

Memoirs of a Geisha



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ARTHUR GOLDEN

Arthur Golden grew up in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and then attended Harvard College, where he received a B.A. in art history with a specialization in Japanese art. In 1980, he earned an M.A. in Japanese history from Columbia University. After a summer at Peking University in Beijing, China, he began working in Tokyo. While there, he met a man whose mother was a retired geisha, prompting his interest in the subject. After returning to the United States in the mid-1980s, Golden began writing his first novel, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which took him six years to complete. A runaway success, the novel was on the *New York Times*' bestseller list for over two years, sold more than four million copies, and was translated into thirty-two languages. Golden currently lives in Brookline, Massachusetts with his wife and two children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While the novel makes infrequent mention of world historical events, the majority of the plot occurs from the beginning of the Great Depression in Japan to the end of World War Two. During the 1930s, a global economic depression affected almost every developed country in the world, including Japan. Sayuri, however, does not experience the effects of the Depression, since she works as a prominent geisha serving the wealthy elites of Japanese society. Sayuri also makes passing mention of Japan's militaristic expansion into neighboring countries. In 1931, Japan invaded and annexed Manchuria, a region in northeast China. Despite local resistance against the Japanese occupation, Japan held onto Manchuria until the end of World War Two. During World War Two, the Japanese government placed harsh restrictions on its civilians, rationing food and closing down all the geisha districts in Japan. Near the end of the novel, Sayuri briefly references Japan's surrender to the United States in 1945 and the American occupation of the country that lasted until the early 1950s.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Written as if it were an actual memoir, *Memoirs of a Geisha* draws mostly from a nonfiction, autobiographical tradition. Golden has acknowledged that while writing the novel, he did extensive research and delved deeply into the history of geisha culture. Specifically, Golden draws from Liza Dalby's memoir *Geisha*, which recounts the author's experiences as the only American woman ever to become a geisha. Since Golden's novel masquerades as a true memoir, it also belongs to the relatively recent literary tradition of novels written in the guise

of memoirs or autobiographies. One of the earliest and most prominent examples of this form is Gertrude Stein's 1933 book *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. The success of Golden's novel also motivated the former geisha Mineko Iwasawa – whom Golden interviewed as a source for his novel – to write her own autobiography, *Geisha: A Life*, which refutes Golden's sexualized portrayal of geisha culture.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Memoirs of a Geisha*
- **When Written:** 1991-1997
- **Where Written:** Boston, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1997
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Fiction
- **Genre:** Historical Novel, Fictional Memoir, *Bildungsroman*
- **Setting:** Yoroido, Kyoto, and New York City; early to late twentieth century
- **Climax:** When Sayuri betrays Nobu in the old theater.
- **Antagonist:** Hatsumomo
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Code of Silence: While doing research for his book, Golden interviewed Mineko Iwasaki, a former geisha who had worked in Kyoto during the 1960s. Due to the traditional code of silence geishas have about their clients, Iwasaki only agreed to let Golden interview her if he promised to keep her identity anonymous. In the book's acknowledgments, however, Golden thanks her by name for her contribution. This caused Iwasaki to face a strong and threatening backlash. She sued Golden for a breach in contract, and the two settled out of court in 2003.

Movie Magic: The novel was made into a 2005 movie that won three Academy Awards, including Best Cinematography, Best Art Direction, and Best Costume Design.



PLOT SUMMARY

In 1929, the nine-year-old Chiyo Sakamoto lives with her ailing mother, emotionally withdrawn father, and older sister Satsu in a small fishing village in Western Japan. One day, the wealthiest man in her village, Mr. Ichiro Tanaka, takes notice of Chiyo's beautiful blue-grey **eyes**. After striking a deal with Chiyo's father, Mr. Tanaka sells Chiyo to an *okiya*, which is a boarding house for geisha. Geisha are women trained to entertain men with conversation, dancing, and singing.

At the *okiya*, Chiyo works as a maid while she trains to be a geisha. The other people living at the *okiya* are the young apprentice geisha Pumpkin, the greedy and materialistic Mother who runs the *okiya*, and the beautiful but cruel geisha Hatsumomo. A few months after arriving in the *okiya*, Chiyo becomes so homesick that she tries to run away to her home village. The doors to the *okiya* are locked at night, so Chiyo climbs to the roof, but she falls and breaks her arm. Enraged at Chiyo for trying to run away, Mother stops paying for Chiyo's geisha education. Instead, she tells Chiyo that she will work as a maid in the *okiya* until Mother sees fit to release her.

For two years, Chiyo works as a maid. One day, she goes on an errand and realizes that her life lacks purpose and direction. As Chiyo sits by a **stream** and begins to cry, a handsome man named the Chairman comforts her. Touched by his kindness, Chiyo decides that she must try to become a geisha so she can increase her standing in the world. Only then will she be able to surround herself with kind men instead of people like Hatsumomo and Mother.

Not long after this encounter, a geisha named Mameha arrives at the *okiya* and takes notice of Chiyo's beauty. Mameha convinces Mother to reinvest in Chiyo's education by saying that she will take on Chiyo as a "little sister"—a geisha apprentice. Since Mameha is one of the city's best geisha, Mother sees an opportunity to make money from Chiyo again and agrees to Mameha's plan. Chiyo thinks that Mameha is only taking her on as a protégé in order to infuriate her rival Hatsumomo.

Over the next two years, Chiyo completes her geisha training and makes her debut as an apprentice geisha. Following the geisha tradition of adopting a new name, Chiyo takes on the name Sayuri. At one event, Mameha introduces Sayuri to the wealthy businessmen Toshikazu Nobu and Chairman Ken Iwamura. Sayuri realizes that Chairman Iwamura is the man who comforted her years ago. However, Sayuri doesn't get a chance to talk with the Chairman because Mameha tells her she must cultivate a relationship with Nobu instead. Mameha wants to make Sayuri a success in Kyoto by having Nobu and a doctor nicknamed "Dr. Crab" start a bidding war over Sayuri's *mizuage*—the ceremonial taking of a young geisha's virginity. After months of cultivating relationships with the two men, Dr. Crab ultimately pays a record amount for Sayuri's *mizuage*.

The plan works and Sayuri gains a reputation as a highly coveted geisha. As part of geisha traditions, Mother adopts Sayuri, because she becomes the highest-earning geisha in the *okiya*. Over the next few years, Nobu continues to ask for Sayuri's company. Though she likes Nobu as a person, she wishes she could spend more time with the Chairman instead. When World War Two breaks out, the government closes the geisha districts so that the women can more actively contribute to the war effort. Nobu uses his influence to find Sayuri the safe and relatively easy job of sewing parachutes in a village outside

of Kyoto.

After the war, Nobu comes to find Sayuri. He says that he needs her to return to Kyoto and help him entertain a Japanese official named Sato. The American government wants to seize Nobu's business assets, but Sato can use his connections to prevent this from happening. Sayuri agrees and returns to Kyoto.

At a teahouse, Sayuri—along with Pumpkin and Mameha—entertain Sato, Nobu, and the Chairman. For the next year, they meet on a weekly basis and Sayuri feels her attraction to the Chairman growing. Sato successfully convinces the Americans not to bankrupt the business. With the business secure, Nobu proposes himself as Sayuri's *danna*—a patron who gives a geisha lavish gifts in return for sexual privileges. Because Nobu provided her a safe place to live during the war, Sayuri feels as if she is in his debt. She reluctantly agrees, wishing that the Chairman could be her *danna* instead.

To celebrate the good news, the group goes to an island near Okinawa for a weekend vacation. Sayuri realizes that if Nobu stumbles upon her sleeping with Sato, then Nobu will think that she has dishonored herself and withdraw his proposal to be her *danna*. Sayuri hopes that this will leave her free to pursue a relationship with the Chairman. Sayuri arranges to meet Sato at an abandoned theater and tells Pumpkin to bring Nobu at a set time. Pumpkin, however, brings the Chairman instead, who sees Sayuri and Sato having sex. Thinking that her chances are ruined with the Chairman, Sayuri feels crushed and utterly despondent.

A few days after returning to Kyoto, Sayuri receives an invitation to meet the Chairman at a teahouse. At the teahouse, the Chairman confesses that he fell in love with Sayuri the moment he saw her as a young girl crying by the stream. Surprised that he even remembers her from that day, Sayuri says that she only slept with Sato in order to make Nobu give her up so that she could possibly have the Chairman as her *danna*. Overcome with emotion, the Chairman pulls her close and kisses her.

A few weeks later, the Chairman becomes Sayuri's *danna*. They live happily together over the next few years. Sayuri even gives birth to the Chairman's son. Eventually they immigrate to New York City, where she recounts her memoirs to the Japanese history professor Jakob Haerhuis.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto – The novel's narrator and protagonist, Sayuri tells the story of how she went from a poor fisherman's daughter named Chiyo Sakamoto to become Sayuri

Nitta, one of Kyoto's premier geisha. With her piercing blue-grey **eyes**, Sayuri is beautiful, perceptive, and quick-witted. Her cleverness and adaptable personality allow her to survive a variety of challenging circumstances, including when she outsmarts Hatsumomo, her rival geisha, or when she maneuvers her way out of a relationship with the ill-tempered Nobu. An idealist and a romantic, Sayuri falls in love with Chairman Ken Iwamura and decides to spend her entire life working towards being with him. Her steadfast determination ensures that she succeeds in building a relationship with the Chairman and, by the novel's end, she immigrates with him to the United States, where she recounts her memoirs to Jakob Haarhuis.

Toshikazu Nobu – A man in love with Sayuri, Nobu spends much of the novel trying to get Sayuri to become his personal geisha. Injured from his time in the military, Nobu is missing an arm and has burn scars covering his face. Though fiercely loyal, Nobu is inflexible, ill-tempered, and quick to use harsh, cutting words. While Sayuri values him for his loyalty and candor, she loves his business partner, Chairman Ken Iwamura, for his gentle kindness. Clouded by his own desire for Sayuri, Nobu either does not realize or does not care that Sayuri has no love for him. Nobu professes a staunch belief in self-determination, believing that each person must realize his or her personal purpose in life. At times petty and unforgiving, he ultimately forgoes any relationship, whether romantic or platonic, with Sayuri when he learns that she slept with a piggish man named Sato, whom Nobu thinks is beneath her.

Chairman Ken Iwamura – Referred to as simply “the Chairman” for most of the novel, Ken Iwamura is the gentle, dignified, and kind love interest of Sayuri. While most people in Kyoto would pay no attention to a crying girl on the street, the Chairman comforts the young Sayuri when he sees her weeping by a **stream**. The Chairman falls in love with Sayuri at that moment because he sees an honest openness in her eyes that is different from the lies and deceit in the rest of the world. An honorable and loyal man, the Chairman at first sacrifices a relationship with Sayuri in order to let his friend and business partner Nobu pursue a relationship with her. But when the Chairman realizes that Sayuri feels as much love for him as he does for her, his love for Sayuri outstrips his loyalty to Nobu. After the Chairman takes Sayuri as his personal geisha, he and Sayuri live out the rest of their happy lives in a flurry of passion and love.

Hatsumomo – The novel's antagonist, Hatsumomo is the most beautiful and the cruelest geisha in the book. Though she hides her cruel nature from the men she entertains, Hatsumomo insults or sabotages anyone she dislikes. Jealous of any geisha who might be prettier than her, Hatsumomo fears that Sayuri will replace her as the most popular geisha in Kyoto. As a result, Hatsumomo tries to ruin Sayuri's career by spreading malicious rumors about her. When Sayuri does surpass her as a geisha,

Hatsumomo loses confidence in her abilities as a geisha and begins to drink heavily. After damaging her own reputation beyond repair, Hatsumomo leaves Kyoto in shame, most likely to become a prostitute.

Mameha – Mentor to Sayuri and Hatsumomo's chief rival in Kyoto, Mameha is a kind but cunning geisha. She takes Sayuri under her wing as a favor to the Chairman, and provides guidance to Sayuri on how to navigate the complicated terrain of geisha culture. But Mameha also relishes undermining Hatsumomo's reputation in Kyoto, mercilessly chipping away at Hatsumomo's confidence and social standing until Hatsumomo is forced out of the city in shame. A practical woman, Mameha believes that love for a geisha is an impossible dream. She encourages Sayuri to find a wealthy man who can provide stability and security rather than passion and love.

Pumpkin – Nicknamed “Pumpkin” by Sayuri because of her round head, Pumpkin grows up with Sayuri in the *okiya*. Compassionate but a little slow-witted, Pumpkin struggles to make it as a geisha. With Hatsumomo as her mentor, she also absorbs some of Hatsumomo's vicious cruelty. After spending some hard years as a prostitute during World War Two, Pumpkin tries to sabotage Sayuri's relationship with the Chairman in order to get back at Sayuri for succeeding where she herself failed.

Mother/Ms. Nitta – Greedy and completely self-serving, Mother runs the *okiya* where Sayuri, Hatsumomo, and Pumpkin live. She only cares about the people in the *okiya* as much as they can help her make money. Mother tries to hide her physical unattractiveness with heavily applied makeup and a colorful silken kimono. Mother adopts Sayuri after Dr. Crab pays a record amount of money to take Sayuri's virginity.

Satsu Sakamoto – Sayuri's beloved older sister. Since Satsu is not as pretty or as clever as Sayuri, Mr. Tanaka sells her to a brothel instead of an *okiya*. Satsu despises life as a prostitute, so she runs away to her home village where she reunites with her boyfriend. Sayuri never learns where her life leads her.

The Baron – Mameha's wealthy and aristocratic patron who bids against Dr. Crab for Sayuri's virginity. A drunk and an uncaring man, he forces Sayuri to undress in front of him so that he can pleasure himself while looking at her in the mirror. He kills himself out of fear that the Americans will win the war and take away his landholdings and title.

Noritaka Sato – The ugly, dim-witted Deputy Minister who uses his influence to reverse the American government's decision to strip the Chairman and Nobu's company of its assets. Since Nobu finds Sato detestable, Sayuri sleeps with him in order to infuriate Nobu, hoping that Nobu will lose interest in her as a result.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Auntie – The most senior maid at the *okiya*, Auntie is a failed

geisha who cares for Pumpkin and Sayuri, providing them with advice on how to survive Hatsumomo's cruelty and Mother's penny-pinching greediness. Granny adopted Auntie and Mother, raising them in the *okiya*.

Ichiro Tanaka – The wealthiest man in Sayuri's home village, Mr. Tanaka is an eloquent and naively altruistic man. Thinking he is saving Sayuri and Satsu from a life of poverty, he convinces their father to sell the girls to an *okiya* and a brothel, respectively.

Dr. Crab – Nicknamed "Dr. Crab" by Sayuri because of his crablike appearance, Dr. Crab is a dry, emotionless doctor who pays a record amount to take Sayuri's virginity.

Granny – The elderly, mean-spirited owner of the *okiya* who raised Mother and Auntie. Granny dies early in the novel after being electrocuted by her electric heater.

Minoru Sakamoto – Sayuri's emotionally negligent father who sells her and her sister Satsu to Mr. Tanaka. A poor fisherman, Sakamoto has a lot of wood in his personality, meaning that he is slow and methodical in his ways.

Mrs. Sakamoto – An unnamed character, Sayuri's mother develops a sickness at the beginning of that confines her to bed. Like Sayuri, Mrs. Sakamoto has a lot of **water** in her personality. Sayuri also inherited her mother's blue-grey **eyes**.

Korin – Hatsumomo's only friend, Korin is as mean but not as beautiful as Hatsumomo. She dies during the war when the Americans bomb the factory at which she works.

General Junnosuke Tottori – The potbellied man that Sayuri sleeps with twice a week in exchange for extra rations for the *okiya* during the war years. Nobu thinks Sayuri dishonors herself by sleeping with such a lowly man.

