments of the two Siamese princes for Satoko, Kiyooki is once again stunned by the radiance and beauty of her eyes.

### Chapter 9

Linuma, Kiyooki's personal tutor, reflects somewhat bitterly on his failure to motivate the indolent aristocratic youth during his six-year tenure in the Matsugae household. Linuma is puzzled that Kiyooki, indifferent to his studies at school, has not tried to compensate in some other area such as athletics. Linuma feels frustrated, too, by Kiyooki's friendship with Honda, who seems to admire the passive Kiyooki despite his many shortcomings. His attempts to instill in Kiyooki a feeling of vigorous manhood and hard work also have failed. As Linuma prays in the family shrine, questioning the sensuality and self-seeking of the world, he finds that he is sexually aroused from having seen a servant girl and begins sweeping in a frenzy.

### Chapter 10

Satoko and her servant Tadeshina arrive at the Matsugae household for New Year's celebrations. Kiyooki asks Tadeshina whether Satoko has read his letter; she replies that she personally burned it before Satoko could have a chance to open it. Feeling relieved and a little tipsy from sake, Kiyooki joins Satoko under an evergreen tree where she professes her happiness because of him and tells him the new year will reveal much more about her feelings. Kiyooki tells his tutor Linuma that the maids are gossiping about a note he slipped to Miné, one of the servants, on his way to the shrine for prayers. Linuma begs Kiyooki not to tell his father about the flirtation, for fear he and Miné will both be fired. Kiyooki tells Linuma he will do nothing of the sort, if he and Tadeshina will "join forces" with him and become friends.

## Chapters 6-10 Analysis

Class distinctions and shifting cultural values become sharper as the nascent love affair between Kiyooki and Satoko begins to warm up. The degree of openness to western influence seems to be the dividing line between traditional Japanese society and the "new" society in which rigid social classes are blurred and a middle class begins to emerge through the transforming alchemy of education. Linuma, who works in the Matsugae household as tutor to the indifferent Kiyooki, is an example of this change. As he works his way through law school, Linuma becomes repelled by his charge's indolence and lack of motivation to excel at anything. This he attributes to Kiyooki's aristocratic "elegance" and refinement that Linuma believes has rendered him unfit for any productive or useful role in society. However, Linuma changes his mind about Kiyooki when the young noble cunningly uses a love note that his tutor has written to the servant girl Miné to blackmail him into silent submission about Kiyooki's love life.





# Chapters 11-15

## Chapters 11-15 Summary

### Chapter 11

Kiyooki dreams that he is wearing an emerald ring that belongs to one of the Siamese princes, and when he peers deeply into it the face of a woman appears. He moves his hand to slap a fly and when he looks again into the emerald the image is gone. Then he receives word from an obsequious linuma that Satoka would like him to join her in skipping school to play in the snow. He hesitates, then decides to join her. He tells linumi to hire a rickshaw for two and to send word back to Satoko that he will join her.

### Chapter 12

Kiyooki is struck once again with Satoko's radiant beauty as she enters the rickshaw, coming close to Kiyooki as she snuggles under the blanket he has brought to keep their legs warm. Fighting off the neurotic circular thoughts in his head, Kiyooki notices that Satoko has closed her eyes expectantly. He kisses her, rather politely at first, but their passion quickly flares and they hungrily devour each others' mouths. Afterwards, they ride in silence for a bit until Satoko says she should be getting home. Kiyooki agrees but immediately regrets having allowed her to control the situation.

### Chapter 13

The next day at school, Kiyooki and Honda meet and Kiyooki confesses that he used the pretense of a cold to stay away, and that he convinced his mother he really has a cold. The two then launch into a lengthy philosophical dialogue that seems quite out of character for a pair of 18-year-olds. Honda says individual personalities don't matter much in the long view of history, that future generations will lump everyone of a certain time together regardless of their differences, disputes, divergences. They compare changing Japanese society with western cultures that believe humans can impose their will on history. Honda observes that if one believes in chance then one must also believe in the power of the will.

### Chapter 14

That evening, before linuma leaves for his night law classes, Kiyooki calls him to his room and perfunctorily hands him the key to his father's huge library. He tells his servant that Tadeshina has given the servant girl Miné, with whom linuma is fascinated, instructions to knock softly on the library door at the time when he usually leaves for classes and he will open the door. Miné does so, linuma lets her in and releases the full fury of his passions on her—which she enjoys because she is pleased to use her body to bring delight to others. As they copulate, they can hear rats scurrying about in the ceiling.



## Chapter 15

Kiyoaki receives an elegant and passionate love letter from Satoko in which she reprises their time together and expresses a desire to be with him always. It is not until he reads her letter that his passions are once again aroused, although he blotted them out before. Kiyoaki struggles to get the right tone in his letter of response, assuming different personas and guises, but is finally disgusted with himself and simply writes back to Satoko his joy of sharing a kiss for the first time in a kind of boyish passion.

## Chapters 11-15 Analysis

During an illicit rendezvous in a rickshaw across a snowy landscape, Kiyoaki and Satoko kiss passionately. Engorged with cupidity, Kiyoaki secures the keys to his father's library and gives them to Inuma, telling him that Miné will join him there for their own illicit rendezvous. Seemingly an act of generosity, it is in reality another tactic by Kiyoaki to tighten his absolute control over his tutor and to guarantee his silence and secrecy about his relationship with Satoko. Along with his rising passion for Satoko, Kiyoaki demonstrates a more pronounced need for control that is based on his fear of entering into a sexual relationship with Satoko because of his castrating relationship with his own mother. Satoko writes him a passionate letter expressing her delight at their day of truancy from school, and Kiyoaki struggles to find just the right "voice" for a letter of reply. Unable to come up with a pretense that seems real, he surrenders and writes her a simple letter of affection.



# Chapters 16-20

## Chapters 16-20 Summary

### Chapter 16

A sense of disappointment prevails at the Matsugae estate because the family decides not to hold open to the public three important spring events—the Doll Festival in March, cherry blossom viewing in April, and the Shinto festival in May. The events are closed to the public because the official period of mourning for the late emperor has not elapsed. During his spring break, Kiyooki visits his widowed grandmother in her house on the estate. Aware of his indolence, she asks him whether he might be interested in judo or fencing, and laments that the gymnasium has been torn down. His grandmother says she is embarrassed by his father's pretentious lifestyle, and reminds Kiyooki that she places the stipend she receives from the government for her two sons killed in the war on a shelf in the family altar without opening it. Kiyooki says he will never wear a uniform and will only wound hearts—not bodies in battle.

### Chapter 17

As elaborate preparations for the cherry blossom festival get underway, one of the two Siamese princes asks Kiyooki whether "that beautiful girl of yours" will come to the festival. He replies yes, but asks them not to mention their relationship in front of his own or Satoko's family. As Prince Chao P. gazes out of the window, he spots Satoko arriving in her long-sleeved kimono, and shouts: "Here she comes!" The two Siamese princes and Kiyooki strain at the window for a better look at her and Kiyooki admits to himself for the first time: "I am madly in love with her."

