

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 2: The Tale of Genji

Readings: *The Tale of Genji*, 11th c. novel, Lady Murasaki excerpt, Chapter IV "Yugao," Arthur Waley translation

Film: animated classic, *The Tale of Genji*, 1987, Sugii.

Suggested grades: 12th (mature students) and college

Themes:

The search for an ideal, enduring love; also, the traditional Japanese theme of "mono no aware," the deep awareness of the impermanence of youth, love, and beauty; finally, the continuing influence of *The Tale of Genji* on Japanese literature and the fine arts through the centuries.

The story:

Because of the length and complexity of this 1090 page work, it is neglected in world literature courses; however, using a 39-page chapter along with the 110-minute animated classic video, it is possible to have students experience and explore a significant portion of the world's first novel and one of the great works of world literature.


The key to understanding Prince Genji is to withhold moral judgment of his many--by modern standards--immoral relationships, and to see his life as a tragic search for an enduring love to fill the void he has known since the early death of his young mother. He is presented as exceptionally handsome (and androgynously beautiful) intelligent, sensitive, and gifted in the arts of poetry, dancing and loving. Although he moves gracefully from one lover to another, he is always sincere in his love, sensitive and different to each woman. He obviously loves life, but he can never escape his obsessive search for love and his accompanying awareness of a tragic impermanence of the beauty and love he seeks. Although there dramatized versions of the *The Tale of Genji* are available, the animated version conveys Murasaki's characters and their world as mythic and the stuff of cultural and intercultural dreams. Because of Genji's affairs and the film's sophisticated dream-like images and symbolism, this unit is suggested for mature students. Part of the literary and film adventure should be to understand and interpret the many layers of this great work.

Teaching:

Understanding the complex gallery of characters and relationships requires some prerequisite historic and plot information to help with the identification of the main characters and their relationships. The introductions of the Waley and Seidensticker translations are useful sources. Also helpful are Rimer's *A Reader's Guide to Japanese Literature* and his *Modern Japanese Fiction and its Traditions*. After preparing and motivating the students for the challenge, the teacher can assign Chapter IV, "Yuago," allowing the next class for the discussion and a showing of the first five minutes of the video which corresponds to the episode in the reading. The full 110-minute film can

then be shown in the following three class sessions, allowing time for introductory remarks and, following the film segment, some questions. A final class can focus on the psychological interpretation of Murasaki's work. Fumiko Enchi's *Masks*, draws allusions from the masks of Noh plays and episodes from the *The Tale of Genji*. One of the main characters from Enchi's novel has written an essay (included in the novel, pages 46-57) interpreting Lady Rukujo's role in the mysterious deaths of the Yuago lady and Genji's wife Lady Aoi as unconscious dominance of the other's spirits. This source can introduce a fascinating and controversial theme to the discussion and also provide a modern example of *The Tale of Genji's* continuing influence on Japanese literature.

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