Jakob Haarhuis – The novel's fictional translator who records and translates Sayuri's story in New York City during the early nineties.

Kuniko Tanaka – The mischievous daughter of Mr. Tanaka, who takes Chiyo to spy on Mr. Tanaka when he visits a teahouse.

Ms. Fidget – The woman who examines Sayuri and Satsu at the beginning of the novel to determine if they are fit to become geisha.

Shojiro – Hatsumomo's most loyal client, Shojiro is the Kabuki actor who makes Hatsumomo jealous by flirting with Mameha.

Mr. Bekku – The curt man who transports Satsu and Sayuri to Kyoto.

Miyagiyama – The famous sumo wrestler who uses his opponents' own force to unbalance them.

Arashino – The kimono maker who gives Sayuri a place to live during the war years as a favor to his friend Nobu.

Mr. Itchoda – Mameha's tightlipped dresser who accompanies Sayuri to the Baron's party.

Takazuru – The young apprentice who asks Sayuri for help to make Nobu like her more.

Minoru Nishioka – The man whom the Chairman hopes will marry his oldest daughter and inherit the business.

The Sugi Boy – Satsu's boyfriend.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



DESTINY VS. SELF-DETERMINATION

Throughout the novel, the protagonist Sayuri Nitta describes herself as a **river**, a metaphor that captures the dueling forces of destiny and self-determination in her life. At times, Sayuri is like a river guided by external forces, unable to control the direction her life takes. For example, when Sayuri was a child, her father sold her and her sister Satsu to an *okiya* (a geisha boarding house). While Satsu takes control of her fate by running away and starting a life with the boy she loves, Sayuri passively accepts her dismal circumstances and learns the arts of being a geisha. Though Arthur Golden rarely investigates sexism or gender roles in Japanese society in the novel, Sayuri's passivity must also be understood through the lens of the sexist conditions in Japan during the 1930s. With few opportunities for women who did not come from wealthy families, Sayuri believes that becoming a geisha is better than her other two options: becoming a maid or a prostitute. Sayuri remarks, "We don't become geisha because we want our lives to be happy; we become geisha because we have no choice." Believing that she is unable to make a better life for herself, Sayuri resigns herself to becoming a geisha. In this way, she is a passive object tossed about by the wills of other people rather than an active agent determining her own life. She is like a river guided by the banks around her.

In contrast, Sayuri's friend and client Nobu thinks of destiny and self-determination as the same thing. Nobu recognizes that Sayuri's conception of destiny is simply an excuse for her passivity. He chides Sayuri for sleeping with any man, no matter how boorish or vile, who is willing to become her patron. To Nobu's disgust, Sayuri shirks responsibility over these matters by saying that she must follow the path set out for a geisha. In response, Nobu explains that destiny is not a set of predetermined events that will happen to an individual, but instead a personal purpose or meaning towards which we strive. Thus, Nobu encourages Sayuri to recognize that although a river cannot pick its direction, water moves freely

within the river, determining for itself where inside the river it will flow. In this way, Nobu suggests that Sayuri still has the freedom to actively move closer to fulfilling her personal destiny.

In an act of tragic irony, Sayuri takes Nobu's advice about self-determination when she decides to betray him. Nobu tells Sayuri that he wants to be her patron, but Sayuri loves his best friend and business partner, Chairman Ken Iwamura. In the world of the geisha, two business partners would never compete over the same geisha, so Sayuri knows that if Nobu shows interest in her, then the Chairman will never be free to pursue her. As a result, Sayuri purposefully sleeps with a man Nobu despises in order to diminish his interest in her, leaving her available for a relationship with the Chairman. Through this act, Sayuri asserts her identity not as a passive plaything of powerful men, but instead as a woman in charge of her own destiny. As readers, however, we should also be critical of how Golden, a male author, portrays this woman's destiny as revolving entirely around a man she loves rather than around her own autonomy, freedom from being a geisha, or personal self-actualization.



BEAUTY, ARTIFICE, AND TRUTH

In the history of Western philosophy and literature, scholars and artists have often suggested that beauty and truth are one and the same: truth must

be beautiful and the beautiful must be truth. This idea is encapsulated in the poet John Keat's famous line, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." *Memoirs of a Geisha*, however, contradicts this view of beauty. Though the word "geisha" means "artist" or "artisan," geisha are just as much the art itself as they are the artist. To fit the Japanese standard of beauty, geisha craft a highly artificial appearance: they dress in beautifully-patterned kimono, wear elaborate hairstyles, and paint their faces white in order to appear as if they are wearing masks. While these beautiful artifices conceal the geishas' actual appearances, geisha must also conceal their desires, true feelings, and inner self so that they can shift their personalities in order to please or amuse their male clients. The novel thus argues that beauty is more about artifice and concealment than truth.

As an extension of this idea, outward appearances in the novel often deceptively conceal characters' true selves. Despite her cruel personality, Hatsumomo is one of the most popular geisha in Kyoto because of her beauty. She successfully disguises her cruelty from her male clients by acting like a polite geisha, but as Sayuri recognizes, whenever people glimpse the true mean-spiritedness of her personality, they begin to see her beauty wane. On the other end of the spectrum, people often mistake Nobu's heavily scarred face and brash personality for an inner cruelty. Yet Nobu proves himself to be one of the kindest and most loyal men in the novel, affirming the idea that outward

appearances do not necessarily correspond to inner personality.

While beauty might not provide access to truth in the novel, it does serve a more utilitarian purpose of providing comfort. Working in Kyoto while Japan is at war in Manchuria, Sayuri realizes that her beauty serves an important function in comforting the soldiers returning from the front lines. Sayuri claims that in the dark brutality of war, these men can think about geisha and hold firm in their belief that there is beauty in this world worth fighting for. Though the presence of beautiful things provides comfort in themselves, the novel also suggests that beauty can soothe our suffering by reminding us of the ephemerality of all things. As Sayuri comes to recognize over the course of the novel, all things that are beautiful eventually fade. Like flowers in spring that die in winter, or a young geisha who ages into an elderly woman, everything in life—both the triumphs and the agonies—passes away. While this truth might sound depressing, it provides Sayuri with a melancholy sort of comfort that allows her to appreciate the fleeting joys of the present, as well as to know that her struggles will eventually come to an end.



GROWING UP

Memoirs of a Geisha belongs to the literary genre of the *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age. Novels in this genre portray the psychological development of

the protagonist as he or she grows from a youth into an adult. *Memoirs* follows this trajectory as it illustrates Chiyo Sakamoto's transformation from the daughter of a poor fisherman into the renowned Kyoto geisha, Sayuri Nitta. At the beginning of the novel, young Chiyo lives in an obscure Japanese fishing village, and with little education or knowledge of the outside world, she clings to the naive illusion that the world is a place of compassion and fairness. Specifically, she hopes the wealthiest man in her village, Mr. Ichiro Tanaka, will adopt her, transporting her away from her life of poverty as well as from her dying mother and emotionally absent father.

But Chiyo quickly loses these innocent illusions as her life becomes upended by the harsh reality of her society. Instead of adopting her, Tanaka arranges for her father to sell Chiyo into slavery at an *okiya*, where she will be made to learn how to be a geisha. At the *okiya*, Chiyo matures as she grapples with isolation, grief, alienation, and self-discovery. For example, after Chiyo arrives at the *okiya*, she learns that both of her parents have died in quick succession. Feeling as if she can never return to her childhood, Chiyo sinks into a deep, year-long depression. As she slowly emerges, she realizes that only her dreams of what the future might hold will give her the strength to go on in the uncaring environment of the *okiya*. This experience of grief and her subsequent realization mark the beginning of her transformation from the child Chiyo to the adult Sayuri.

Yet the novel differs from a traditional coming-of-age story with regards to Sayuri's sexual awakening. Instead of being free to pursue relationships and come into sexual maturity on her own terms, Sayuri loses her virginity to whoever pays the highest amount to have sex with her. Paradoxically, the sexualized life of the geisha actually delays her sexual awakening. Even though she spends years as the private mistress to men, Sayuri only experiences true sexual awakening when, in her thirties, she kisses the Chairman, the love of her life. Thus the novel indicates that romantic love, rather than just sex, represents a key moment of transformation from childhood to adulthood.



SEX AND LOVE

The events of *Memoirs of a Geisha* occur during a time in Japan when geisha played an integral part in social life. In the West, “geisha” is basically synonymous with “prostitute.” However, in actuality, a geisha was an elite entertainer who mastered the arts of singing, dancing, playing instruments, and telling stories. Though a geisha might flirt with the men she entertains, the clients must satisfy themselves with the illusion of sex rather than the act itself. After all, if a man simply wanted sex, then he could visit one of the many legal brothels in the city. Instead of trading in sex, the geisha trades in the illusion of love, giving men the psychological gratification of feeling as though these beautiful geisha desire their company.

But this is not to say that sex plays no part in a geisha's life. Wealthy men bid to take an apprentice geisha's virginity, while more experienced geisha seek to establish an exclusive relationship with a *danna*, the Japanese word for patrons who provided for the geisha in exchange for sex. Most geisha in the novel see their patrons as privileged clients rather than romantic partners, and so sex itself becomes a currency rather than an emotional connection or even a pleasurable experience for the geisha. It is notable however, that the real-life geisha Mineko Iwasaki—whom Golden interviewed for the novel—has since refuted Golden's sexualized portrayal of geisha culture, and wrote her own autobiography in response.

In the novel's world—where love is only an illusion that conceals the true economic relationship between geisha and *danna*, most geisha believe that love is not possible for them. Sayuri, however, is the exception. After the Chairman bestowed an act of kindness on her when she was only a teenager, Sayuri began to yearn for him, working her entire life to be a good enough geisha so that he would want to be her *danna*. Even after Sayuri's mentor Mameha tells her to give up her illusions of love—since all a geisha can ever hope for is to have a wealthy *danna* who isn't cruel—Sayuri's belief in the possibility for love remains resolute. Though it might seem overly sentimental, this conviction, in addition to her growing willingness to define her own path in life, ultimately leads her to a loving relationship

with the Chairman by the book's end.



TRADITION, RITUAL, AND GENDER

From the daily interactions with male clients to the ceremony of losing her virginity, tradition and ritual govern almost every facet of the geisha's life.

Throughout the novel, Sayuri must navigate the social terrain of these customs, learning when to abide by tradition and when to flout it. Sayuri enters the geisha world as a complete novice who is unfamiliar with how an apprentice geisha must act or speak to those around her. By focusing on a character who is completely ignorant of geisha practices, the novel is able to more thoroughly explore and represent them—because the protagonist (like the average Western reader) must learn them for the first time as well. Over time, Sayuri learns to master these traditions, becoming the most successful geisha in Kyoto.

For Sayuri, as well as most geisha in the novel, tradition rarely seems to have value in itself. Instead, Sayuri and the other geisha use tradition as a means to an end—by perfectly embodying these traditions, Sayuri can live up to the expectations of her clients and, in doing so, achieve a modicum of financial security. This practical use of tradition suggests that geisha, at some level, know that the established practices of their profession are oppressive towards women. This is made most obvious in the fact that it is traditional for a teenaged geisha-in-training to lose her virginity to the man who pays the most to sleep with her. Yet it is also evident on a more day-to-day level, in that traditional geisha are forced to conform to the fantasies of their male clientele, who want the women to remain beautiful objects or playthings for their amusement, rather than nuanced and complicated human beings with their own desires and dreams. Thus the geisha only adopt these traditions as a way of succeeding in a society that allows them few other paths for autonomy.

These practices, moreover, become a constrictive force for Sayuri. Though she only learned the traditions in order to make use of them, she begins to rely on them so much that she forgets how to break the rules when necessary. For example, the social norms that prevent geisha from expressing themselves make her feel incapable of voicing her affection for the Chairman. Thus, by the end of the novel, Sayuri must, in a sense, relearn her childhood disregard of the rules. She does so when she neglects the traditions of the geisha by sleeping with a man who is not her *danna*, thereby betraying her loyal client Nobu. This “transgression” allows Sayuri to break free of the oppressive norms that privilege a client's desires as more important than a geisha's. In this way, the novel ends with Sayuri fulfilling her *own* desire—rather than a client's—by becoming the geisha of the Chairman, the man she loves.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



WATER, RIVERS, AND STREAMS

In the Japanese Buddhist tradition, water is one of five elements that make up the fabric of the universe and the personalities of every person. Like water shifting to fit the shape of its container, people with a lot of water in their personality have a tendency towards adaptability and flexibility. Therefore, when characters in *Memoirs of a Geisha* comment on how much “water” Sayuri has in her personality, they are linking her to these traits. Related to ideas of adaptability, rivers and streams in the novel are mutable and flexible symbols, sometimes representing destiny while other times representing self-determination. Guided by external forces like gravity and wind, running water is not always capable of following a path of its own making. In this way, water represents destiny, because the water has no control over its own movements. Likewise, for most of the novel, Sayuri lets other people determine the direction that her life will take. But the character Nobu introduces the second meaning of water. He suggests that running water is a powerful force that can flow in any direction it wishes. Thus, Sayuri must choose between the two conflicting symbolic meanings of water: the water that lets external forces guide it, or the water that determines its own direction.



SAYURI'S EYES

Sayuri's eyes symbolically relate to the old saying that “eyes are the windows to the soul.” Sayuri's translucent blue-grey eyes lead many characters to believe that she has a lot of **water** in her personality. Her eyes also represent her honest and truthful nature, which contrasts with the artificial and deceptive world of the geisha. In order to be successful in Kyoto, geisha create the illusion that they enjoy spending time with the men they entertain, no matter how boring or boorish the men are. Mameha even explains that a geisha's expressive eyes are her best asset for creating these illusions. While these deceptive eyes conceal a geisha's true feelings, Sayuri's eyes are open and honest. Because of their light color, her eyes seem transparent—“windows” in the old saying—and they reveal her true feelings instead of concealing them. Yet since most characters in the novel are only concerned with the external appearance of beauty rather than inner beauty, they can only see the superficial loveliness of her eyes, rather than the beautiful personality that her eyes reveal. Only the Chairman sees beyond the superficial into the deep inner beauty of Sayuri's soul, indicating their connection and compatibility.



THE CHAIRMAN'S HANDKERCHIEF

The Chairman gives Sayuri a handkerchief (wrapped around a coin) when Sayuri is crying by the stream, and this act of kindness is a great comfort to her. In the following years, this handkerchief comes to represent the possibility of love in a world where sex is a commodity to be exchanged and love seems like an unattainable fantasy. In the novel, young geisha apprentices lose their virginity to the highest bidder, while experienced geisha have sex with patrons in exchange for lavish gifts. Likewise, most geisha trade in the illusion of love, making their living by flirting and fawning over men without ever experiencing actual love for them. Even though most geisha are cynical when it comes to finding love, Sayuri keeps the Chairman's handkerchief in the sleeve of her kimono every day as a reminder of his kindness and the possibility of love. Since the Chairman and Sayuri come together as lovers at the end of the novel, the handkerchief also comes to symbolize actual love in a world where it seems like only an illusion.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Memoirs of a Geisha* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ Suppose that you and I were sitting in a quiet room overlooking a garden, chatting and sipping at our cups of green tea while we talked about something that had happened a long while ago, and I said to you, “That afternoon when I met so-and-so...was the very best afternoon of my life, and also the very worst afternoon.”

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Jakob Haarhuis

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 7

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to our protagonist and narrator, Sayuri. Sayuri, a famous geisha, will tell us a little about the history of her profession, and also tell us the story of how she became a geisha and found fame and fortune. The novel, then, is a kind of coming-of-age story, designed to show us a young woman's transformation into a famous and confident geisha.