### Chapter 18

The upper crust of Japanese society arrives at the Matsugae's for the cherry blossom festival, including Baron Shinkawa and his wife, owners of the second Rolls Royce ever purchased in Japan. Like other guests, they have to arrive early before the appearance of the imperial couple who are given a formal reception before viewing the blossoms. Kiyooki is taken aback by the remarks of older aristocrats about Satoko's beauty and excellence. He compares Satoko's elegant movements with those of the geishas, formalized and uninspired. With a snap of two sounding sticks, the festival dance begins.

### Chapter 19

Kiyooki and Satoko take advantage of a break in the festivities to slip away behind a large tree at some distance from the house. When he tries to kiss her, she resists him and asks him to release her because "this is breaking my heart." Crushed, Kiyooki withdraws, then she kisses him and he notices that tears are streaming down her cheeks. She tells him he is only a child and cannot understand what is going on. "The



truth is, Kiyō, you're no more than a baby," she says. Then she withdraws and returns to the party, leaving Kiyōaki wounded in his most sensitive spot—his pride.

## Chapter 20

After the festival, Kiyōaki retires to his room but cannot sleep. He summons linuma and stares blankly at his servant while he reads the menu from the party. Kiyōaki tells linuma that he probably cannot imagine what is vexing him: the fact that Satoko insulted him and hurt his feelings. He asks whether linuma has heard anything from Tadeshina—Satoko's servant—that would indicate a change in the relationship with Satoko. linuma denies it, then says he has heard Kiyōaki's father tried to interest him in a frolic with some geishas, but that Kiyōaki declined the offer. This was told to Tadeshina by the servant girl Miné. Tadeshina responds that Satoko indeed read his letter, but when she learned from Tadeshina that it was a lie that Kiyōaki had consorted with prostitutes, she was overjoyed and thus invited him on a rickshaw ride in the snow. Kiyōaki, filled with resentment, tells linuma he feels Satoko has played with him like a toy and angrily dismisses him.

## Chapters 16-20 Analysis

As the two young lovers circle and try to ensnare each other with various displays and denials of affection, it becomes apparent they are growing deeply attached. This game of hearts is played by using servants as proxies. Tadeshina, Satoko's servant, tells Miné, a servant in Kiyōaki's household, that Satoko read the bogus letter about a visit with geishas but was so relieved to find it was only a fabrication that she invited Kiyōaki to spend a day of hookie with her. Needless to say, triangulation abounds in their relationship as Satoko and Kiyōaki create their own impromptu kabuki dance. The challenge for the two then becomes one of honesty, revealing themselves directly to each other rather than through intermediaries.



# Chapters 21-26

## Chapters 21-26 Summary

### Chapter 21

Satoko and her servant Tadeshina try repeatedly and unsuccessfully to reach Kiyooki by telephone so that Satoko can meet with him. Kiyooki locks himself in his room and flatly refuses to talk to anyone. He calls Inuma to his chambers to witness him burning a thick unopened letter from Satoko. At dinner with his parents, the marquis asks Kiyooki whether his long relationship with Satoko starting in childhood would be harmed by the fact she has been extended an offer of marriage. Kiyooki says he has no involvement with her and no opinion about her marriage.

### Chapter 22

The Toin family, imperial nobility, want to find a bride for their son, Prince Harunori. Satoko is informally introduced to the imperial couple at the cherry blossom festival, and is then invited to their home for tea to meet the prince. Marquis Matsugae, Kiyooki's father, owes a debt of gratitude to Satoko's family, the Ayakuras, for having raised his son in the manner of a nobleman during his formative years. So the marquis offers to underwrite the costs of Satoko's dowry and other wedding expenses, since her family is relatively cash poor. As she rides to the Toin residence, Satoko wishes wistfully for some kind of sudden intervention to halt the proceedings. Satoko finds the efforts of her elders to make conversation tedious; when she meets the prince in military dress and manners she is impressed with his "empty dignity." A week after her visit, a steward from the Toin household comes to the Ayakura house to discuss wedding plans. Then the families submit a petition for marriage to the emperor.

### Chapter 23

Inuma comes to Kiyooki's room to bid him a formal farewell, since he has completed his studies and is leaving the household. Somewhat to the master's disgust, the loyal servant of seven years breaks into tears several times. Inuma confirms to Kiyooki that he and Miné will both be leaving, to get married. At the annual Omiyasama festival at the Matsugae estate, the absence of both Inuma and Satoko makes Kiyooki sad but he comforts himself with the belief that he has gained mastery over his feelings and is now a man.

### Chapter 24

Kiyooki, in a strange way, is comforted by the loss of Satoko because it is easier to bear that fact than the uncertainty that he might someday lose her. At school, Prince Pattanadid asks Kiyooki to retrieve his green emerald ring that was given to him by his sweetheart, Princess Ying Chan, when he left Siam. The two princes are not doing well at school because their six months of studying Japanese has not given them a fluent



command of the language. They are both homesick and lonely and Chao P. exclaims that he feels he is connecting with a part of the princess when he has the ring on his finger again. When he comes home, Kiyooki encounters his mother who is bustling to go to the Ayakuras because of an imperial approval of the impending marriage. He is at first indifferent, then morose over the news but sends his best wishes.

#### Chapter 25

Like a man struck by a bolt of lightning, Kiyooki is electrified by the realization that he loves Satoko in the full way in which a man loves a woman. Energized by the fact he has lost his diffidence, melancholy and childish avoidance, Kiyooki flings open the window and breathes deeply of fresh air and the scent of flowers.

#### Chapter 26

After a period of daydreaming, Kiyooki summons a rickshaw and goes to the Ayakura residence. There, he demands to talk to Tadeshina. They ride to a place where they can meet privately. Tadeshina is shocked that Kiyooki now shows an interest in Satoko. He tells Tadeshina she must arrange a meeting between himself and Satoko; that the wedding is happening because of her reading his disdainful letter to Satoko and giving it to her, despite his request the letter be destroyed. He wonders aloud whether he should reconstruct her letter to him that he has torn apart. "It is too late," Tadeshina says. Kiyooki disagrees, and asks what might happen if he took her letter to the prince's family. The blood drains from Tadeshina's face, and she agrees to arrange one meeting if he returns Satoko's letter. Kiyooki agrees, but insists on a private meeting between himself and Satoko.

## Chapters 21-26 Analysis

At last, Kiyooki has a love and a cause. The love he discovers within himself is for Satoko—not a lukewarm affinity for her, but full-blown lust and love combined. The trigger for this realization is the official announcement of her engagement to Prince Harunori. Kiyooki's cause is to cut through the layers of social protocol and internecine scheming and blackmail to get at Satoko. Kiyooki, like Prince Machiavelli before him, uses the intrigues of others to advance his own cause. He meets secretly with Satoko's servant Tadeshina and tells her he needs to see Satoko. When she says it is not possible, he threatens to reveal the love letter he received from Satoko that describes her love for him. Tadeshina relents and agrees to arrange a single meeting. Although to a contemporary American reader all this palace intrigue seems unbelievable and shocking, the reader can hardly doubt that the author portrays accurately how power plays out in the old, traditional Japanese society. Kiyooki, initially indifferent to everything because of his power and wealth, becomes fully aware of the need for him to struggle against opposing forces to be with the woman he loves. This awareness, as much as anything else, marks his transition into manhood.



# Chapters 27-32

## Chapters 27-32 Summary

### Chapter 27

Kiyooki goes to a boarding house in Kasumicho to meet Satoko, as arranged by her servant Tadeshina. Alone, they sit close to each other as Satoko sobs, her head drooping. Finally Kiyooki puts his arms on her shoulders and tries to kiss her but she rebuffs him. He then puts one hand under her chin, raises her head and kisses her through her feeble protestations until she finally yields to passionate kissing and lovemaking. He realizes in his heart that he really loves her, and she smiles during their lovemaking. Afterwards Tadeshina asks him to return the letter and he refuses, telling her that he plans to use it to arrange more visits with Satoko, who tells her servant there is nothing they can do but continue to meet with Kiyooki.

### Chapter 28

Kiyooki visits Honda's house, aglow with love and aching to tell his story. Honda is greatly pleased that his friend has come, and entranced with details of the love affair with Satoko. He tells Kiyooki that, for some reason, he thought of the old photo they once shared from the Russo-Japanese war. They enjoy a meal together and Honda asks Kiyooki what his intentions are. Kiyooki replies that he does not intend to back off from his affair, although marriage is impossible because of the royal sanction. Honda, a law student, reminds him that because of the affair, the sanction is now null and void and he cannot leave the people in his family hanging. Kiyooki eats strawberries and smiles. Honda tells him that the reason he thought of the old photo is because he believes his generation is engaged in a different kind of warfare—a battle of the emotions.

### Chapter 29

Honda's father, a justice of the Supreme Court, gives his son permission to sit in courtrooms other than his own to watch and learn how the Japanese system of jurisprudence works. During a break in his classes, Honda sits through the murder trial of a woman who is accused of killing her husband in a sordid love triangle. Appalled at the testimony about the dark passions of his fellow man, Honda realizes that part of his fascination with Kiyooki is his reckless dark side that could easily bring destruction. Honda decides it is best not to interject himself into Kiyooki's affairs, or affair.

### Chapter 30

Siamese Prince Pattanadid claims at Peers School that his beloved emerald ring has been stolen; he and his brother Prince Krisada have decided to return to Siam. The inevitable charge, counter-charge, denial grips the school. Students have little sympathy for the prince because they consider it effeminate for a man to wear such a ring. When



Kiyoaki tells his father, Marquis Matsugae, about the incident, the marquis determines to do something so the two young men do not return to Siam with bitterness at the Japanese. He invites them to join the family at its seaside villa when school is out.

### Chapter 31

A spate of sunshine revives the spirits of the two Siamese princes, and they join Kiyoaki and Honda in short cross-country hike. At the top of a ridge, they are refreshed by cool sea breezes. When the two princes see a distant statue of Buddha, they drop to their knees in reverence while the two Japanese youths grin secretly to each other.

### Chapter 32

Kiyoaki, Honda and the two Siamese princes frolic through the sea-cooled woods to the beach. As the two princes are splashing about, Kiyoaki and Honda sit on the beach and the former falls asleep while the latter scrutinizes his body. Kiyoaki awakens and asks Honda if he will cover for him as he slips away for a few days to see Satoko, and Honda agrees.

## Chapters 27-32 Analysis

In a remote boarding house, Kiyoaki and Satoko finally consummate their affair. Almost immediately, Kiyoaki begins to enlist co-conspirators. When Tadeshina demands the return of Satoko's love letter, Kiyoaki refuses and tells her he intends to continue using it for more trysts with his lover. He asks his friend Honda if he will keep their affair secret, and Honda agrees. However, as a law student, Honda tells Kiyoaki that his affair with Satoko has rendered the royal proclamation of marriage null and void. Later, when Honda sits through a murder trial resulting from a love triangle, he concludes it would be best not to become embroiled in their relationship. As they relax on the beach one sunny day, Kiyoaki falls asleep and Honda admires his beautiful body, suggesting a homoerotic undertone in their friendship.





# Chapters 33-38

## Chapters 33-38 Summary

### Chapter 33

The four young men hold lengthy discussions about mythology, religion and philosophy—questioning their own and others' beliefs. As they talk, night falls and the brilliance of the heavens seems an appropriate setting for their cosmic dialogue. Earthbound and no doubt thinking of his trip to see Satoko, Kiyooki interrupts to tell his friends it is time to return for dinner.

### Chapter 34

With Honda's assistance, Kiyooki makes secret trips to Tokyo to see his lover three times a week. Although the wedding is postponed because of the death of the emperor, it does not mean that Satoko cannot marry the young prince. Kiyooki decides to invite Satoko to come visit him and spend the night in his villa, and to return her home before daybreak. However, this raises the thorny question of just when and how she could travel unrecognized. He decides the best course is to borrow a car driven by someone else without knowledge of their affair. Honda asks Itsui, a schoolmate who is a poor student, whether he can borrow his Ford and a driver for a date with a fictitious woman named Fusako. Itsui agrees to loan him the car, provided Honda helps him with his final exams. As Satoko and Honda ride in the car, she confesses to him that she and Kiyooki have sinned but that she feels no remorse, but rather a sense of purification.

### Chapter 35

The two Siamese princes receive word from their native land that Princess Chan has died. She is Chao P's sweetheart and Prince Kridsada's sister. Chao P passes out and Kridsada moans sadly, as the two are led up to their rooms. When they come to their senses, the princes announce their plans to return home. As Kiyooki and Honda bid them farewell on an ocean liner, Kiyooki feels that it is his own youth that is departing.

### Chapter 36

By fall, the lovers' visits grow less frequent and more cautious. Whenever they are together, they are shadowed by Satoko's servant Tadeshina. On one of their evening walks, Satoko casually tells Kiyooki that their affair will be over in a month or so because the Toinnomiyas will insist that the marriage contract be honored. Kiyooki protests that he loves her too much and becomes quite uncomfortable. Satoko asks him if he wants to break things off now because of his anxiety and discomfort. He squeezes her hand mightily, but she does not protest.