The story of how Sayuri (originally named Chiyo) becomes

Sayuri is both tragic and optimistic, and by the same token the profession of geisha is both liberating and imprisoning. Sayuri gains new privileges and liberties for herself in becoming a geisha--but we should never forget that she's also selling herself to other men, and on occasion she's forced to have sex with strangers (something real geishas have denied). In all, the novel will take an ambivalent position on the profession of geisha: like the afternoon we're going to hear about, it's both "the very best" and "the very worst."

☝ Water flows from place to place quickly and always finds a crack to spill through. Wood, on the other hand, holds fast to the earth.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sayuri describes her personality by describing her physical appearance. Like her mother, she has blue eyes--a rarity in Japan, and a sign of having "water" in one's personality. Sayuri also notes that her father was slow and deliberate, much like wood. Because of her eyes, however, Sayuri suggests that she takes more after her mother.

The symbolism of the two elements in this passage is clear: Sayuri is both fluid and flexible, like water (always conforming to its surroundings), while her sister Satsu, like her father, is steadfast like wood. The passage is also important because it suggests that Sayuri's life was partly predetermined by her very nature--it was the "water" in her personality that made her the person she is today.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☝ I found myself wondering if my sister was standing before some other cruel woman, in another house somewhere in this horrible city. And I had a sudden image in my mind of my poor, sick mother propping herself on one elbow upon her futon and looking around to see where we had gone. I didn't want Mother to see me crying, but the tears pooled in my eyes before I could think of how to stop them.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Mrs. Sakamoto, Satsu Sakamoto, Mother/Ms. Nitta

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sayuri (at this point still Chiyo) has been sent to work under Mother at an okiya, a place for training geishas. As she looks at her "Mother"--not really a mother at all, just a supervisor--Chiyo finds herself thinking of her real family: her sick mother and her sister, who has also been "sold." For the time being, Chiyo has no real control over her own feelings: she's just a little girl, and she can't stop herself from crying.

The passage is moving, but it also conveys an important point: Chiyo is a novice in the world of geishas, and the world of appearances. To become a geisha, Chiyo will have to learn how to control her true feelings, suppressing disgust and contempt when such emotions aren't useful. By the same token, she'll have to turn her back on her biological family in order to focus on her surrogate family at the okiya, as well as the men she encounters as a geisha.

Chapter 4 Quotes

☝ "I've found a place to spend my life. I'll work as hard as I have to so they don't send me away. But I'd sooner throw myself off a cliff than spoil my chances to be a geisha like Hatsumomo."

Related Characters: Pumpkin (speaker), Hatsumomo, Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Chiyo gets to know Pumpkin, one of the young women in the okiya. Pumpkin is a young woman who aspires to do nothing in life but be a geisha. She looks up to geishas in the okiya, such as Hatsumomo, a proud, cruel, but beautiful geisha. Pumpkin even claims that she'd rather die than give up on becoming a geisha: it's the best life she can imagine for herself.

The passage is tragic because it underscores how imprisoned and hopeless some of the residents of the okiya are. Pumpkin is a kind young woman, but she's been convinced that her only chance for success in life is to become a geisha. Even more tragically, Pumpkin might be right: while it's demeaning, sexist work in some ways, working as a geisha affords young women from poor backgrounds an incredible opportunity for social mobility. In short, being a geisha means both freedom and imprisonment.

Chapter 5 Quotes

☛ You see, when a geisha wakes up in the morning she is just like any other woman. Her face may be greasy from sleep, and her breath unpleasant. It may be true that she wears a startling hairstyle even as she struggles to open her eyes; but in every other respect she's a woman like any other, and not a geisha at all. Only when she sits before her mirror to apply her makeup with care does she become a geisha. And I don't mean that this is when she begins to look like one. This is when she begins to think like one too.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Hatsumomo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Chiyo watches as a popular geisha, Hatsumomo, wakes up and puts on her makeup. As she watches, Sayuri notes that a geisha first waking up is just like any other woman: greasy skin, bad breath, etc. A woman becomes a geisha, however, when she puts on her makeup and uses artifice and decoration to make herself look beautiful in a certain way. Being a geisha isn't just a combination of appearances, though—it's a state of mind. As Sayuri implies, geishas are highly trained professionals, taught how to be civil and charming at all times; in other words, taught to think like geishas. Even though being a geisha is largely about outward appearances, it's *also* about cultivating a certain mental image of oneself, too.

☛ In fact, a geisha leaves a tiny margin of skin bare all around the hairline, causing her makeup to look even more artificial, something like a mask worn in Noh drama. When a man sits beside her and sees her makeup like a mask, he becomes that much more aware of the bare skin beneath.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Hatsumomo

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Chiyo watches as the popular geisha Hatsumomo puts on her makeup; as she watches, she describes the way that a geisha decorates her own face. A geisha wears extremely thick makeup, to the point where the contours of the face are largely hidden. And yet the geisha also doesn't try to pretend that the thick white makeup is the same color and texture as her skin; on the contrary, she makes it clear that the makeup is artificial, leaving a thin layer of naked skin around her forehead.

The geisha's makeup is highly erotic, though the eroticism of the makeup could easily be lost on readers. Paradoxically, the whole point of thick, heavy makeup isn't to disguise the skin so much as it is to encourage the client to think *about* the skin underneath. Appearances are important to geishas, but not just as ends in themselves; rather, they're designed to communicate something about what lies beneath, either literally or metaphorically.

Chapter 7 Quotes

☛ Auntie took Hatsumomo by the arms and held her from behind, while Mother began to pull open the seams of Hatsumomo's kimono at the thigh. I thought Hatsumomo would resist, but she didn't. She looked at me with cold eyes as Mother gathered up the *koshimaki* and pushed her knees apart. Then Mother reached up between her legs, and when her hand came out again her fingertips were wet. She rubbed her thumb and fingers together for a time, and then smelled them. After this she drew back her hand and slapped Hatsumomo across the face, leaving a streak of moisture.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Hatsumomo, Mother/Ms. Nitta, Auntie

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mother accuses Hatsumomo of having spent time with her boyfriend; i.e., having had sex with a man who wasn't a client—a major no-no for a geisha. To Chiyo's great surprise, Hatsumomo doesn't resist when

Mother feels her genitalia to determine if she's been having sex. Hatsumomo's passivity suggests that after years of working as a geisha, she's become numb to the idea that her body and sexuality belong to somebody else, whether it's Mother or a client.

Mother seems to determine that Hatsumomo has, indeed, been having sex with someone who's not a client, as she immediately slaps Hatsumomo—a major event, as Hatsumomo is usually the favorite of the okiya, and the one in the position of power. Mother, however, is concerned only with money, and she treats her geishas like objects or products that must be kept in good condition.

Chapter 8 Quotes

☝ Two seasons have passed since you left Yoroido, and soon the trees will give birth to a new generation of blossoms. Flowers that grow where old ones have withered serve to remind us that death will one day come to us all.

Related Characters: Ichiro Tanaka (speaker), Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Chiyo receives a message from Mr. Tanaka, the man who largely arranged for Chiyo and her sister to be sold into servitude. Tanaka tells Chiyo that her parents have died, and her sister has run off with a lover. Tanaka seems sympathetic to Chiyo's sadness for her family, and yet he's oblivious to the fact that *he* is responsible for much of Chiyo's sadness. He tries to paper over the issue by making an eloquent observation about the way that beauty replaces death and sadness, if given enough time.

One should take Tanaka's observations with a grain of salt, of course, but they're not entirely wrong (and he seems to be misguided more than malicious in his intentions). As we'll see, Chiyo finds the courage to move past tragedy by finding beauty in her otherwise sad life. Furthermore, Tanaka's observation conveys the kinship between beauty and death—the very sight of beauty is also a sign of death, and vice-versa. There is, one could argue, something sad about beauty itself—one of the central ideas of a novel about geishas.

☝ The training of an apprentice geisha is an arduous path. However, this humble person is filled with admiration for those who are able to recast their suffering and become great artists...This humble person has been alive long enough to see two generations of children grow up, and knows how rare it is for ordinary birds to give birth to a swan. The swan who goes on living in its parents' tree will die; this is why those who are beautiful and talented bear the burden of finding their own way in the world.

Related Characters: Ichiro Tanaka (speaker), Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mr. Tanaka, the man who caused Chiyo to be sold into slavery, continues to offer Chiyo some encouragement. He tells Chiyo that her parents have died, but urges her to move past the tragedy. It's easy for Mr. Tanaka to talk about "moving on"—it's not his parents. But Mr. Tanaka also makes a good point: Chiyo can't spend the rest of her life mourning for her parents. Like the swan of his metaphor, she must eventually move past the tragedy and find beauty on her own terms.

Tanaka's words symbolize the importance of optimism and beauty in fighting tragedy. Beauty can be an important force in fighting off the specter of sadness, but it's also a reminder of sadness itself: the more beautiful something or someone is, the more ephemeral and fragile it often is, and so the greater its potential for sadness. In short, Tanaka's words are inspiring and yet full of contradictions. Beauty helps people move past sadness, and yet it also reminds them of their own sadness.

☝ So many things in my life had changed, even the way I looked; but when I unwrapped the moth from its funeral shroud, it was the same startlingly lovely creature as on the day I had entombed it...It struck me that we—that moth and I—were two opposite extremes. My existence was as unstable as a stream, changing in every way; but the moth was like a piece of stone, changing not at all. While thinking this thought, I reached out a finger to feel the moth's velvety surface; but when I brushed it with my fingertip, it turned all at once into a pile of ash....Now I understood the thing that had puzzled me all morning. The stale air had washed away. The past was gone. My mother and father were dead and I could do nothing to change it.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Minoru Sakamoto, Mrs. Sakamoto

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 107-108

Explanation and Analysis

One year earlier (around the time she learned of her parents' deaths), Chiyo "buried" a tiny moth and hid it in the foundations of the okiya. A year later, she retrieves the dead moth and finds that it looks exactly the same. In a world in which everything seems to be changing, the dead moth is a symbol of stability and comfort for the young Chiyo. Chiyo has lost her parents, been sent to a new, difficult life, etc.--even the tiniest constant in her life makes her feel better.

The passage is one of the turning-points in the novel: the moment in which Chiyo seems to reach some acceptance with her parents' deaths, and begins to try making a name for herself on her own. Chiyo will not dwell in the past any longer; instead, she'll try to find fortune on her own terms.

☞ But how can I describe what I saw in that instant? He was looking at me as a musician might look at his instrument just before he begins to play, with understanding and mastery. I felt that he could see into me as though I were a part of him. How I would have loved to be the instrument he played!

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Chairman Ken Iwamura

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 113

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to one of the key characters of the novel, the Chairman (Ken Iwamura). The Chairman and Chiyo cross paths shortly after Chiyo retrieves her dead moth from the foundations of the okiya. He notices that she's sad, and offers her his handkerchief--a sign of his kindness and gentleness. Chiyo is immediately struck by the Chairman, both for his handsomeness and his kind personality.

The passage conveys the sexual nature of Chiyo's attraction to the Chairman, as well as her deeper emotional bond with him. Phrases like "see into me," "a part of him," "the

instrument he played," and "mastery" move back and forth between intimate and objectifying, spiritual and sexual--not a bad way to sum up the geisha's profession. And notice, too, that Chiyo seems to want to be the Chairman's object, more than his partner or his equal. She's been raised in a culture in which women are trained to be inferior to men--thus, even when she's envisioning her ideal life, she can't help but objectify herself. (This is also a common critique of the author, Arthur Golden--that Sayuri's great "goal" in life is simply to be rescued by the right man.)

Chapter 10 Quotes

☞ "Those of us with water in our personalities don't pick where we'll flow to. All we can do is flow where the landscape of our lives carries us."

Related Characters: Mameha (speaker), Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 125

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mameha offers Chiyo a metaphor for her life as a geisha. Mameha is teaching Chiyo about the geisha's art, and she wants Chiyo to understand the kind of life a geisha with "water" in her personality--like Chiyo and Mameha--will have. Thus she gives us another metaphor connecting water to life: water rushes around, flowing uncontrollably in response to gravity and other forces. By the same token, a geisha can't really control where she's sent or whom she sees--she just goes with the flow.

In this analogy, water is passive--it responds to the powers that be. Mameha is an experienced geisha, and her analogy conveys the contradictions of a geisha's life: geishas are essentially prisoners, and yet they're also freer, more talented, and better traveled than many other women in Japan--they're both free and not free.

Chapter 12 Quotes

☞ "When I say successful, I mean a geisha who has earned her independence. Until a geisha has assembled her own collection of kimono -- or until she's been adopted as the daughter of an okiya, which is just about the same thing --she'll be in someone else's power all her life."

Related Characters: Mameha (speaker), Hatsumomo, Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mameha tells Chiyo about the importance of independence in a geisha's life. A geisha can be extremely popular and well-liked, but she might not be very successful. A successful geisha is one who's gained some measure of independence from her clients and patrons--i.e, a geisha who's earned enough money to support herself. A geisha with her own source of money doesn't have to rely on her clients to support her and feed her, and therefore she can be choosier with her clients, and more selective about what they do together.

In short, Mameha complicates our understanding of geishas so far. A geisha, in Golden's previous descriptions, was basically a slave. Now, we're told that geishas have a way out, at least up to a point: if they make enough money they can take some control over their destinies. Mameha is wise enough to realize that popularity counts only in the way it can bring in richer clients, which can then lead to greater independence. By passing on such a lesson to Chiyo, it's implied, she trains Chiyo to think long-term and value her own freedom.

Chapter 14 Quotes

☝☝ It was as if the little girl named Chiyo, running barefoot from the pond to her tipsy house, no longer existed. I felt that this new girl, Sayuri, with her gleaming white face and her red lips, had destroyed her.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 167

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Chiyo becomes Sayuri--a transformation that symbolizes her growth into the role of geisha. Sayuri is a little uncomfortable with her new name: she recognizes, accurately, that by taking on a new name, she's turning her back on her old life and starting again.

The notion that choosing a new name could cause a spiritual transformation is consonant with the novel's view of

appearances and outward beauty. Appearances are never arbitrary in the novel: when Chiyo takes on the name Sayuri, she changes her entire being, not just her name. By the same token, Sayuri begins to turn her back on her past: she's no longer fixated on her old life, and has even become a new person altogether--a geisha.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☝☝ I was hardly worthy of these surroundings. And then I became aware of all the magnificent silk wrapped about my body, and had the feeling I might drown in beauty. At that moment, beauty itself struck me as a kind of painful melancholy.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), The Baron, Mameha

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

As Sayuri embarks on her career as a geisha, she finds it impossible to imagine herself even attaining much success: when she and Mameha entertain an important client like the Baron, who's seated next to her in the scene, she finds herself feeling insecure and childish. She's highly conscious of the layers of clothing and makeup adorning her body, and feels that she's never be able to live up to the standard of the other geishas.

For the time being, it's not so easy for Sayuri to adjust to her new life: she remembers her old life too vividly, and feels the contrast her current beauty and her previous sadness. This passage, then, makes another strong connection between beauty and suffering. Sayuri doesn't feel that she deserves all this beauty, and her self-doubts, a "kind of painful melancholy," return.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☝☝ "I'm the one who picked it," Mameha said. "The fortune-teller doesn't pick names; he only tells us if they're acceptable." "One day, Mameha," Nobu replied, "you'll grow up and stop listening to fools." "Now, now, Nobu-san," said the Chairman, "anyone hearing you talk would think you're the most modern man in the nation. Yet I've never known anyone who believes more strongly in destiny than you do." "Every man has his destiny. But who needs to go to a fortuneteller to find it? Do I go to a chef to find out if I'm hungry?" Nobu said.