### Chapter 37



In preparation for the wedding, the family of the bridegroom picks three areas of Satoko's education they consider deficient and asks her to remedy them. Tadeshina, who considers herself wise and one with the Earth, is eager to comply with trysts between Satoko and Kiyooki because she believes the passion between two young people is sacred. In October the Toinnomiyas send notification the wedding will be in December. One morning when Satoko awakens, she rushes to the bathroom to vomit and Tadeshina recognizes it as the onset of morning sickness. The servant woman tells Satoko she must have an abortion, and Satoko agrees once she is convinced that she will not go to prison.

### Chapter 38

Using a public phone, Kiyooki calls Tadeshina and tells her he would like to see Satoko. Nothing can be arranged for 10 days, she tells him. Restless and irritable, Kiyooki is in a sullen mood when the two meet briefly for lunch with Tadeshina. Their verbal exchanges are tense and taut. When they part company, Kiyooki wonders if he will ever see his lover again. There is a mumbled promise to meet again in 10 days. As Kiyooki tells Honda about his frustrations one day after school, Kiyooki spies a dead mole, picks it up to examine it closely, then hurls it into a nearby pond. Honda takes that as a sign of his friend's desolation of spirit.

## Chapters 33-38 Analysis

The tangled web of deceit becomes ever more complex as Kiyooki, aided and abetted by Honda, arranges regular trips to Tokyo to see Satoko. Honda even borrows a friend's car by telling him he needs it to pick up a woman named Fusako, in exchange for helping his friend Itsui with final exams. As the web of deception becomes broader and more complex, everyone involved becomes increasingly irritable. Satoko suggests to Kiyooki their affair may be coming to an end because of the approach of her wedding day. Then she finds herself pregnant with Kiyooki's child, which immediately becomes another secret to be kept under wraps until a visit to an abortionist can be arranged. When Kiyooki, unaware of Satoko's pregnancy, calls Tadeshina to arrange another visit, she tells him it can not happen for at least 10 days. Nerves become more taut as the tension among the co-conspirators rises.



# Chapters 39-44

## Chapters 39-44 Summary

### Chapter 39

After 10 days, Kiyooki has not heard from Satoko or Tadeshina. He waits a few more days and still hears nothing, so he boldly departs one night for Azabu where he wanders alone among the places where he and Satoko spent time as children. He goes to the Ayakura mansion and sees a light on upstairs, but is afraid to approach and returns home. When he returns home from school, Kiyooki is summoned to a game of billiards with his father. The marquis shows him a letter written by Tadeshina before her suicide attempt with sleeping pills. In the letter, she reveals that Satoko is pregnant and calls it "a family matter." The marquis confronts his son, becomes enraged and attacks him with the hard end of his billiard cue, striking him several times on the back and arm, finally landing a crushing blow on his face. Kiyooki confesses that he is the father and says, "Satoko is mine." The marquis and his mother decide to take Satoko to Osaka to undergo an abortion at the clinic of a Doctor Mori.

### Chapter 40

As she begins a 10-day recovery from the overdose of sleeping pills, Tadeshina confesses to the count that she sent a letter to the marquis informing him of Satoko's pregnancy at a time when she felt desperate. She fully intended to die afterwards, Tadeshina says. The count and countess are restrained in their responses. Tadeshina tells the count there is much she left out of her letter.

### Chapter 41

Count Ayakura asks Tadeshina what she left out of her letter to Marquis Matsugae. She reminds him of an incident eight years previously in which she agreed to find Satoko a lover when she comes of age, so that when she is presented to the socially correct suitor she will appear sexually experienced. The old woman smiles deferentially, knowing that she has power over her master in the form of potential blackmail.

### Chapter 42

Dr. Mori, the obstetrician, stays a week in the Ayakura mansion to care for Satoko before they make the trip to Osaka. At the train station, Kiyooki watches as Satoko and female members of both families board the train. He rushes aboard to see Satoko once more, then is ushered off the train where he watches her depart, heartbroken.

### Chapter 43



The abortion is successful and after a couple of days' recovery in the hospital, the entourage boards the train for the return journey. They stop at Obitoké so Satoko can visit the Gesshu Monastery and bid farewell to the Abbess.

#### Chapter 44

Once inside the monastery, however, Satoko disappears, cuts off her hair and goes deeply into prayer. She begs to become a novitiate, and the monastery accepts her.

## Chapters 39-44 Analysis

Tadeshina writes a letter to Marquis Matsugae telling him about the affair of his son with Satoko, and the resulting pregnancy, then tries to commit suicide by taking 100 sleeping pills. When the marquis reads the letter, he summons his son to the billiards room and attacks him with the heavy end of a cue stick. Bloody and battered, Kiyooki defiantly tells his father that Satoko is his, no matter state protocol or family honor. Both the Ayakura and Matsugae families come together on a plan to take Satoko to Tokyo for an abortion. Kiyooki joins them, but stays at a distance when he sees Satoko off on the train. After the abortion, on the return trip, Satoko suddenly turns a visit to her old monastery school into an escape. She pleads with the nuns to take her on as a novitiate. Defeated and discouraged, the families return home without Satoko. The author is signaling to the reader that the individual is capable of out-maneuvering the group, in defiance of Japanese custom. This is a sign that the old order is threatened by the rise of the underclass. Also, Satoko's flight to the monastery could be read as symbolic of Japanese society, faced with huge displacements, returning to its religious underpinnings of Buddhism.



# Chapter 45-50

## Chapter 45-50 Summary

### Chapter 45

When word of the outcome reaches the Matsugae and Ayakura families, they meet in an air of shock and anger. The marquis declaims his outrage and asks how it will be possible to make an apology to the emperor. When he calms down, the marquis realizes that is himself who set in motion the wheels of this catastrophe by asking the count to raise his son Kiyooki as a nobleman in the household with Satoko. They decide that Count Ayakura must go to the monastery with a black wig, gain the release of his daughter and return her in disguise.

### Chapter 46

At the convent, Satoko implores the Abbess to initiate her as a nun. The Abbess decides to dispense with the usual year of ascetic discipline that usually precedes initiation. She advises Satoko that if she takes her vows, she will never be able to see Kiyooki again. Satoko agrees, and is initiated.

### Chapter 47

Satoko's parents visit and Kiyooki's mother goes to see Satoko in the Gesshu Monastery. The count keeps his conversation light and topical, without mentioning the fact he wants her to return home. When it is apparent he has made no progress, the countess tries to convince her to leave, finally breaking down in tears. On the third day, the two mothers return to Tokyo but the count remains in Gesshu for another week trying to compose himself. When the count returns to Tokyo and tells the marquis the bad news, he does not react with anger but summons the police chief and tells him to break into the Monastery and "rescue" Satoko, but the idea is quickly discarded. Then the marquis calls in a physician to sign a statement that Satoko is insane, and a letter is sent to the emperor. Kiyooki learns of these developments by reading an article in the next day's newspaper.