Related Characters: Chairman Ken Iwamura, Toshikazu Nobu, Mameha (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 200

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sayuri spends time with Mameha and her clients, the Chairman and Nobu. Nobu is interested in how Sayuri chose a name for herself--tellingly, Mameha answers on her behalf, illustrating that Sayuri is still nervous around her future clients. Nobu rejects the idea that a fortune-teller is needed to choose a name (a belief that was supposedly a popular part of Japanese culture at the time). Nobu implies that fortune-telling in general is an illusion--it has no real bearing on life. And yet the Chairman points out at Nobu, for all his exasperation with superstition and ritual, is just as superstitious as the average person: he believes in destiny.

What does the Chairman mean by "destiny?" Nobu seems to subscribe to the belief that everyone has a destiny, even if it's sometimes hard to see (a fortune teller who claims to be able to understand destiny is just a liar). Nobu's observations relate back to Sayuri's own: she feels that she has a destiny, although she sometimes struggles to understand it.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☝ I would gladly have exchanged the robe the Baron was offering me for some way out of the situation. But he was a man with so much authority that even Mameha couldn't disobey him. If she had no way of refusing his wishes, how could I?... I suppose I finally came to the conclusion that I had no choice but to obey him and pay the consequences, whatever they might be. I lowered my eyes to the mats in shame; and in this same dreamlike state I'd been feeling all along, I became aware of the Baron taking my hand and guiding me through the corridors toward the back of his house.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Mameha, The Baron

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 260

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Baron--one of Sayuri's clients--takes Sayuri to his room. Inside, the Baron seems to be preparing

to rape or assault Sayuri--an event that, in theory, isn't supposed to happen to geishas like Sayuri, but sometimes does. The Baron asks Sayuri to remove her clothing in order to try on the beautiful kimono he's bought her as a gift--clearly just an invitation for Sayuri to undress in front of him.

The passage shows the darker underside of the geisha world. Although geisha are cultured, sophisticated women who entertain their clients with song and conversation, they can also be sex workers (at least Golden describes it). A man like the Baron is so powerful that he can do whatever he wants with Sayuri--and he can do so because Sayuri, for all her training, is still a sexual object, purchased and traded between powerful men.

Chapter 25 Quotes

☝ Since moving to New York I've learned what the word "geisha" really means to most Westerners. From time to time at elegant parties, I've been introduced to some young woman or other in a splendid dress and jewelry. When she learns I was once a geisha in Kyoto, she forms her mouth into a sort of smile, although the corners don't turn up quite as they should... This woman is thinking, "My goodness. I'm talking with a prostitute." A moment later she's rescued by her escort, a wealthy man a good thirty or forty years older than she is. Well, I often find myself wondering why she can't sense how much we really have in common. She is a kept woman, you see, and in my day, so was I.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

Sayuri, returning to her present self as the narrator in New York, offers some thoughts on the relationship between geishas, prostitutes, and "kept women." Many Americans think that "geisha" is synonymous with prostitute. Sayuri, however, wishes she could correct these people: a geisha, she insists, isn't a prostitute, since she's trained to entertain men at a higher, more cultured level. Furthermore, geishas don't just have sex with their clients--the majority of their clients don't have any kind of romantic encounters with them, sexual or otherwise. A geisha is more like a "kept woman"--i.e., a Western woman who relies completely on her boyfriend or husband for money and housing.

The point here isn't that geishas are entirely different from prostitutes--as we've already seen, geishas *do* encounter sexual advances from their clients, and even initiate bidding wars about who gets to have sex with them (at least in the world of the novel). Geishas and prostitutes are both sexualized objects, passed between clients--even if geishas are more trained and cultured. The point of the passage, rather, is that Westerners hypocritically criticize geishas when there are plenty of women in their own culture who navigate their ways through upperclass society in much the same way as geishas, and never get any real criticism for doing so. The Western world hypocritically criticizes geishas for their vulgarity, when the West itself is full of women who play a similar part.

☝ The only parties at which I managed to convince myself that my life might still have some purpose, however small, were the ones attended by military men...For several generations, army and navy officers had come to Gion to relax. But now they began to tell us, with watery eyes after their seventh or eighth cup of sake, that nothing kept their spirits up so much as their visits to Gion. Probably this was the sort of thing military officers say to the women they talk with. But the idea that I—who was nothing more than a young girl from the seashore—might truly be contributing something important to the nation...I won't pretend these parties did anything to lessen my suffering; but they did help remind me just how selfish my suffering really was.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sayuri thinks about her work as a geisha during the war. During the late 1930s, when Japan was locked in military conflict with China, Sayuri entertained many soldiers, giving them a sense of happiness and optimism when they needed it most.

The passage shows Sayuri becoming more mature and channeling her maturity into her profession. Sayuri has become so used to being a geisha that she lives in an isolated world, mostly separate from the war and society at large. But now she feels like she can bring some happiness to those who need it, and in doing so serve her country in some small way. She's begun to take pride in her work, and notes with hope that she may have improved the lives of

noble Japanese soldiers. In this, Sayuri also gains new perspective on her own selfish desire to be with the Chairman: there's more to her life, she realizes, than finding the right mate.

Chapter 26 Quotes

☝☝ “You geisha! There was never a more irritating group of people. You go around consulting your almanacs, saying, ‘Oh, I can't walk toward the east today, because my horoscope says it's unlucky!’ But then when it's a matter of something affecting your entire lives, you simply look the other way.”

Related Characters: Toshikazu Nobu (speaker), Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sayuri has visited Nobu, hoping to work her way back into the Chairman's life. Nobu notes that Sayuri is preparing to accept a *danna*--i.e., a male client with whom the geisha spends all her time. Nobu notes the irony: geishas are intensely superstitious about small matters, but when something important is about to happen, they're curiously passive and ignorant. In short, Nobu seems to be encouraging Sayuri to take more control over who will become her *danna*: she can find a way to ensure that she won't end up with the General. Nobu, we've already seen, doesn't believe in superstition, even though he seems to subscribe to a vague belief in fate: thus, he seems to be urging Sayuri to fulfill her destiny--or perhaps, to make her own destiny with the Chairman.

☝☝ “I wish I could believe life really is something more than a stream that carries us along, belly-up.”
“All right, if it's a stream, you're still free to be in this part of it or that part, aren't you? The water will divide again and again. If you bump, and tussle, and fight, and make use of whatever advantages you might have...”

Related Characters: Toshikazu Nobu, Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sayuri responds to Nobu's statements. Nobu is urging Sayuri to take control over her life: to find a way to ensure that she doesn't end up with the General. Sayuri responds with her usual metaphor explaining the "water" in her personality. She says that her life is like a stream--she has no real control over where she's sent, and instead just responds passively to the forces of the universe. Nobu offers a counter-analogy: he claims that if life really is like a stream, then it's possible to move around *within* the stream.

Nobu's analogy is a good one, because it walks a fine line between the belief in total freedom and the belief in total fate. Nobu seems to believe that some aspects of a person's life are beyond control--and yet other aspects *can* be controlled. Sayuri is too passive, too willing to believe that life is beyond her own control. Water doesn't always have to be passive--it can be liberating as well. Thus Sayuri, Nobu implies, could control some parts of her life, such as who her *danna* will be.

Chapter 28 Quotes

☝ “Sayuri,” he said to me, “I don't know when we will see each other again or what the world will be like when we do. We may both have seen many horrible things. But I will think of you every time I need to be reminded that there is beauty and goodness in the world.”

Related Characters: Toshikazu Nobu (speaker), Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 343

Explanation and Analysis

As the war gets more dangerous, Nobu and Sayuri are both thrust into dangerous positions. Here, Nobu says good bye to Sayuri, thanking her for showing him beauty and happiness. Nobu seems to genuinely love Sayuri: he's stuck his neck out for her many times, saving her from a career in the factories (a fate that killed some of Sayuri's geisha friends). Nobu's love for Sayuri seems to contrast with the Chairman's behavior toward Sayuri--Sayuri loves the Chairman, but it's not really clear that the feeling is mutual. Nobu's love for Sayuri also seems pure and deep: he doesn't think of her as an object for his gratification, but rather a

woman who's shown him how to be happy. It's implied that Nobu's memories of Sayuri will bring him joy during the dark days of the future, when he's locked in the middle of a war.

Chapter 29 Quotes

☝ Because I'd lived through adversity once before, what I learned about myself was like a reminder of something I'd once known but had nearly forgotten --namely, that beneath the elegant clothing, and the accomplished dancing, and the clever conversation, my life had no complexity at all, but was as simple as a stone falling toward the ground.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 348

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sayuri becomes filled with despair. she's separated from the Chairman, the love of her life, and becomes sure that she'll never see him again. Sayuri takes no more pleasure in her work--gone are the days when she felt proud of herself for bringing joy to a group of soldiers--and thinks of her life as a dull, miserable fall.

Sayuri's chosen metaphor is interesting because it conveys a sense of inevitability: a stone falling toward the ground has no control over its movement; it just obeys the laws of gravity. The metaphor is even *more* fatalistic than Sayuri's previous nature metaphor of choice--water (water, at least, can flow in different directions as it moves down the stream, as Nobu pointed out--a falling stone moves in one direction, and one direction only). The metaphor reflects the fact that Sayuri has become deeply depressed due to her circumstances.

Chapter 34 Quotes

☝ In the instant before that door opened, I could almost sense my life expanding just like a river whose waters have begun to swell; for I had never before taken such a drastic step to change the course of my own future. I was like a child tiptoeing along a precipice overlooking the sea. And yet somehow I hadn't imagined a great wave might come and strike me there, and wash everything away.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Chairman Ken Iwamura

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 405

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Sayuri is in the middle of having sex with a man she doesn't even like (let alone love): Sato. Sayuri is shocked when Pumpkin, her old "friend," opens the door, leading the Chairman--the actual love of Sayuri's life--inside. Sayuri had planned for Pumpkin to lead *Nobu* into the room, in a desperate attempt to manipulate him into leaving her, thus allowing her to pursue the Chairman. Here, Sayuri's plan has seemingly backfired in the worst possible way, all thanks to Pumpkin.

Sayuri conveys her anxiety with yet another water metaphor. Previously, water has been a metaphor for destiny, or--at times--freedom. But here, water symbolizes neither: the water in question is a huge, monstrous wave, symbolizing the destruction of Sayuri's plans and--so she thinks--her future with the Chairman.

“ And so you can imagine that this kiss, the first real one of my life, seemed to me more intimate than anything I'd ever experienced. I had the feeling I was taking something from the Chairman, and that he was giving something to me, something more private than anyone had ever given me before.

Related Characters: Sayuri Nitta / Chiyo Sakamoto (speaker), Chairman Ken Iwamura

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 416

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene (which leads the novel toward a happy ending), Sayuri confesses her feelings for the Chairman, and the Chairman reciprocates her feelings. The Chairman kisses Sayuri warmly and deeply, and Sayuri is amazed to realize that she's never been kissed so passionately in her life. Despite working in a sexualized world for many years, Sayuri has never felt real passion or intimacy: the constant presence of sexuality has trivialized the feeling, leading her to take a narrow view of desire. But now, with the Chairman, Sayuri discovers the love that can exist within desire and sexual intimacy, that sex is not just a giving or a taking, but a giving *and* a taking, an equal exchange of the most personal kind.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In a fictional translator's note, professor of Japanese History Jakob Haarhuis writes that, at the age of fourteen, his father brought him from their home in the Netherlands to Kyoto, Japan. While in Kyoto, they saw geisha in beautiful kimono (traditional full-length robes) dance in a performance at the city's foremost theater. At the time, Haarhuis had no idea that nearly fifty years later, he would record the memoirs of the famous Kyoto geisha Sayuri Nitta. While there have been many magazine articles about Sayuri's life, Haarhuis says that her memoirs—which he has translated as the book that follows—mark the first time people will see the world from her perspective.

Haarhuis writes that if Sayuri hadn't immigrated to New York City in 1956, then she might never have had the freedom to reflect on the years she spent as a geisha. Though geisha don't make any formal vow of silence about the men they entertain, most geisha are very tightlipped about their experiences. They fear to reveal secrets about powerful Japanese men who have the power to ruin a geisha's career and reputation. But since Sayuri lived in the U.S., she was free to tell her stories openly without fear of reprisal.

Haarhuis did not meet Sayuri until 1985, when a mutual friend introduced the two in New York. As their friendship grew, Haarhuis asked if he could record her incredible life story. Sayuri agreed. Over the course of eighteen months, she dictated her memoirs. After completing the project, Haarhuis asked her why she agreed to let him record her memoirs. Sayuri's only response was that she had nothing else to do in her old age. Haarhuis writes that he will leave it up to the reader to decide if her motives were as simple as that.

By beginning the novel with a fictional translator's note, Arthur Golden creates the illusion that Sayuri's memoirs are a nonfictional retelling of her experiences as a geisha rather than a fictional product of Golden's imagination. Thus, in its first pages, the novel sets up the theme of Beauty, Artifice, and Truth by using this note as an "artifice" – which is a clever device used to trick or deceive others – to make the following stories seem more true. This is the first of many artifices we will encounter in the novel.



Traditional codes of conduct in geisha culture prevent a geisha from speaking her mind, thus indicating the sexist oppressiveness of Japanese society at this time. Unable to speak publicly about their lives, geisha do not have the freedom to express their personal narratives through the act of storytelling. Golden himself, however, ended up "outing" the real-life geisha he interviewed for the book, even after she specifically requested to remain anonymous.



Haarhuis' skepticism about Sayuri's motives for recounting her memoirs hints that Sayuri might be an unreliable narrator—a first-person narrator who skews, distorts, or obscures the truth of a story. Here, Sayuri appears to obscure her true motives by understating her aims for crafting this involved narrative.



Haarhuis says that he used a tape recorder while recording Sayuri's memoirs in order to ensure accuracy but, since her death last year, he has wondered if he also wanted to preserve her uniquely expressive voice. She often spoke in a soft voice, but when she got excited, her voice would expand so that it sounded like seven or eight people were in the room. Haarhuis writes that he sometimes plays her tapes alone in his study and finds it difficult to believe that she is no longer alive.

We are reminded here that there is always an absence at the center of the novel: the absence of Sayuri's speaking voice. On a deeper level, Sayuri's metaphorical voice – her ability to express herself – is partially lost because we are supposedly reading her book through translations and not in the original Japanese. Moreover, any real geisha voice is lost because we are not even reading the true narrative of a geisha, but the fictional account of a white, American male author writing at the end of the 20th century. Thus, Golden risks supplanting actual geisha voices with his own – a claim many critics have made against the book.



CHAPTER 1

The novel's main story begins with an elderly Sayuri Nitta remarking that the afternoon she met Mr. Ichiro Tanaka in the year 1929 was the best and worst afternoon of her entire life. She says that if she had never met Mr. Tanaka, then she would never have become a geisha. Unlike most geisha, Sayuri wasn't raised from an early age to be a geisha. Instead, she grew up as Chiyo Sakamoto, the daughter of a poor fisherman in the small village of Yoroido, on the Sea of Japan. She would only take the name Sayuri after she became a geisha.

The main story begins with Sayuri hinting at her transformation from the girl Chiyo to the woman Sayuri. In this way, Sayuri establishes this novel as a bildungsroman – a type of novel that charts the emotional and intellectual development of the protagonist as he or she becomes an adult. In Sayuri's case, her change of name will signal an important step in her maturation into an adult.



Sayuri says that she inherited her mother's translucent blue-grey eyes. Fortunetellers had told her mother that their blue eyes, a rarity among Japanese people, indicated that they both had a lot of water in their personalities. In contrast, her father Minoru Sakamoto – who was over twenty years older than her mother – had a lot of wood in his personality. Sayuri says that water flows quickly, always finding a crack to spill through, whereas wood holds fast and does not change easily. Like wood, her father acted slowly and methodically in everything he did. Sayuri says that her sister Satsu, who is six years older than her, took after their father. Satsu had a slowness about her, both in her actions and her thinking.

Sayuri introduces the symbol of the eyes. Though their meaning will become more complicated later, at this point they reflect the old saying that eyes are the “windows to the soul”—in that they provide insight into one's identity. Throughout the novel, Sayuri will be linked to water (traditionally one of the elements composing the universe) because she has a fluid and flexible personality. While this allows her to adapt to various circumstances, it also causes her to tailor her desires and actions to benefit other people rather than help her assert her own individual wishes.



Sayuri (now referring to herself as Chiyo, her name at the time) remembers that when she was seven, her mother came down with a terrible illness. Over the course of the next two years, her mother grew so frail that before long she was unable to leave her bed because of the pain. One day, the village doctor drops by their small home near the sea to examine her mother. Chiyo's father and the doctor discuss her mother's condition as Chiyo makes tea. The doctor says that Sakamoto's wife will die in a few weeks. Hearing this, Chiyo feels as if a panicked bird were flapping in her mind.

Though Sayuri tells Haarhuis her father's name, she withholds the name of her mother. As a result, her mother seems like less of a character and more of a plot device—especially as it is her illness that will initiate the series of events that eventually lead to Sayuri becoming a geisha. Perhaps another sign of her unreliability as a narrator, Sayuri also might downplay her mother's identity so as not to have to relive the emotional pain of her illness and death. Golden, in trying to recreate the voice of a Japanese woman, uses lots of metaphors and similes relating to nature—perhaps overdoing them at times.



When the doctor leaves, Sakamoto tells Chiyo to get incense for their Buddhist altar. Chiyo asks if he has anything else to tell her, hoping that he would say something comforting about her mother's condition. But her father says nothing, and slowly raises a single finger, a sign that means he wants her to say nothing else.

To escape her worries about her mother, Chiyo runs as fast as she can down a path to the village. Slipping on the path, she falls and knocks herself into a daze. The next thing Chiyo remembers is finding herself on a table that smells like fish, staring at Mr. Ichiro Tanaka. The wealthiest man in their village, Mr. Tanaka owns the fishing company that employs most of the fishermen in Yoroido. Seeing Chiyo fall, he had carried her to one of his nearby fishing outlets. Mr. Tanaka says that he recognizes Chiyo as Mr. Sakamoto's daughter, and he compliments her on the beautiful color of her **eyes**. Looking at Mr. Tanaka, Chiyo sees an intelligent sharpness in his face. Chiyo feels as if Mr. Tanaka sees the world as it really is, even if he does not always like what he sees. Mr. Tanaka calls for the doctor, who tends to Chiyo's lip before sending her off.

After buying the incense that her father asked for, Chiyo heads back to her house. On the way she feels a mix of emotions. She worries about her mother's health, but also feels a pleasant sensation when she thinks of Mr. Tanaka. Chiyo clutches the incense to her chest and says Mr. Tanaka's name over and over into the wind, until she feels satisfied that she hears the music in every syllable.

CHAPTER 2

The next morning Chiyo goes swimming in the pond near her house to take her mind off her troubles. Returning home from the swim, she sees the "Sugi boy" fondling Satsu against a tree on the path to the house. Unsure of what they're doing, Chiyo inquisitively watches them from behind a tree until suddenly Mr. Tanaka appears behind her. When he asks why she's hiding behind a tree, Chiyo points to her sister and the Sugi boy, saying that she's waiting for them to leave before she can head home. Mr. Tanaka yells at the two and they run off.

Sakamoto's silencing of Chiyo's question recalls Haarhuis' claim that powerful Japanese men keep geisha quiet. In this way, Sakamoto represents the first instance of how certain traditions and customs – like respecting one's father – oppress women by silencing them.



Throughout the novel, Chiyo will deal with her emotional experiences by literally and metaphorically "running away" from her problems. As Chiyo matures, she will find better and more developed ways for handling her emotional pain. Chiyo's appraisal of Mr. Tanaka's face is also immature and naïve, as she thinks that Mr. Tanaka is a man who knows the truth of things simply because of his appearance. Yet Tanaka will turn out to be a surprisingly naïve character who sells Chiyo and her sister into sexual slavery because he thinks that their lives will be better if they are a geisha and prostitute, respectively.



Chiyo's prayer-like chanting of Tanaka's name reveals her innocent and romantic personality. As Chiyo matures, she will encounter the harsh realities of a geisha's life, where love appears to be merely an illusion. Under these conditions, she will have to fight to hold onto her belief in the possibility of love.



Chiyo witnesses her sister having the normal sexual experiences that Chiyo herself will never have because, as a geisha, Chiyo won't be free to pursue relationships and come into sexual maturity on her own terms. Instead of having the freedom to experiment and explore her sexuality—like Satsu does here—Chiyo will be forced to sleep with older men for pay.



Mr. Tanaka gives Chiyo medicinal herbs that he was going to her house to drop off. He says that she should give them to her older sister so that she can make a tea for their mother. Chiyo responds that since Satsu isn't very good at making tea, Chiyo will make the tea herself. Mr. Tanaka asks who takes care of Chiyo with her mother sick, her father so old, and her sister unable to even make tea. When Chiyo says she mostly takes care of herself, Mr. Tanaka responds that she is like an orphan. Mr. Tanaka says that he too was an orphan at her age, but that he was adopted into the wealthy Tanaka family. He took their name and started running their fishing company when he came of age. He says that maybe something like that will happen to Chiyo too, and then he leaves.

After her encounter with Mr. Tanaka, Chiyo begins to find comfort in fantasizing that he will adopt her. Whenever her mother groans in pain that week following the encounter, Chiyo wishes she could escape the house and live with the kind Mr. Tanaka. At the end of the week, Chiyo comes home to find Mr. Tanaka sitting across from her father. Mr. Tanaka tells Chiyo that he and her father had just been talking about her. Mr. Tanaka says that Chiyo and Satsu should come to his house the following day for dinner and to meet his daughter, who is Chiyo's same age. Chiyo thanks him politely, concealing the explosion of feelings inside her. She feels excited that her fantasy of living with Mr. Tanaka might be coming true, but also ashamed of leaving her dying mother and elderly father.

The next day, Satsu and Chiyo meet Mr. Tanaka at the center of the village and climb into his wagon. Mr. Tanaka brings them to his office at the company's headquarters in the nearby town. Inside his office, an old woman is waiting for them. Chiyo notices that the woman can't sit still, so Chiyo gives her the (private) nickname Ms. Fidget. Ms. Fidget gives Mr. Tanaka a look and he leaves the room at once. Ms. Fidget examines Satsu's face before untying her shirt and examining her breasts. Shocked, Chiyo feels that the way the woman handles Satsu's naked body is more indecent than the way the Sugi boy had touched her.

Ms. Fidget then tells a confused but obedient Satsu to undress completely. Ms. Fidget tries to put her hand between Satsu's legs. Satsu resists, but the old woman gives a shout and slaps her hard across the leg. Satsu cries as the woman examines her. Ms. Fidget then turns to Chiyo and tells her to get undressed. Seeing Chiyo's **eyes**, she says that Chiyo must have a lot of **water** in her personality. When the old woman tells her to spread her legs, Chiyo resists like her sister until Ms. Fidget slaps her legs as well. Terribly frightened of what the woman would do, Chiyo feels the woman's fingers give her a pinch between her legs.

Chiyo's ability to take care of herself shows that she is an independent person capable of making her own decisions. While most children rely completely on their parents or guardians, the young Chiyo has the freedom to control her life without overt external forces like an intrusive mother or father determining her life for her. But when Chiyo becomes a geisha, she will lose this freedom. Thus, one of the major conflicts of this novel centers on Chiyo's ability to regain the freedom of self-determination that she – paradoxically – had as a child.



Chiyo's fantasies are another example of her attempts at coping with her grief. Unable to cure her mother's illness, Chiyo psychologically distances herself from her mother's pain through her fantasies of living elsewhere. As Chiyo matures, she will learn to address the grim realities of her circumstances instead of simply fleeing from them into her own imagination. Chiyo's emotional response to Tanaka's offer also marks the first time she must conceal her emotions – something she will have to do almost everyday of her adult life as a geisha.



Chiyo's reaction to Ms. Fidget fondling Satsu's breasts suggests that, even at a young age, Chiyo can tell the difference between how the Sugi boy fondled Satsu with affection and how Ms. Fidget touches Satsu as if her body were a piece of meat to be sold—a commodity. We will later learn that Satsu loves the Sugi boy, implying that she consented to his caresses, while she has no say in how Ms. Fidget treats her. Thus Ms. Fidget denies Satsu's right to self-determination by refusing to acknowledge Satsu's authority over her own body.



Without first getting their consent, Ms. Fidget performs the first of many sexual assaults in this novel. It is in this moment that Chiyo and Satsu begin to learn the disturbing lesson that women in their society have little control over their own bodies. Chiyo's experiences as a geisha will enforce the belief that a woman's body belongs to other people, both men and women—it is essentially a commodity to be used and sold, not a rightful part of her self.



Ms. Fidget tells the girls to dress as she calls in Mr. Tanaka. Though Chiyo feels her tears welling up, she doesn't cry so that she won't look bad in front of Mr. Tanaka. The woman tells Mr. Tanaka that the girls are healthy, suitable, and "intact." Chiyo thinks that Ms. Fidget must be a fortuneteller whom Mr. Tanaka has hired to tell the girls' fortunes so that he would know more about them before adopting them. Mr. Tanaka thanks Ms. Fidget and takes the girls back to the wagon.

At Mr. Tanaka's large house, Chiyo plays with his friendly daughter Kuniko Tanaka on their expansive property. The girls get along well, and Chiyo feels excited to have Kuniko as a sister. At dinner, Chiyo marvels at how much food Mr. Tanaka's family eats in one meal. After dinner, Mr. Tanaka leaves the house. While Satsu and Kuniko's mother wash the dishes and talk, Kuniko tells Chiyo to come with her. Kuniko says that every night she secretly follows her father when he leaves after dinner. The girls follow him to a teahouse where they peer inside through a hole in the wall. Chiyo sees Mr. Tanaka and four other men laughing and being served by a woman wearing a green kimono, an elaborate hairstyle, and white makeup. Though the woman isn't particularly attractive, Chiyo is impressed by her glamorousness. Kuniko tells Chiyo that she is a geisha.

They quickly return to Mr. Tanaka's home and get into side-by-side futon beds. Kuniko falls asleep but Chiyo stays awake, trying to understand everything that happened to her during the day. Chiyo whispers to the sleeping Kuniko that soon Chiyo will come to live with her.

CHAPTER 3

One morning a few weeks later, Chiyo is returning home from doing an errand in the village when Mr. Tanaka's assistant comes running up the path. He tells her that Mr. Tanaka wants her and Satsu to come down to the village immediately. Chiyo runs home and tells her sister and father that Mr. Tanaka wants to see them. Her father turns his head heavily to the door and nods. Before the girls leave, Chiyo hears her mother cry out in pain from the back room.

Ms. Fidget's comments suggest that the girls have "intact" hymens, which means that the girls have yet to have vaginal sex. Mr. Tanaka will be able to sell these girls for a higher price if they are virgins. In this way, Tanaka and Ms. Fidget treat sex, a girl's virginity, and a woman's body as a commodities—objects that have monetary value.



The naïve and inexperienced Chiyo holds onto the fantasy that Mr. Tanaka is going to adopt her even after Ms. Fidget's examination. The strength of Chiyo's conviction shows just how powerful a fantasy can be for a person who wants to escape reality. As a geisha, Chiyo will be responsible for crafting these fantasies for men—who want to believe that the beautiful geisha truly admire and adore them. Chiyo will perhaps be so successful at crafting these illusions because she herself knows the power of fantasy and escapism.



Still so young, Chiyo has trouble understanding the true nature of the day's events. Because she is too inexperienced to see the truth, she continues to maintain her fantasy.



Her mother's ominous cry foreshadows that Mr. Tanaka's reasons for summoning the girls are not as kind and benevolent as Chiyo hopes. Sakamoto, moreover, knows Tanaka's true intention: he is going to take them away to Kyoto. Sakamoto's total lack of emotional response thus makes him appear cruel and emotionally absent.



In the village, Chiyo feels that Mr. Tanaka is strangely distant. He even forgets Satsu's name, which Chiyo finds odd, since Chiyo thinks he is going to adopt them both. Mr. Tanaka drives the girls to a train station, where they see Ms. Fidget waiting next to a skinny man wearing a stiff men's kimono. Mr. Tanaka introduces the man as Mr. Bekku. Mr. Tanaka asks if Mr. Bekku needs any help transporting the girls, but Mr. Bekku waves off the offer. Chiyo asks where they're going, but no one responds to her question. She wonders if Mr. Bekku is taking them somewhere to have their fortunes told more completely.

Mr. Bekku leads the girls by the elbows onto the train. Mr. Tanaka says something to Chiyo but she is unable to make it out. He either says, "We'll meet again" or "Wait" or "Well, let's go," which are all phrases that sound similar in Japanese. As the train starts to move, Mr. Bekku says that the girls smell like fish. He then takes out a comb and starts vigorously tearing through Satsu's messy hair, causing her to cry from the pain. Feeling confused and scared, Chiyo blames herself for putting Satsu in this position.

After hours of riding the train without food or drink, they arrive in Kyoto. As they ride through the city on a rickshaw, Chiyo feels a terrible emptiness and fear. The fast moving cars, the sounds of trucks rumbling, and the smell of burning rubber assault her senses. Chiyo feels that the city is as foreign to her as the bottom of the sea.

The rickshaw stops and Mr. Bekku instructs Chiyo to get out. When Satsu tries to get out as well, Mr. Bekku pushes her back into the rickshaw, saying that she is going elsewhere. Realizing that Mr. Bekku is separating her from Satsu, Chiyo is struck by the reality that Mr. Tanaka isn't actually adopting them. She begins to cry for the first time that day. As Mr. Bekku drags Chiyo inside the building, an exquisitely beautiful woman appears, wearing a kimono lovelier than anything Chiyo has ever imagined. Little did Chiyo know at the time that this woman was Hatsumomo, a geisha renowned in Kyoto for her beauty and cruelty. As Hatsumomo walks out, she looks at Chiyo and calls her street trash. Mr. Bekku hands Chiyo over to an older woman and drives off with Satsu.

Tanaka's emotional distance and his forgetting of Satsu's name has no effect on dislodging Chiyo's commitment to her dream of adoption, once again showing the powerful hold of fantasy and artifice. Again and again in this novel, characters will hold onto their fantasies in order to cope with the harsh realities bearing down upon them.



The train will not only physically transport Chiyo away from Yoroido, but also metaphorically initiate a new stage in her life by transporting her out of the freedom of her childhood and into the restrictive world of the geisha.



Chiyo's reaction to the new city mirrors her psychological state. Having lived her whole life in the quiet seaside village, the experience of the city is disorienting and scary, which reflects her own inner confusion about why Tanaka sent her here in the first place.



Hatsumomo epitomizes the gap between personality and external appearances. On the outside, Hatsumomo has the appearance of beauty, yet she is actually a cruel and unforgiving person—her attractive appearance does not seem to "match up" with the cruel, ugly inner personality. Likewise, we are beginning to see that Tanaka is similar to Hatsumomo in this way. Chiyo misunderstood Tanaka's concern and compliments for kindness, when he was actually musing on the profit he could make by selling a pretty girl into sexual slavery.