### Chapter 48

At Peers School, other students ask Kiyooki what he thinks of the aborted royal engagement, obviously unaware of his involvement. Reticent by nature, Kiyooki says little on the subject. One day he runs into another student who is also the son of a marquis and who has a disfiguring disease that earns him the nickname "monster." The two sit under a tree in the schoolyard ("one ugly, one beautiful") and attempt conversation that goes nowhere.

### Chapter 49



During winter break from school, Kiyooki's sense of shock and loss becomes overwhelming. Neither of his parents speaks to him and he feels quite isolated. While a Christmas party proceeds in the Matsugae residence, Kiyooki gets in a small rowboat and paddles himself out to the small island where he falls, disconsolate, onto the frozen ground and weeps and wails about his desolation and loss.

#### Chapter 50

Although Kiyooki is very fond of the annual Imperial Poetry Recitation at the royal palace in early January, this year he dreads the event because he feels like a leper, filled with self-loathing. When he sits down to supper one evening, the servant hands Kiyooki a small wine glass filled with a crimson liquid. He quaffs it down, then notices a thick clinging aftertaste. When he asks what he has drunk, the servant tells him the cook gave him the blood of a snapping turtle to restore him to health and vitality. At the recital, Count Ayakura is designated the chief lector, or reader. As he reads various poems, some of them multiple times, Kiyooki is overcome with shame for his part in causing the count to lose his only daughter. When the emperor glances in Kiyooki's direction, Kiyooki decides the only honorable thing for him to do now is to die.

## Chapter 45-50 Analysis

Kiyooki's depression deepens as his parents shun him and his schoolmates ask him silly questions about the broken royal engagement. The creeping awareness that he will never see his beloved again drives him to desperation. When the emperor glances in his direction at the annual poetry recitation, Kiyooki suffocates with a sense of shame and remorse over his involvement with Satoko. Thus the symbology of the new Japanese order in conflict with the traditional order becomes plain, as well as the implicit fact that the imperialist society is still, in 1912, strong enough to resist the inevitable changes in the new century..



# Chapters 51-55

## Chapters 51-55 Summary

### Chapter 51

In an effort to distract his son, the marquis suggests that Kiyooki consider attending Merton College, Oxford University in England. He tells his son admission should be assured once he finishes his studies at the Peers School because the dean is a personal acquaintance. Somewhat buoyed by this prospect, Kiyooki experiences a temporary reprieve from his depression but then sinks even deeper as he becomes anxious and agitated. He decides he must see Satoko but has no money, so he borrows from Honda and takes the train to Obitoké which is near the Gesshu Monastery. He takes a rickshaw to the convent, but is rebuffed by the senior nun. He returns to his room at the shabby inn where he is lodged. Several more attempts to gain entry also fail and Kiyooki feels ill. He sends a telegram to Honda, asking him to come and join him for support.

### Chapter 52

Kiyooki develops a deep cough and a general listlessness; he feverishly chants Satoko's name. That afternoon, he hires a rickshaw to carry him within walking distance to the convent, hoping that his approach on foot might gain him entry. A heavy snowfall covers the landscape as Kiyooki's cough grows more irritated. He walks up the pathway to the monastery and collapses on the doorstep in a violent coughing fit. The nun opens the door and he hears a chorus of female voices; the senior nun rubs his back gently. Finally, she tells him firmly that he cannot enter and that the gardener will help him back to his rickshaw.

### Chapter 53

Honda arrives at the inn and, seeing the condition of Kiyooki's health, advocates getting on a train immediately for Tokyo. Kiyooki refuses and pleads with his friend to talk to the senior nun at the convent and try to arrange a meeting with Satoko. Honda wonders to himself why it is that his friend can experience such pure passion, while he is so steeped in the world of logic, reason, and Aristotle.

### Chapter 54

Early the next morning, Honda goes to the monastery and begs an audience with the senior nun. His hopes rise when he is ushered inside and asked to wait for the reverend abbess. Honda hears a rustling of clothing and the senior nun appears. He pleads the case of Kiyooki passionately and the nun listens thoughtfully, then delivers a discourse on the principles of Buddhism. Finally, she answers his request with a flat "no."



## Chapter 55

Kiyoaki and Honda board a train for Tokyo; Honda is tensely watchful of his friend's deteriorating health. He hears a deep moan from the opposite berth, and Kiyoaki says his chest hurts as if he is being stabbed. Honda notes that his friends' beautiful eyes are filled with tears. Two days after his return to Tokyo, Kiyoaki dies at the age of 20.

## Chapters 51-55 Analysis

The attempts by Marquis Matsugae to stitch together his shattered family and distract Kiyoaki fail, and Kiyoaki rushes to the monastery in a desperate attempt to see Satoko. Once again, traditional Japanese values trump the passionate onrush of social change as the nuns prevent such a meeting despite repeated attempts by Kiyoaki and Honda to get permission to visit Satoko. Sick with physical illness and a broken heart, Kiyoaki returns to Tokyo and dies. Although his challenge to the old protocols and mores of society ultimately fail, Kiyoaki gains depth and credibility by following his heart instead of tradition. The reader gets the sense that the loosening of old ways will not come without a struggle, but that when it does come, it will mean more freedom for the individual to express him or herself.





# Characters

## Kiyoaki Matsugae

Kiyoaki is the aristocratic heir to the proud samurai Matsugae name in imperial Japan of 1912, when Japanese society is a rigid hierarchy. Kiyoaki attends the best schools but is little interested in his studies. He is a dreamy, passionate youth who falls desperately in love with the young Satoko Ayakura when he is 18 years old. The two have been raised in the same Ayakura household for a part of their childhood because Kiyoaki's father wants his son to become familiar with the ways of true nobility. Kiyoaki is a sensitive, melancholy young man who exhibits all the unrealistic romanticism of youth. Having lived the sheltered life of an aristocrat, Kiyoaki is ignorant in the ways of the world and inexperienced in love. His passion for Satoko causes him to break all the rules of the aristocracy in pursuit of her. He eventually falls ill because she has entered a convent and is unavailable for even one last visit, then dies at the age of 20.

## Shigekuni Honda

Honda is Kiroaki's closest friend and longtime schoolmate. Honda is selfless in his devotion to Kiroaki, and possessed of a little more practical knowledge of the world than his friend. Honda is the son of a Supreme Court justice and studies law books in his spare time. This Mutt-and-Jeff duo appears throughout the book, as if the two characters are intended to express contradictory but compatible natures. Honda, as a conventional, obedient servant of the emperor and anyone of higher rank in Japanese society, plays the foil to Kiyoaki's defiant and ultimately self-destructive nature. An important part of this friendship is Honda's caretaking of Kiyoaki, whom he obviously admires tremendously.