Frightened and feeling terribly alone, Chiyo cries in the doorway until the old woman consoles her and says there's nothing to cry about. The woman tells Chiyo to call her Auntie. Noticing Chiyo's **eyes**, Auntie says that she is beautiful. Auntie leads her into a two-story courtyard surrounded by little buildings. A young girl comes to meet them with a bucket of water. Because of the girl's plump head, Chiyo decides to call her Pumpkin, a nickname that will stick with the girl even into her old age. Auntie shoos Pumpkin away, takes a rag from the bucket, and starts washing the dirt and grime from Chiyo's face.

Chiyo asks where she is and Auntie says she's at an *okiya* – a place where geisha live. Auntie tells her that if she obeys everything that Auntie says, then she can be a geisha too. Auntie then says that two women, whom she calls Mother and Granny, will soon come down the stairs to look at Chiyo. She instructs Chiyo to bow low and not look at them in the **eyes**. Auntie says that Granny doesn't like anyone, so Chiyo must try to impress Mother, who makes all the real decisions anyway. Just then, Chiyo hears a creaking of wood and sees a flow of silk kimonos coming down the stairs.

Not wanting to disobey Auntie – the only person who has been kind to her since she was forced to leave Yoroido – Chiyo keeps her **eyes** downcast and bows low in front of Mother and Granny. Mother asks her to come closer so that she can get a better look at her. Chiyo tries to keep her eyes pinned to Mother's elegant kimono, but she can't help herself from glancing upward to see if a beautiful face matches the beautiful clothing. Instead, Chiyo sees an ugly woman with the face of a bulldog. Though Chiyo didn't know it at the time, Mother and Auntie grew up together in the same *okiya*. Granny had adopted them both.

Mother approvingly says that Chiyo's beautiful blue-grey **eyes** mean that she has a lot of **water** in her personality. Granny simply says that she looks dull. Mother tells Chiyo that if she obeys the *okiya*'s rules, then she will start her training in the arts of the geisha in two or three months. Until then, she'll work as a maid. Chiyo finds herself wondering if Satsu is also standing in front of an ugly woman right now. This thought about Satsu prompts Chiyo to imagine her mother sitting up in bed, wondering where Chiyo had gone. Thinking of her mother makes the tears return to her eyes.

Chiyo's nickname for Pumpkin suggests that Chiyo often lacks emotional awareness. The nickname is a bit insulting, because it refers to Pumpkin's large head, especially in a social situation so concerned with physical beauty. We never learn how Pumpkin feels about the nickname, but we do learn that Chiyo has a surprising lack of compassion for this girl—and Pumpkin will come to resent her, perhaps starting this very moment. In this way, Chiyo resembles her emotionally absent father.



*Because of the adult women's familial titles, the women at the *okiya* metaphorically replace Chiyo's real family. Yet Granny and Mother's nicknames are ironic, because these women in no way embody the characteristics of motherhood. Mother and Granny are uncaring and unloving women who only care about the money they can bring into the *okiya*. Though Chiyo gets a new "mother," this title merely obscures the fact of Mother's unkindness.*



Still so naïve, Chiyo thinks a woman in beautiful clothing must have a beautiful face, not realizing that a person might use clothing to conceal or lessen one's ugliness. As she matures, Chiyo will learn that beauty in one aspect of a person's identity does not mean that beauty exists in other aspects. Mother's beautiful clothing does not correspond with her ugly face, while Hatsumomo's beautiful face does not correspond with her ugly personality.



*Chiyo's arrival at the *okiya* not only signifies her first steps towards becoming a geisha, but also her passage from the world of truth into the world of appearance. As Chiyo stands before Mother – who is a mother only in name – she thinks of her actual mother. Now, in the world of appearances, nothing will be as it seems: beautiful women are ugly on the inside and cruel women take on the name "mother" in order to seem kinder and more nurturing.*



CHAPTER 4

During her first days at the *okiya*, Chiyo feels as bad as if she had lost her arms and legs, rather than her family and home. Chiyo copes with her misery by acting obedient, hoping that Mother will send her to geisha school – where she hopes to find Satsu training to be a geisha. Chiyo thinks that if she finds Satsu, then the two of them can run away back to Yoroido. Chiyo spends her days cleaning the *okiya* and waiting on Mother and Granny.

Around three weeks after her arrival at the *okiya*, Chiyo is cleaning Hatsumomo's room when Hatsumomo comes in. Hatsumomo says that Chiyo shouldn't touch the makeup containers, because they will start to smell like an ignorant girl from a fishing village. Hatsumomo then says that Chiyo's "ugly" sister visited the *okiya* yesterday smelling just as bad as Chiyo. Chiyo pleads with Hatsumomo to tell her what Satsu said, but Hatsumomo responds that Chiyo must first earn the information. When Chiyo says that she'll never bother Hatsumomo again if Hatsumomo tells her what Satsu said, Hatsumomo slaps her across the face before calmly telling to get out of her room.

Stunned by the slap, Chiyo stumbles out of the room and falls to the ground. Seeing Hatsumomo slap Chiyo, Mother calls Chiyo into her room. Mother scolds Chiyo, saying that she must work harder to stay out of Hatsumomo's way. Everyone in the *okiya* has to work to make Hatsumomo happy because, as the only geisha in the *okiya*, Hatsumomo is the only one who brings in any money. Mother says that if Chiyo wants to become a geisha, then she must not make Hatsumomo upset again.

About a month after arriving at the *okiya*, Chiyo begins her training as a geisha. Since Pumpkin started her training six months earlier, Pumpkin shows Chiyo the way to the school for geisha. The two girls have had little time talk over the last month because of their duties at the *okiya*, but on their way to school Chiyo asks Pumpkin how she ended up at the *okiya*. Pumpkin says she lived with her uncle, who sold her to the *okiya* after his business failed. Chiyo asks if she ever thought of running away. Since she has nowhere else to go, Pumpkin says that she'd rather throw herself off a cliff than give up the chance for a stable life as a geisha.

Chiyo's plan to escape the okiya shows that she is already beginning to grow up. In previous chapters, Chiyo simply fantasized about a better life whenever she came up against a problem, but now she takes active steps to change her future. In this way, Chiyo takes some control over her life, determining her own path towards happiness.



Hatsumomo continues to reveal her "ugly" personality in these instances of verbal and physical abuse. Generally, we think of makeup as the foremost artifice – it hides a person's natural appearance in order to make the person more attractive. Hatsumomo might be so defensive of her makeup because she relies on it to create the illusion of beauty—yet in trying to protect this illusion, she ultimately destroys another: the illusion of kindness. Traditionally, a geisha should be beautiful on the outside and gentle and kind on the inside – two traits Hatsumomo does not have.



In some ways, Mother is the ultimate ironic figure—though her name is "mother," she is in no way motherly. Likewise, in this scene we expect Mother to scold Hatsumomo for abusing Chiyo, but in a tragic irony she instead scolds Chiyo for being abused.



*Pumpkin's response to Chiyo reveals that Pumpkin has few ambitions in life: all she wants is stability. As Chiyo matures, she'll see that most geisha share Pumpkin's modest dreams. We will also soon learn most geisha are essentially slaves to the heads of their *okiya*, which means that they have little independence. Chiyo will ultimately come to stand apart from these women by striving for more out of life: true love and independence.*



At school, Pumpkin takes Chiyo to the classes. Chiyo looks around for Satsu but doesn't find her. In the first class of the day, Chiyo watches as the classroom of girls learn to play the *shamisen*, which is a small, three-stringed, guitar-like instrument. Chiyo notices that Pumpkin is by far the worst player in the class. Next they go to a singing class, where Pumpkin hides her inability to sing by mouthing along the words while everyone sings together. At the end of the class, Pumpkin introduces Chiyo to the singing teacher. The teacher jokes that she'll teach Chiyo how to sing as long as Chiyo survives living with Hatsumomo long enough to learn.

The classes at geisha school focus exclusively on art forms that adorn the world with beauty. In the process of learning these skills, the girls never study math, science, or history. Thus, this education deprives the girls of ever learning about the factual, unembellished scientific and historic realities of their world. Without this education, the girls live in a world of beautiful appearances that are totally divorced from reality.



CHAPTER 5

That afternoon, Hatsumomo brings Chiyo to the Registry Office for geisha who reside in the Gion district of Kyoto. According to geisha traditions, the head geisha of an *okiya* signs up the new apprentice on the day that the apprentice begins her training. When the registry clerk says that Chiyo's **eyes** remind him of the sparkly grey color of a mirror, Hatsumomo interjects that they look more like a dead man's tongue.

The clerk's and Hatsumomo's comments expand on the symbolic significance of Chiyo's eyes. If Chiyo's eyes resemble a mirror, then perhaps they are now – in addition to being windows into Chiyo's soul – mirrors that reflect the souls of the people who look at them. Since Hatsumomo has an inner cruelty, she only sees the reflection of her own ugliness.



That evening back at the *okiya*, Hatsumomo lets Chiyo watch her put on the geisha makeup as part of the tradition. Chiyo says (to the reader) that when a geisha wakes up in the morning she is like any other woman. Only when she sits by the mirror and puts on the makeup does she become a geisha. Chiyo watches Hatsumomo paint her face and neck with a white chalk paste. A geisha leaves a thin ring of bare skin around the hairline, causing her makeup to look more artificial, almost like a mask. This is supposed to be more erotic, because when a man notices that a geisha's makeup is like a mask, he becomes more aware of her bare skin underneath.

Tradition is so integral to the life of a geisha that even the cruel Hatsumomo allows Chiyo to observe her in her most private moments. Chiyo's thoughts on the geisha's makeup also reveal how geisha craft an artificial appearance because this appearance paradoxically heightens the awareness and desire for truth. In this way, artifice can actually bring us into a deeper appreciation of the truth – an idea that will return near the end of the novel in relation to our memories as artifices.



Hatsumomo then puts on the many layers of the kimono. Every *okiya* has a professional dresser to help the geisha tie her obi – the broad sash worn around the waist of a kimono. While most women in Japan wear kimonos with obi, the geisha's obi is so wide and intricately tied that only professional dressers know how to tie the obi properly. Finally, Hatsumomo picks out some hair ornaments for her elaborate hairstyle. The outfit she wears that day costs more than a policeman would make in an entire year. Before Hatsumomo leaves the *okiya*, Auntie sparks a flint behind her back for good luck. Chiyo says that geisha are superstitious, and will never leave the *okiya* to go entertain men before someone sparks a flint at their back.

The ritual of sparking the flint at a geisha's back shows how geisha rely on superstitions to gain some control over their lives. As Ms. Fidget's actions have shown, some people treat a geisha's body as a sexual object for the pleasure or profit of others. In this society that devalues the right a geisha has over her own body, geisha walk through the city under constant threat that a man might use violence to satisfy his sexual desire. With so little power in their society, geisha use small rituals like striking a flint to feel as if they are taking some control over their lives by warding off bad luck.



CHAPTER 6

One of Chiyo's duties as the most junior geisha in the *okiya* is to stay up late into the night, waiting for Hatsumomo to come home from entertaining men, so that Chiyo can help her undress. While waiting for Hatsumomo one evening, Chiyo notices a bar of light coming from Granny's room. The light reminds Chiyo of how the light would stream through her mother's window. With a pang of sadness, Chiyo wonders if her mother is still alive.

On another night, a man whom Chiyo thinks looks like a workman comes into the *okiya*. A few minutes later, Hatsumomo arrives. Hatsumomo says that she has yet to make Chiyo's life really miserable, but if Chiyo ever mentions to anyone that a man came to the *okiya*, then all that will change. Hatsumomo and the man go into a private room. Too young to understand what they're doing, Chiyo is surprised to hear the occasional moan coming from the room.

Once a week, Hatsumomo and the man – who is a chef at a nearby noodle restaurant – come to the *okiya* and shut themselves in a room. All the maids know what they're doing, but no one tells Mother or Granny, for fear that Hatsumomo will take revenge on all the maids. Though geisha are allowed boyfriends, Mother would be angry to learn that Hatsumomo was spending her time with him rather than entertaining paying customers. Moreover, if Hatsumomo's male clients ever found out that Hatsumomo was seeing this man, then they might think less of her for carrying on with a noodle joint chef.

On another night, Hatsumomo comes home drunk with her geisha friend Korin. Hatsumomo shows Korin a beautiful kimono that belongs to a geisha she dislikes named Mameha. Hatsumomo explains that she blackmailed Mameha's maid into stealing it for her. Hatsumomo brings out some ink and tells Chiyo to write on the kimono. Though she feels sorry to destroy such a beautiful piece of clothing, Chiyo does as she is told so as not to anger Hatsumomo. As Chiyo makes a mark, a maid comes out of a room and sees her do it. Hatsumomo makes a lunging motion at the maid with her arm, scaring the maid back into her room.

Hatsumomo and Korin walk Chiyo to Mameha's home so that she can return the ruined kimono. Chiyo knocks on the door and gives the kimono to the maid. Just as the door closes, Chiyo glimpses Mameha. Chiyo notices that Mameha has a perfect, oval face with smooth and delicate features.

The light acts as a symbolic reminder of Chiyo's childhood. Light in novels often represents truth or epiphany, and here in this world of appearance, the beam of light transports Chiyo back to the simpler, less artificial world of her home. In this way, the light brings her back to the truth, a place where she has a real mother rather than a fake "Mother."



The novel has yet to reveal to either Chiyo or the reader what role sex plays in the life of a geisha. Many (Western) readers unfamiliar with the geisha's role in society might simply assume that geisha are prostitutes, which is not the case—although this very novel often helps perpetuate that stereotype.



The unwritten prohibition against boyfriends is another instance of geisha having little control over their personal or professional lives. Because they are discouraged from having sexual relations with men of their choosing, geisha have little chance at finding love and building a meaningful, romantic relationship with another person. Thus, we are beginning to see that love for a geisha is an unattainable fantasy, and sex is just another commodity.



Chiyo feels remorse not because the kimono belongs to someone else, but because she doesn't want to destroy a beautiful object. Chiyo's anxiety over beauty's destruction shows that she has not yet accepted that all beautiful things must come to an end. Over the course of the novel, she will realize that humans can do nothing to prevent beauty from eventually fading, a lesson that will help her come to terms with the reality of death.



Mameha, like Hatsumomo, is a beautiful geisha—but, as we already know from the example of Hatsumomo, we shouldn't rush to conclude that there is an intrinsic relationship between Mameha's attractive appearance and an attractive inner personality.



The next day, after Chiyo returns to the *okiya* from school, Mother and Granny tell Hatsumomo and Chiyo that they had a visit from Mameha. Before Mother can say anything else, Hatsumomo says in an exasperated tone that Chiyo was the one who ruined the kimono. Auntie walks over and says that Chiyo didn't do it, and that everyone knows Hatsumomo hates Mameha because Mameha is more successful than Hatsumomo. Mother says no one believes Hatsumomo's story, but that a maid did see Chiyo making the mark, so Chiyo will pay for the damages.

Granny says that they should beat Chiyo for breaking the rules, and Auntie offers to do it. Auntie takes Chiyo away and tells her that the kimono will be added to Chiyo's debt. Auntie explains that when Chiyo begins working as a geisha, most of her earnings will go to the *okiya* to pay back any expenses she incurred while there: food, lodging, doctor visits. Auntie says if Chiyo doesn't become a geisha, then she'll never make enough money to pay back her debts. If this happens, then she'll end up like Auntie – a maid who spent her entire life paying back the debts on a pitiful maid's salary.

Auntie explains that Granny adopted Mother and Auntie with the hopes that they would become geisha. Mother was good-looking as a younger woman and became a relatively successful geisha, but Auntie was a failure because of her bad looks and lack of grace. One time, Granny beat Auntie so violently that she broke Auntie's hip. After that, Auntie stopped being a geisha. Auntie says that's why *she's* the one who's going to beat Chiyo – so Granny doesn't hurt Chiyo and ruin her chances at becoming a geisha.

As Auntie beats her with a pole, Chiyo feels like her life can't get any worse. Every time the pole hits her bottom, Chiyo sees Hatsumomo smiling down at her. In tears at the end of the beating, Chiyo lies on the ground while Hatsumomo walks over. Angry that she has to suffer for Hatsumomo's actions, Chiyo demands to know where her sister is. Hatsumomo smiles softly, tells Chiyo that her sister is at a *yorou-ya*, and gives her the address. She then gives Chiyo a shove with her foot and walks off.

*Mother's actions show that she both knows the truth about Hatsumomo's action and does not care about that truth. Mother is willing to lie and obscure the truth in order to keep Hatsumomo happy, because Hatsumomo is the principal earner in the *okiya*. For Mother, money and profit are more important than truth and fairness*



*Auntie's explanation reveals that Chiyo's status at the *okiya* is somewhere between a slave and indentured servant. Sold against her will to the *okiya*, Chiyo is now forced to work until she pays off her debts. If Chiyo never becomes a geisha, however, then she will never be able to pay her debts, effectively making her a slave for life. Auntie's explanation thus reveals the full extent of Tanaka's betrayal. He not only separated Chiyo from her family and home, but also effectively sold her into slavery.*



Auntie's personality contrasts most directly with Mother's. Mother hides her greed and lack of concern for others under the appearance of elegant clothing and the name "Mother," whereas Auntie's appearance of cruelty – her willingness to beat Chiyo – is actually an act of compassion meant to save Chiyo from an even more brutal punishment.



Though Hatsumomo's frank disclosure of Satsu's location might seem out of character, we should remember that appearances are rarely as they seem in this novel. If Hatsumomo appears kind, then she mostly likely has an ulterior motive. Hatsumomo is basically a "flat" character, and we never see her humanized or portrayed sympathetically.



CHAPTER 7

Having never heard of a *jourou-ya* before, Chiyo asks Auntie what the word means the next day. Auntie says that it's the sort of place Hatsumomo will end up if she gets what she deserves. Chiyo wants to look for Satsu at the address but, as part of her punishment, she can't leave the *okiya* for fifty days except to go to school. To help pass the time, Chiyo gets back at Hatsumomo by putting pigeon droppings in her makeup.

While still barred from leaving the *okiya*, Chiyo receives an order one night from a senior maid to go out to give Hatsumomo her shamisen (instrument). Chiyo decides that this is her chance to see Satsu. Not telling the maid about the punishment, Chiyo goes to do the errand. Chiyo brings the shamisen to the teahouse where Hatsumomo is entertaining, and gives the instrument to a maid who works there. From there, Chiyo goes to the address that Hatsumomo gave her. When she enters the district where the *jourou-ya* is located, Chiyo sees women wearing kimono with their obis tied in front. Though Chiyo doesn't know it at the time, only prostitutes wear their obis in the front. Since prostitutes have to untie their obis all night, they don't bother tying them up in the back.

Soon after Chiyo finds the *jourou-ya* and steps inside, Satsu comes down the stairs. Her lips are painted a garish red and her skin is pale, and she has her obi tied in the front. When she sees Chiyo, she lets out a cry. She pulls Chiyo into a room and says that they must be quiet because Satsu will get a beating if the mistress of the *jourou-ya* finds out Chiyo came to see her. They hug, and Satsu strokes her hair in a way that reminds Chiyo of their mother. As Chiyo begins to cry, Satsu says she can't live in this place any longer. Over the last few months, Satsu has saved up enough money to run away. She plans to catch a train out of the city, and says Chiyo should come with her. They agree to meet five days from now at one a.m., near the famous Minamiz theater.

Chiyo runs back to the *okiya* and is happy to find everyone asleep and no one looking for her. But then Chiyo notices movement in a side room. Thinking it's a rat, she goes to investigate, only to find Hatsumomo on her back with her boyfriend between her legs. Hatsumomo glances at Chiyo, but the boyfriend doesn't realize she's there. Chiyo runs back to the spot where she usually waits for Hatsumomo to come home. Hatsumomo's boyfriend soon emerges from the room and angrily says he's tired of sneaking around, and that he's not coming back tomorrow. Hatsumomo pleads with him to stay, but he walks out.

Auntie's comment foreshadows that Satsu might have it even worse than Chiyo. Chiyo's revenge also reverses the beautifying function of makeup. While makeup is an artifice that both conceals and enhances one's true features, the pigeon dung symbolically brings out the truth of Hatsumomo's personality by making Hatsumomo's appearance (and smell) as unappealing as her inner self.



*Chiyo's disobedience shows that she is only willing to conform to the rules of the *okiya* when it suits her. As a young girl, Chiyo still tries to take control over her life. Despite being brought to the *okiya* against her will, she does whatever she can to resist her situation, not letting anyone put restrictions on her. Satsu appears to work at a brothel, which once again emphasizes Tanaka's betrayal. He might have seemed like a kind man, but he actually sold Satsu, a young teenager, into the sex trade against her will.*



In Yoroido, Satsu was not responsible enough to even make a cup of tea, but now she has clearly grown into a resourceful and strong-willed young woman—a result of surviving what we can only imagine to be the traumatic experience of working at the brothel. While Satsu cried on the train and when they met Ms. Fidget, now Chiyo is the one crying. In this way, Satsu has quickly matured and transformed into an effective substitute for Chiyo's mother, comforting her as a good mother would do.



The boyfriend's reasons for leaving indicate that he is fed up with the artifices and lies of the geisha world. By rejecting the deception and hiding, he is in effect rejecting Hatsumomo's life as a geisha, which revolves around hiding her skin under artificial makeup, her body under layers of clothing, and her cruelty under the appearance of politeness. On the other hand, it's entirely possible that he was just using Hatsumomo for sex, and abandons her when it becomes inconvenient for him.



Taking her anger out on Chiyo, Hatsumomo says that Chiyo wasn't at the *okiya* when she came home. Hatsumomo accuses Chiyo of going to see her sister, and says that she knows Chiyo must have made plans to run away with Satsu. To Chiyo's surprise, Hatsumomo then gives her some money and says that she hopes their escape is a success, because she hopes never to see Chiyo again. After stuffing the money into Chiyo's kimono, Hatsumomo looks down at Chiyo with a motherly gaze. But before Chiyo can react, Hatsumomo viciously grabs Chiyo's hair and shouts at her, pulling her towards Mother's room.

Waking up all the maids, Hatsumomo bangs on Mother's door until she comes out. Hatsumomo says she saw Chiyo selling Hatsumomo's emerald brooch to a man near the *okiya*. Chiyo says that Hatsumomo is a liar who is just trying to get revenge on her because she saw Hatsumomo with her boyfriend, who left just a few minutes ago. Mother has the maids search Chiyo and they find the money. Though Chiyo doubts that Mother actually believes Hatsumomo's story, Mother says that the price of the gem will be added to Chiyo's debt.

Mother then turns to Hatsumomo and accuses her of having her boyfriend over. When Hatsumomo denies it, Mother makes the maids hold Hatsumomo's arms apart. Mother pulls Hatsumomo's kimono open and sticks her fingers between her legs. To Chiyo's surprise, Hatsumomo doesn't resist. When Mother pulls her fingers out, they are wet. Mother draws back her arm and slaps Hatsumomo, leaving a streak of moisture on her face.

CHAPTER 8

To stop Chiyo from leaving again, Mother has the maids lock the front door gates every night. With the doors locked, Chiyo lies awake for the next few nights wondering how she will escape the *okiya* to meet Satsu. On the day before Chiyo and Satsu plan to run away, Chiyo washes the wood floors in the maids' room. While she cleans, the soapy **water** snakes across the room. The sight of the water flowing makes Chiyo daydream of flowing to the second floor and then to the roof. Chiyo suddenly remembers that she can get onto the roof of the *okiya*, but she doesn't know how she'll escape once she gets up there.

Like Mother, Hatsumomo adopts a "motherly gaze" in order to hide her true, selfish intentions. Satsu, by contrast, is genuinely motherly, comforting Chiyo as she cries. Mother and Hatsumomo use the appearance of motherliness as an illusion or artifice to get what they want, while Satsu acts with true motherly compassion in order to comfort her sister.



Once again, Mother's actions reveal that she cares more about money than about the truth. Chiyo's accusation of Hatsumomo also shows that she is a defiant young girl who isn't willing to suffer any injustices without a fight. Yet, in order to succeed as a geisha in her new life, she will learn to curb this personality trait—ultimately making her less ready to assert her own will and desires.



*Hatsumomo's lack of resistance shows that – after years of being a sexual object – she has internalized the belief that her body belongs to Mother and the *okiya*. With the slap Mother humiliates Hatsumomo for acting on her desires – arguably an act of self-determination. Mother wants Hatsumomo to remain a sexual object for the pleasure of the men she entertains, not a woman in control of her own body.*



*Earlier Chiyo said that water find its way through any crack, and here she learns that lesson firsthand by watching the water flow. By meditating on water, Chiyo realizes that she too can find a way to escape the *okiya* by slipping out through the roof. Water here represents Chiyo's adaptability and ability to respond to her environment in order to take control over her own life's path. Like a river, she won't be dammed – she will try to break past the obstacles.*



The following evening when everyone goes to sleep, Chiyo sneaks up to the roof. She swings her legs over the side of the slanted roof and hears people talking in the street below. Chiyo tries to gently slide herself down the roof, but she quickly gathers more speed than expected. Unable to stop herself, she slips off the roof and lands in the street outside the *okiya*. In a daze and with her entire body in pain, Chiyo sees Auntie come out of the *okiya*. More angry than Chiyo ever has ever seen her before, Auntie pulls Chiyo inside and begins to beat her mercilessly, telling her that she will never be a geisha now.

The next morning a doctor comes and sets Chiyo's broken arm. In terrible pain, Chiyo goes to Mother's room. Mother says that she won't invest any more money in a girl who might just run away. Mother says that Chiyo must now pay back the substantial debts she owes by working as a maid.

In the months after Chiyo's failed escape attempt, everyone in the *okiya* ignores her, treating her as if she isn't even there. All that winter, she wonders what happened to Satsu and if her mother and father are still alive. During this time, Chiyo's only comfort comes from imagining herself returning to Yoroido and running along the path to her house. But something always stirs her from her daydreams, causing her to return to her lonely reality.

When spring comes, a package arrives for Chiyo from Mr. Tanaka. Auntie takes the box and opens it, revealing mortuary tablets from her family's Buddhist shrine. There is also a note from Mr. Tanaka that Auntie reads aloud to Chiyo. The note begins with Mr. Tanaka musing on how the spring's beautiful "flowers that grow where old ones have withered serve to remind us that death will one day come to us all." Mr. Tanaka then writes that six weeks after Chiyo left for Kyoto, her mother died, followed soon after by her father. Mr. Tanaka writes that he knows Chiyo will succeed as a geisha and turn her suffering into beauty. At the end of the letter, he briefly mentions that Satsu arrived in Yoroido last winter and immediately ran off with the Sugi boy.

As Auntie reads the letter, Chiyo feels the tears streaming down her face. Hearing that both of her parents died, Chiyo feels as if her mind is a broken vase. Pitying Chiyo and her grief, Auntie helps Chiyo place the tablets on a shelf near the base of the stairwell. Auntie tells Chiyo never to forget her parents, because they are all that's left of her childhood.

Auntie's violent response reveals her own dissatisfaction with life. Unhappy that she has been forced into life as a maid, she takes out her frustration on Chiyo when she sees Chiyo going down the same path. Thus, Auntie might be physically beating Chiyo, but she is also expressing her hatred and anger at the horrible circumstances that force young girls to pick between life as a maid and life as a geisha.



With her debts so high, Chiyo now must expect to work as a maid for her entire life—an echo of Auntie's fate. Auntie had broken her hip before the end of her geisha career, and now Chiyo breaks her arm.



*Chiyo's failed escape attempt seems to have broken her spirit along with her arm. Chiyo gives up on trying to leave the *okiya* and instead retreats into her fantasies, as she did as a child. Chiyo seems to have emotionally and psychologically backslid – she is now more like the past child running away from her grief, and less like the resilient girl looking for escape.*



Tanaka's letter shows that he is more misguided than cruel. He appears to care for Chiyo, and may have actually believed that selling her and Satsu into slavery was the right thing to do. Tanaka's poetic line about the flowers also introduces a key aspect in the theme of Beauty, Artifice, and Truth. As Tanaka recognizes, all beautiful things are reminders of death because they remind us that beauty can never last. While this makes beauty inherently melancholic, Chiyo will adapt this idea in order to find comfort in the notion that, like beauty, suffering too is only passing.



Auntie's claim about Chiyo's childhood suggests that because Chiyo has undergone one of life's major struggles – the loss of one's parents – she has now lost the innocence of childhood.



CHAPTER 9

In the present, Sayuri interrupts the narrative to reiterate that the afternoon she first met Mr. Tanaka was the very best and the very worst afternoon of her life. Up until getting the letter, meeting Mr. Tanaka had only brought her suffering, but Mr. Tanaka had also given her the opportunity to leave Yoroido, which allowed her to live a fuller – if also harder – life. Sayuri says that for the six months she spent in Kyoto before getting the letter, she dreamed of returning home and never fully committed to her new life in Gion. But Sayuri says that Mr. Tanaka's letter started her on the path to becoming a geisha.

The fact that this afternoon was both Chiyo's best and worst illustrates her nuanced belief in the value of suffering. While a younger and more immature Chiyo might have been unable to see the positive side of leaving Yoroido, the more mature Chiyo sees that although suffering is painful, it can be worth the reward of a fuller life. In this way, Sayuri suggests that she would rather go through the suffering of becoming a geisha rather than live a peaceful but ultimately boring life in Yoroido.



For an entire year after getting the letter, Chiyo lived in a daze of grief and loneliness. Chiyo would spend her days feeling guilty that she wasn't there with her parents in their final days. A full year after receiving the letter, Chiyo dreams of a bearded man who opens a window with a loud clack. Suddenly waking up, Chiyo feels the dream stirring something inside her, making the world of the morning seem altogether different than the one of the previous night.

The novel quickly passes over the year that Chiyo spent mourning her family. This sudden jump forward in time disorients the reader in a way that reflects Chiyo's own disorientation at that time. Chiyo's dream also foreshadows how her life will forever change after she meets an older man in the coming scene.



With the dream buzzing around in her head, Chiyo remembers how last year she flicked a moth off her arm, causing it to land on the ground dead. Touched by its small insect death, Chiyo wrapped the moth in a rag and placed it under the foundation of one of the buildings in the *okiya*. She hadn't thought of the moth again until this morning after having the dream. After retrieving it from under the foundation, she unwraps the rag to see the moth utterly unchanged. Sayuri feels that her existence is "as unstable as a **stream**, changing in every way," but that the moth is "like a piece of stone, changing not at all."

Chiyo's metaphor of the stream expands on the symbolism of water. She describes the stream as having little control over its own movement: the stream twists and turns, having no say over which direction it takes. Likewise, Chiyo has felt her life governed by external forces over which she – like the stream – has no control. Sold into slavery, separated from her sister, and mourning the deaths of her parents, Chiyo feels as if she has little control or stability.



When Chiyo touches the moth's beautiful velvety wing, the entire moth crumbles into dust. Chiyo suddenly realizes that death is inevitable, and that there is nothing she can do to change that fact that her parents are dead. Chiyo feels that for the past year she was facing backward, but now she decides to face the future. With the world open ahead of her, Chiyo feels as if she needs a sign to tell her which direction she should take.

The crumbling of the moth's beautiful wings helps Chiyo realize the truth of Mr. Tanaka's letter about the inevitability of death. Here, the moth crumbles into dust in the same way flowers wither in winter. Seeing such a beautiful thing turn to ash so quickly, Chiyo reaches the mature understanding of death as a fact unable to be avoided or deterred.