## Satoko Ayakura

Satoko is the Juliet in this Romeo-and-Juliet tale, the object of Kiyoaki's obsessions and passions. Satoko comes across as a rather immature child of a privileged family who has never had to struggle to survive or to make any decisions of consequence. Satoko is two years older than Kiyoaki, and is fond of speaking in riddles which truly annoys Kiyoaki. Their love affair starts in a playful way but quickly turns serious. This is Kiyoaki's first love affair and he enters it passionately, once committed. When faced with her first decision of the heart—whether to marry Prince Harunori Toin in an arranged ceremony or to be with her lover, Kiyoaki—she dodges the bullet by entering a monastery. Satoko seems every bit as mercurial as Kiyoaki, although perhaps a little more bound by tradition because of her gender.



## Linuma

The personal servant and tutor to Kiyooki, Linuma comes to the Matsugae household from a village in Kagoshima where the Marquis Matsugae is revered and honored as "a fierce and powerful god." However, when he arrives, Linuma is offended by the family's opulent lifestyle that is diametrically opposed to his own spartan upbringing and values. Although Kiyooki is Linuma's personal responsibility, he finds his aristocratic and sensitive mind and manners repulsive. One night after a formal ceremony, Linuma finds Kiyooki in bed, tears in his eyes. Kiyooki asks if he can make a confidential confession: that he stumbled a bit while carrying the train of Princess Kasuga. Once again, Linuma is disgusted by the affectations of the upper class and by Kiyooki personally. Linuma studies law while serving in the Matsugae household, and leaves after he finishes law school.

## Marquis Matsugae

Marquis Matsugae is Kiyooki's father, the descendant of an old Samurai family. He is uncomfortable with the humble status of his family 50 years earlier and sends Kiyooki to live with an aristocratic family in his earliest years to become refined in the manner of a nobleman. The marquis is very proud of his son as a young man because he believes Kiyooki has elevated his family to the status of the "new nobility." He is a rather strict disciplinarian, perhaps reflecting his family's distinguished military service in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904. His residence is a huge mansion with 100 acres of land on the outskirts of Tokyo, servants, and a large lake. The marquis is especially proud of the fact Emperor Meiji once visited his estate.

## Tadeshina

Tadeshina is Satoko's personal maid. She is an aged woman of hard-won wisdom and total fealty to her master, and yet beneath her wise and weathered appearance runs a deep current of sensuality that makes her unusually compassionate towards younger people such as Satoko and Kiyooki. She is both surrogate grandmother and confidante to Kiyooki and Satoko as their relationship becomes more intense. Tadeshina is crafty and worldly. She is able to maneuver both the count and the marquis to do her will, sometimes using the threat of blackmail.

## Prince Pattanadid and Prince Kridsada

These two Siamese princes arrive for a long visit in the Matsugae household. Most of their appearances in the book are in structured social situations; they are minor characters, perhaps to serve as a foil to the devastating romance between Kiyooki and Satoko. Eventually, they get fed up with their inability to communicate and the barrier that exists between themselves and the other students at the Peers School, and return to Siam.



## Prince Harunori

Prince Harunori is the third son of His Imperial Highness Prince Toin, and 25 years old when his family attempts to arrange his marriage to Satoko. Many potential candidates are brought to his attention, with little enthusiasm on his part. However, when he is shown a photo of Satoko, he stares at it intently. This is taken as a sign of his approval. The prince is very much an artifact of the traditional Japanese society; he dresses in military attire and is always disappearing for "maneuvers" or other martial activities.

## Princess Ying Chan

The princess is the sweetheart of Chao P, or Prince Pattanadid of Siam. When the prince has not heard from her in a couple of months while in Japan, he asks Kiyooki to retrieve the green emerald ring that Princess Ying Chan gave him so her can feel closer to her.

## The Monster

"The Monster" is a student at the Peers School who holds the same exalted social rank as Kiyooki, but who is shunned by the other students because of a disease that disfigures his face and makes his hair fall out. The Monster walks with his head down and hat pulled over his face to avoid ridicule. One day The Monster and Kiyooki sit under the same shade tree and Kiyooki tries unsuccessfully to engage him in conversation. Their bodies, sprawled under the tree, make a perfect point/counterpoint arrangement, although their personalities are very different.



# Objects/Places

## Gesshu Temple

Gesshu is a Buddhist convent on the outskirts of Nara to which Satoko Ayakura retreats after her arranged engagement to the son of an aristocratic family collapses. Unable to decide whether to accept Kiyooki's love or the arranged marriage, Satoko joins the convent and its particular brand of Buddhism. Kiyooki follows her with his friend Honda, and is repeatedly rebuffed when he tries to gain permission from the sisters to see his lover. Even his ingratiating friend Honda is unable to penetrate the rigid barriers of the monastery. Meanwhile, Kiyooki grows ill from his many months of self-deprivation because of his inability to contact Satoko.

## Tokyo

As the capitol of Japan and seat of government, Tokyo is the primary setting for the novel and the home of the central characters. The characters are connected to Tokyo by familial, governmental, legal and social ties. Tokyo, in turn, is connected to the rest of Japan by train and automobile, and to the rest of the world by wire.

## Hosso Buddhism

Hosso Buddhism is a sect of Buddhism that teaches that all existence is based on subjective awareness. It is the type of Buddhism practiced at the Gesshu Temple, to which Satoko Ayakura repairs. Most of Kiyooki's family are also adherents.

## The Peers School

The Peers School is a training ground for future aristocratic rulers of Japan. Both Kiyooki and Honda attend the school, where they become best friends. The Marquis Matsugae urges his indolent son to apply to a European University such as Oxford or Cambridge when he finishes at the Peers School—both for social as well as academic reasons. Realistically, though, Kiyooki could probably only gain admission to Kyoto or Tohoku University because of his poor academic record.

## Snapping Turtles

The lake at the estate of Marquis Matsugae is filled with snapping turtles because some friends of Kiyooki's grandfather gave him 100 turtles when he was ill because their meat was thought to restore health. Kiyooki, however, is afraid of the turtles because of stories by the servants that if someone gets a snapping turtle on his finger he is as good as dead.



## Matsugae Shrine

The shrine is on a hill behind the servants' quarters on the Matsugae estate. Inuma, Kiyooki's personal tutor, goes there daily for prayers. He also passes by the quarters of a pretty servant girl, Miné, with whom he is infatuated. He writes her notes and is distracted by his sexual arousal in the shrine whenever he sees her.

## Rickshaw

A two-man rickshaw, or covered carriage pulled by humans, is where Kiyooki and Satoko exchange their first passionate kiss as they ride through the snow, playing hooky from school.

## Merton College, Oxford University

Merton College, Oxford University in England is where Kiyooki's father, Marquis Matsugae, suggests he go to college after graduation from the Peers School. The attempt by the marquis to take his son's mind off his disastrous love affair with Satoko only has a temporary effect. Kiyooki soon sinks deeper into his depression and obsessive desire to see Satoko after she has entered a monastery.

## The Royal Palace

The Royal Palace is the residence of the emperor and empress, living symbols of traditional Japanese society. The palace is where the annual Imperial Poetry Recitation takes place—an empty ritual where social and political rank counts more than aesthetics and writing skill.

## Shimbasi Station

The focal point for all railroad lines in Japan, Shimbasi Station is where various members of the Ayakura and Matsugae families set out for sightseeing and shopping trips. It is also the station from which Kiyooki departs on his mission to see Satoko and returns unsatisfied and sick, only to die a few days later.



# Themes

## Sociocultural shift in Japanese life

It is the dawn of a new century in post-feudal Japan as the lovers Satoko and Kiyooki discover each other. Playmates as children growing up in the same household (but unrelated), their passion quickly blossoms into love as the two reach adulthood. In 1912, marriages among the aristocracy are still arranged by families seeking to perpetuate and increase their power and prestige. As the pair of lovers are consumed by fire, Satoko becomes engaged to a prince she hardly knows and does not respect, much less love. The families must petition the emperor on behalf of their heirs for permission to allow them to wed, and the engagement proclamation makes front page news in the local papers.

Meanwhile, Kiyooki and Satoko meet furtively and often with the assistance of Satoko's servant woman Tadeshina and Kiyooki's friend Honda. Thus the stage is set for high drama, as the lovers act out the conflicts produced by the imperial society that is both hierarchical and patriarchal. In this traditional society, the individual is subordinate to the state as personified by the emperor. At the same time, western ideas and influences creep into Japanese society and culture, largely through the upper classes who have the means and the time to travel. Western ideas conflict directly with traditional Japanese values: individual freedom is paramount, democracy has replaced autocracy and a feudal aristocracy has been supplanted by a meritocracy. In their struggle for true and lasting love, Kiyooki and Satoko foreshadow the rise of western values and the nascent cultural upheaval in Japan.

## Passion vs. Sensibility

A secondary theme is played out in the contrast between the indolent, indifferent Kiyooki who suddenly awakens to his manhood with a tragic torrent of passion for Satoko, and his school friend Honda who studies law and provides somewhat of a grounded sensibility to balance Kiyooki's obsessions and rush to personal ruin. By implication, then, these two sensibilities may be read as signs of the transformation that is upon Japan. Honda's father, a Supreme Court justice, has studied in Germany and exalts reason over passion and emotion. Honda seems to follow in his father's footsteps in choosing the careful, rational path over his passions.

Kiyooki, although the scion of an old Samurai family, is bored with the established order and the sacrifice of self required to fit into the tight niche into which he is born. His is a restless, poetic soul that risks everything for love. Honda, on the other hand, witnesses a murder trial that stems from a romantic triangle and decides it is not worth it to him to give his own emotions the upper hand over his reason. As a result of his friendship with Kiyooki, however, he remains loyal and tries to help his friend even though he fears Kiyooki will destroy himself. Symbolically the author uses these two contrasting



sensibilities to show another layer of conflict in Japanese society at the turn of the last century. Old beliefs, represented by Honda, still exist and help to hold the imperial society intact while new ideas and passions, represented by Kiyooki, directly challenge the old ways by emphasizing individual feelings and freedom over the deferential manner of the old society.

## Power and Control

The power to control others through fear and intimidation manifests itself as a theme throughout the novel. Satoko at first employs riddles and double-speak to confuse and confound Kiyooki, throw him off balance, and thus give herself a sense of control over their relationship. In reality, her behavior mystifies her ardent young suitor, frustrates then angers him. When she writes him a passionate love letter, he tears it up but saves the pieces and later uses the letter as a way to blackmail her servant Tadeshina into arranging trysts with Satoko. He threatens to reveal the letter and cause a social upheaval that will annul Satoko's engagement to Prince Harunori and implicate Tadeshina in the affair so she will lose her position in the Ayakura household.

When Inuma, Kiyooki's tutor, writes a passionate letter to the servant girl Miné, Kiyooki obtains the letter and uses it to blackmail Inuma into cooperating with his secret schemes in his affair with Satoko. Likewise, Tadeshina has a letter dating back years earlier from Count Ayakura in which he asks her to facilitate Satoko's first sexual experience so she will be a more desirable bride. Tadeshina clings to this letter as her bit of power to trump any potential dismissal because of complicity in the Kiyooki-Satoko affair. These power plays and blackmailings could be viewed as signs of individual powerlessness that manifest themselves under a rigidly hierarchical social order. Indeed Kiyooki himself, who quickly masters the arts of palace intrigue, cowers and is filled with shame when the emperor looks directly at him.

# Style

## Point of View

Yukio Mishima's point of view toward his characters and their story is that of detached narrator, even to the point of writing at times like a sociologist would dissect a broad cultural phenomenon. In this case, the object of scrutiny is the decay of the upper class in Japan and the rise of the so-called "lower" orders of humanity. The aristocratic segment, represented primarily by the star-crossed lovers Kiyooki Matsugae and Satoko Ayakura, is the setting for most of the plot while the secondary characters, such as the tutor Inumi and the servant woman Tadeshina, represent the underclass that seeks to rise and to have its own voice. The author's overriding point of view toward his characters is an objective type of compassion.

The author's detachment is necessary to him to relate a story of historical importance so that it is more than just a love story between two young people but a bird's eye view of important sociocultural changes in Japan. Wherever the characters come into conflict, it is symptomatic of social ills that are in the process of changing. Kiyooki and Satoko, for example, cannot resolve their love for each other because of the imperial, autocratic structure of Japanese society that prevents even the notion of defying the emperor's will. Conflict between Kiyooki and his servant Inumi revolves around the latter's contempt for the former, based largely on differences in their birthrights. In these conflicts, the author shows how they are part of sweeping changes through his objectivity.

## Setting

Geographically, the setting for the novel is Tokyo and smaller nearby towns such as Shinkawa. The estates of the Ayakura and Matsugae families figure prominently, as do the Peers School and the Gesshu Monastery. Culturally, the setting is the dawn of the 20th Century (1912) as outside western influences begin to sift into Japan and to corrode the highly-regimented traditional values.

The Matsugae and Honda households are really estates, where the two sons—Kiyooki Matsugae and Shigekuni Honda—are raised in different manners with different personalities. The Matsugae family is superficially traditionally Japanese, but in truth more relaxed and open to new ideas; the Honda family relishes its display of objects and mannerisms acquired through western travel and influence, but underneath is very conservative. The social setting of these two families is meant to show the polarities in Japanese society in the early part of the 20th Century.





## Language and Meaning

Since the novel is translated from Japanese to English, only the bilingual can know whether this Michael Gallagher translation accurately captures not only the major outlines of plot and characters but nuances of meaning and subtle shades of language intended by the author. As it stands in English, the novel is quite transparent and easy to read. There are descriptive passages that rise close to the level of poetic imagery in their evocative power. It may be the case that translation from Japanese to English is one reason why some of the characters seem like cardboard cutouts rather than fully-formed people. In any event, once the reader is engaged with the characters and story, these defects do not seriously impair either the flow of language or meaning from Japanese to English and to the reader's consciousness.

## Structure

The structure of the novel is a standard plot in which the central characters (Kiyooki and Satoko) confront a challenge, in this case the rigidity of old Japanese social structures, and struggle to overcome the obstacles to their love. In the process, both are changed as they are ultimately defeated. Kiyooki, challenged by word of Satoko's engagement to an aristocratic prince, quickly enters manhood and struggles to take Satoko as his love partner. Satoko struggles to wrest herself free from her arranged marriage but cannot do so. In a cowardly act of self-preservation, she flees to a monastery, thus avoiding the whole issue of choosing a husband. Kiyooki, crushed and broken by her rejection, dies an early death.

The unfolding of the plot is enriched by numerous minor characters who help to provide details about the social backdrop as well as individual motivation. For example, the use of letters to blackmail others by both servants and masters vividly depicts how people respond to a hierarchical society by seeking some power through control. The issue of power runs throughout the novel, from the beginning when Satoko uses her feminine wiles to control Kiyooki to the bitter end when the abbess at Gesshu Monastery repeatedly uses her power to deny a final meeting between Kiyooki and Satoko.

The author uses the device of an old historical photo of Japanese soldiers in the Russo-Japanese war to anchor the story in time and history. From that reference point of the old traditional militaristic values, the story proceeds through the passions of the aristocratic Kiyooki, who swears he will never wear a uniform. Paradoxically, Satoko's aborted engagement is with Prince Harunori, who always wears a military uniform and is usually engaged in some kind of military exercise.



## Quotes

"Marquis Matsugae absorbed his son's brilliant appearance in his beautiful ceremonial costume, and savored the complacency of a man who sees a lifelong dream fulfilled. This triumph dispelled completely his lingering fears of still seeming an impostor, for all his attempts to establish himself as someone fit to receive the emperor in his own home. For now, in the person of his own son [Kiyooki], the Marquis had seen the ultimate fusion of the aristocratic and the samurai traditions, a perfect congruence between the old court nobles and the new nobility." (Chapter 1, p. 10)

"[Kiyooki's] conviction of having no purpose in life other than to act as a distillation of poison was part of the ego of an 18-year-old. He had resolved that his beautiful white hands would never be soiled or calloused. He wanted to be like a pennant, dependent on each gusting wind. The only thing that seemed valid to him was to live for the emotions—gratuitous and unstable, dying only to quicken again, dwindling and flaring without direction or purpose." (Chapter 1, p. 13)

"[Kiyooki] thought of himself as a thorn, a small, poisonous thorn jabbed into the workmanlike hand of his family. And this was his fate simply because he had acquired a little elegance. A mere 50 years before, the Matsugaes had been a sturdy, upright samurai family—no more—eking out a frugal existence in the provinces. But in a brief span of time their fortunes had soared. By Kiyooki's time, the first traces of refinement were threatening to take hold on a family that, unlike the court nobility, had enjoyed centuries of immunity to the virus of elegance." (Chapter 1, p. 15)

"So many others had attempted to befriend Kiyooki, only to be rewarded for their pains with his mockery and contempt. In challenging Kiyokai's caustic reserve, Honda alone had been skilled enough to escape disaster." (Chapter 1, p. 21)

"Kiyooki's looks, his elegance, his diffidence, his complexity, his disinclination for any exertion, his languid dreaminess, his magnificent body, his delicate skin, his long lashes over those dreaming eyes—all of Kiyooki's attributes conspired to betray Iinuma's hopes with a careless, elegant grace of their own. Iinuma saw his young master as a constant, mocking reproach." (Chapter 9, p. 70)

"As he [Kiyooki] watched Satoko walking in the pale watery spring sunshine, she suddenly laughed and as she did so, he saw her raise her arm in a fluid movement, hiding her mouth behind the graceful curve of her white hand. Her slim body seemed to vibrate like a superb stringed instrument." (Chapter 17, p. 122)

"Satoko could not remember what she was looking forward to with such yearning. On the one hand, she was letting a rash caprice sweep her with appalling boldness into a course of action from which there would be no turning back. On the other, she was waiting for something to intervene. For the moment there was still time. There was still time. Up until the very last instant, a letter of pardon might come—or so she hoped. And then again, she despised the very thought of hope." (Chapter 22, p. 153)



"Now he [Kiyooki] realized why he had objected so strongly when his father had proposed to give him an introduction to the pleasures that the women of Yoskiwara had to offer. Just as one can discern the stirrings of a dark green chrysalis inside a cocoon, he had always foreseen the gradual distillation of some ineffably sacred essence in Satoko. And he could give his purity to that essence alone. (Chapter 27, p. 188)

"He [Kiyooki] knew where her [Satoko's] white flesh would first flush crimson with embarrassment, where it would yield, where it would throb with the wingbeat of a snared swan. He knew where it would express joy and where sorrow. Because he knew it in its totality, it seemed to give off a faint glow which could be sensed even through her kimono. His 19-year-old imagination could not deal with a phenomenon such as that of a child, something that however intimately bound up with dark, hot blood and flesh seemed altogether metaphysical." (Chapter 42, p. 314)

"Only the elegance that had been so conscious a part of him [Kiyooki] had withered. His heart had become desolate. Nowhere in himself could he find the kind of graceful sorrow that inspires poems. He was empty now, his soul a desert swept by parching winds. He had never felt more estranged from elegance and beauty as well." (Chapter 50, p. 358)

"She [Satoko] did not actually utter a word of protest, There was nothing to prove whether it was silent resistance or silent seduction. She seemed to be drawing him [Kiyooki] on at the same time as she was fighting him off. He sensed, however, that the strength underlying his assault upon her sacred inviolability was not wholly his own." (Chapter. 27, p. 190)

"His [Kiyooki's] heart beat wildly both with distress and joy. And as he watched her [Satoko] with her mother at her side, drawing steadily closer but moving at a slow and measured pace, he was taken for a moment with the fancy that he was the bridegroom waiting there to receive his bride. And the solemn ceremonial march, like a cumulative weariness that settled over him particle by particle, stirred a joy that was painfully intense and left him quite enervated." (Chapter 42, p. 313)

## Topics for Discussion

What is Kiyooki's character at the outset of the novel? How, when and why does it change?

What role do the two Siamese princes play in the story?

Compare the character of the servant Tadeshina with that of the tutor Inuma. How are they similar, and different?

Compare the character of Count Akakura with that of Marquis Matsugae. How are they similar and different?

What motivates Satoko to suddenly throw herself at the nuns in Gesshu Monastery?

Is there any evidence that Satoko actually loves Kiyooki with the same intensity as he loves her?

Why does Tadeshina attempt suicide?

What is the reaction of Kiyooki's parents when they discover he has gotten Satoko pregnant?

How does the social ranking of Japanese society play out at the annual poetry recital?

Is Kiyooki's death at age 20 a suicide?