At that moment, Auntie tells Chiyo to go to the geisha school to bring Hatsumomo a hair ornament. Hatsumomo is at the school because geisha continue to take lessons for their whole life. At the school, Hatsumomo gestures to all the young girls and tells Chiyo that everyone here will become a geisha except for her. Though Chiyo never had any real interest in becoming a geisha, she feels a wave of sadness overcome her. Chiyo thinks about how a geisha's life of parties would be so much better than the drudgery of being a maid. As she walks back to the *okiya*, she sees people running to and fro with so much purpose. Feeling her own lack of purpose in life, she sits down by the Shirakawa **Stream** that runs through Kyoto and begins to cry.

While Chiyo cries, a man comes up to her and says that it's too nice a day to be upset. Ordinarily, men in Gion wouldn't stop to console or even talk to a lowly maid, but this man speaks to her as if she were a woman of high standing. For a moment, Chiyo imagines a world in which she is treated with fairness and kindness. When she raises her **eyes** to look at the face of the man who spoke, she sees a noble, meditative face like that of Buddha.

When a geisha standing near the man calls him Chairman and tells him not to bother with the maid, the Chairman tells the geisha to go on ahead without him. Noticing that Chiyo can't bear to look at him in the **eyes**, the Chairman says that she must have suffered a lot in this world. Thinking that he understands her, Chiyo looks into his eyes and sees him looking at her as a musician looks at an instrument, as if he is looking right through her. The Chairman takes out a coin and wraps it in a **handkerchief**, telling her to buy herself a shaved ice with syrup from the nearby vendor. Chiyo feels that the bundle – which looks like the moth's shroud – is the sign she needs about her future.

Chiyo watches the Chairman walk away before getting the shaved ice. She sits with the treat and thinks that if she were a geisha, then a man as kind as the Chairman might spend time with her. Until this moment, she never envied the life of a geisha. Now, however, she understands that to become a geisha is nothing in itself other than a stepping stone towards being with a man like the Chairman – or even with the Chairman himself.

Chiyo's melancholy anticipates an important facet in the Destiny vs. Self-Determination theme. The word "destiny" commonly refers to the hidden power that controls or shapes a person's life. However, we can also think of destiny as synonymous with one's purpose in life, a definition of destiny that the character Nobu will give a few chapters later. At the moment, Chiyo feels as if she has no purpose or destiny since her life is aimless, not moving toward any particular event in the future.



Because of the man's similarity to the man in the dream, it seems almost like destiny that they meet. As the novel progresses, however, Golden will provide contradictory evidence on whether destiny, accident, or people's wills are determining the significant events in Sayuri's life.



The bundle's similarity to the moth's shroud is another piece of evidence in favor of the idea that destiny brought Chiyo and the Chairman together. Unlike most people, the Chairman says nothing about Sayuri's eyes, perhaps indicating that he sees beyond their externally beautiful appearance and into the deepest, most ineffable parts of her soul. As we find out in the second to last chapter, this soul-searching is exactly what he's doing. At this point, however, we are reminded of how Chiyo misjudged Mr. Tanaka's "wisdom" from looking at his face, and so perhaps skeptical of the Chairman.



Chiyo's realization about being a geisha gives her life purpose, and gives her some control over it. No longer aimlessly following Mother's orders, she determines her own goals and begins working towards realizing her desire. She is taking a step towards self-determination, but ironically it is a self built entirely around a man and the desire to obtain a position as an elite entertainer of men.



Chiyo takes the change left over from buying the shaved ice and goes to the nearest temple. She throws the coins into the offertory box and prays to the gods to allow her to become a geisha so that she could attract the notice of a man like the Chairman. After praying, she tucks the Chairman's **handkerchief** into her sleeve and goes back to the *okiya*.

Chiyo's prayer, however, shows that she still believes becoming a geisha is out of her hands. Since she has lived the last year like a stream with no control over its direction, she imagines that she cannot actually make the changes in her life necessary for bringing her closer to the Chairman. Instead, she prays that the gods will make those changes for her.



CHAPTER 10

One morning months later, Chiyo smells something horrible coming from Granny's room. She runs to get Auntie, who goes inside the room to find Granny dead. Her electric heater had malfunctioned and electrocuted her. Her face had landed on the hot wire, which was the source of the smell.

In a morbid kind of way, Granny's gruesome death is consistent with her horrible personality. The horrible smell coming from her room could be understood as metaphor for her "ugly" soul leaving her body.



For the next few weeks, everyone in the *okiya* prepares for the funeral ceremonies. For days, people come to the *okiya* to pay their respects to Granny. It's Chiyo's responsibility to show visitors into the reception room. On around the third or fourth day, the geisha Mameha arrives and asks Chiyo for her name. Worried that Mameha somehow found out that she was the one who ruined the kimono, Chiyo expects Mameha to scold her. But instead, Mameha looks into Chiyo's **eyes** and compliments their color. Chiyo feels Mameha looking deep inside of her, as if she were concentrating on something in the distance.

*Granny's death – as gruesome as it was – seems to have no emotional effect on anyone in the *okiya*. Though Auntie and Mother were her adopted children, they do not express genuine sadness or sympathy for her. Instead, the *okiya* simply goes through the motions of the funeral ceremony. Here, there is no love or mourning, just ritual.*



A month after the funeral, a messenger arrives at the *okiya* and tells Chiyo that she should go to Mameha's apartment tomorrow afternoon. At her apartment the next day, Mameha offers Chiyo tea. She says that Hatsumomo must treat Chiyo terribly, because Hatsumomo is jealous of anyone she thinks is prettier than her. When Chiyo says that she is no rival to Hatsumomo, Mameha explains that the mistress of an *okiya* usually adopts her best geisha as a daughter. Mameha says Ms. Nitta (Mother's real last name) would never adopt Hatsumomo, because then Hatsumomo would have complete freedom to do whatever she wants in the *okiya*, possibly even finding a way to kick Mother out. Mameha says that Hatsumomo fears that Chiyo, with her attractiveness and beautiful **eyes**, could become a good enough geisha that Mother would adopt her instead.

*Mameha confirms that familial relations at the *okiya* are based not on bloodlines or love, but on greed and material desire. As Mameha explains, Mother will decide which geisha to adopt based on her account books, not her heart. Thus, in the world of the geisha, even familial love and relationships are just as much an illusion as erotic and romantic love seems to be. Men pay to be with the geisha for entertainment, just as a geisha pays to have security as the daughter of the *okiya*. It's all about the material, not the maternal.*



Mameha tells Chiyo that she must try to become a geisha again if she ever wants to increase her standing in life. Mameha also says that Chiyo has yet to make use of all the **water** in her personality. Mameha says that people with water in the personalities “flow where the landscape of our lives carries us.” Mameha says that in Chiyo’s case, her life is flowing towards becoming a geisha.

Mameha suggests that Chiyo read an almanac to find out what day would be most fortuitous for bringing up the subject with Mother. An almanac is a book of complicated charts that people use to read their fortunes. Thinking about the almanac, Chiyo begins to think that people’s lives are controlled by external forces over which we have no control. Chiyo thinks that people must try to understand the ways of the universe so that they aren’t always swimming against the **currents**, but instead flowing with them.

CHAPTER 11

In the present, Sayuri explains about how one of the main hurdles to becoming a geisha is finding an “older sister.” By the time a girl is finally ready to make her debut as an apprentice, she needs to have established a relationship with a more experienced geisha, who is called an older sister. The older sister takes her younger one around the city, introducing her around Gion to her customers and patrons. In this way, apprentice geisha get experience while experienced geisha receive a portion of the apprentices’ income. Chiyo, however, had no one to be her older sister. Hatsumomo would never have done it, and few other geisha would risk Hatsumomo’s wrath by taking Chiyo on as a sister.

A few weeks after Chiyo’s encounter with Mameha, Mameha arrives at the *okiya* to speak with Mother. Chiyo cleans outside the reception room where Mother entertains guests so that Chiyo can overhear their conversation. Mameha tells Mother that she remembers meeting a beautiful and graceful girl named Chiyo at the geisha school two years ago. Since she hasn’t seen Chiyo in such a long time, Mameha says she’s come to the *okiya* to see if Chiyo is sick. Mother says Chiyo is perfectly healthy but stopped going to school because she was poorly suited for geisha life. Mameha acts surprised, saying that she thought Chiyo had such potential. Mameha says that she was even hoping to become Chiyo’s older sister.

Mameha’s comment about Chiyo’s personality draws the connection between water and destiny. Mameha suggests that water has little control over its direction in life and must simply follow set pathways. Thus Mameha suggests that destiny preordains Chiyo’s future.



*While Mameha’s faith in the almanac suggests that she believes that hidden powers shape our lives, Chiyo’s belief is a little more ambiguous. The external forces that Chiyo refers to could be spiritual forces, but they could also be the real, human forces that have affected her life so far. From Mr. Tanaka selling her to the *okiya* to the Chairman’s kindness, people’s actions irrevocably change the course of her life.*



Once again, familial relationships in the world of the geisha consist of economic rather than biological or emotional bonds. The familial-sounding title of “older sister” is simply an artifice that softens the economic reality: geisha “sisterhood” is actually just an economic transaction where younger geisha pay older geisha for the right to gain access to their cliental. Through this “sisterhood” younger geisha gain experience and older geisha make money.



Mameha’s lies show that she is an artful deceiver, and at this point, Mameha’s motives for helping Chiyo are unknown. Since we now see that Mameha is a convincing liar, we should be skeptical of what reasons Mameha gives in the following passage for taking Chiyo on as an apprentice.



Shocked that Mameha shows interest in one of her maids, Mother asks why she would want to take on Chiyo as her apprentice. Mameha says that she thinks Chiyo's **eyes** will make her one of the most successful geisha in Gion. Mother responds that the Depression has hurt the *okiya*, so she would be taking a large risk investing more money in Chiyo by letting her become a geisha. Mother explains that Chiyo already has very high debts to pay. Mameha says that she thinks Chiyo will pay off any debts by the time she's twenty, despite the city being in the midst of the Depression.

Persuaded by Mameha's confidence in Chiyo's ability to bring in money, Mother suggests a deal. She says that the *okiya* will pay Mameha only half of what she usually gets for being an older sister, but if Chiyo pays back all her debts by the age of twenty, then the *okiya* will pay Mameha the additional amount plus another fifty percent over her normal rate. Mameha agrees, but says she wants to see Chiyo's debt first.

At that moment, Auntie tells Chiyo to go out to do an errand. When Chiyo comes back, Mameha is already gone. Chiyo goes to Mother's room, where Mother asks her why Mameha would want to be her older sister. At that moment, Hatsumomo comes into the room and casually says that Mameha is just trying to annoy Hatsumomo as revenge for the ruined kimono. Hatsumomo says Mother should let Mameha try to mentor Chiyo, since Mameha's plan will fail if she hopes to ever turn Chiyo into a successful geisha. Hatsumomo even says that Pumpkin, who is Hatsumomo's younger sister, will be a better geisha after she has "sharpened her claws" by competing with Chiyo. Mother smiles at the thought of the two girls competing to make money for the *okiya*.

CHAPTER 12

The next afternoon Mameha summons Chiyo to her apartment. Mameha says that if Chiyo is going to be her younger sister, then she must do whatever Mameha says without question. Since Chiyo feels so much gratitude to Mameha for opening up the way to becoming a geisha, Chiyo agrees to Mameha's conditions, promising not to disappoint her.

Mameha's remark about Chiyo's eyes implies that Mameha wants to be Chiyo's older sister because she thinks Chiyo will make a lot of money. After all, the more Chiyo makes, the more her older sister will earn. We don't know it yet, but these aren't her true reasons—and thus Mameha uses Chiyo's spectacular eyes as a veil to conceal her actual motives. In this way, Chiyo's eyes become associated with deception.



The fact that Mameha eagerly agrees to Mother's terms before even having a chance to see Chiyo's debts suggests that she might have motives other than making money for taking Chiyo on as an apprentice. Why else would Mameha take such a financial risk during the Great Depression? Her true reasons will only be revealed at the end of the novel.



The reason Hatsumomo gives for why Mameha would help Chiyo reveals more about Hatsumomo's character than it does about Mameha's motives. Hatsumomo is so self-centered that she immediately assumes that Mameha's motives revolve around her. Additionally Hatsumomo, who is no stranger to taking revenge, jumps to the conclusion that Mameha is being malicious and vengeful towards Hatsumomo rather than kind and helpful to Chiyo.



Chiyo's gratitude to Mameha has some negative consequences—she agrees to do whatever Mameha commands her to do, thereby giving up her independence and autonomy. Chiyo's sense of indebtedness will cause her to give up self-determination again during the climax of the novel.



In the following days, Chiyo begins geisha training. Chiyo explains that the word “geisha” means “artist,” so her schooling consists of learning to sing, dance, and play a variety of instruments. Throughout the lessons, the teachers also correct the girls on their manners and posture. Geisha must learn how to maintain proper “comportment and behavior” around the men they entertain. Chiyo’s last lesson of the day is always the tea ceremony. During the tea ceremony, geisha serve tea in a very traditional manner, using specific cups and serving methods. After a long day of training, Chiyo finds the serenity of the tea ceremony as rejuvenating as a long night’s sleep.

At the beginning of her training, Chiyo and Pumpkin practice shamisen together at the *okiya* everyday, laughing and enjoying each other’s company. But one day Hatsumomo finds them together practicing. She tells Pumpkin never to say another word to Chiyo again, because she is now her rival in the house.

The next time Chiyo visits Mameha’s apartment, Mameha says Chiyo should strive for success, not popularity. Hatsumomo and Mameha are equally popular in Gion, but Mameha is more successful because she earned her independence. A geisha only earns her independence when the mistress of the *okiya* adopts her or if she earns enough money to assemble her own collection of kimono. Geisha kimono are very expensive, and geisha need many of them to wear throughout the year to keep the men interested.

Mameha says the only way a geisha can make enough money to earn her independence is by having a wealthy *danna*. Chiyo thinks about how some lower-class geisha soil their reputations by making themselves available to men on a nightly basis. But it is appropriate for a well-respected man to offer to be a geisha’s *danna*. *Danna* pay a geisha’s expenses and give her lavish gifts over a substantial period of time in exchange for certain “privileges” with the geisha.

Mameha explains that Hatsumomo hasn’t had a *danna* in a very long time. Generally, the female managers of teahouses act as mediators between a geisha and a potential *danna*. Since Hatsumomo is always rude to the teahouse managers, they always sabotage her whenever a man shows interest in becoming her *danna*. Without a *danna*, Hatsumomo has never made enough money to leave the *okiya*.

Though the word “geisha” means “artist,” geisha are just as much the art itself as they are the artist. They must not only entertain men with their knowledge of music and dance, but also be themselves beautiful and graceful objects for the men to gaze upon with pleasure and delight. Chiyo’s appreciation of the tea ceremony shows how some ceremonies and traditions can be beneficial, providing a soothing regularity and a relaxing escapism.



Hatsumomo enforces the culture of competition and rivalry present among geisha, thereby preventing a real affection and sisterhood from developing between the girls.



The difference between popularity and success reveals how even Hatsumomo’s accomplishments are illusory. Though she might seem like one of the most successful geisha in Kyoto, this is merely a superficial accomplishment. True success only comes through independence – a lesson Chiyo will learn to appreciate over the course of the novel.



*For the first time, it becomes clear that while some women use the geisha title to conceal the fact they are prostitutes, most true geisha refuse to have sex with clients unless the men go through the ritualized process of becoming a *danna*. Thus, according to Mameha, a geisha wins her independence through sex.*



*Mameha’s explanation shows how the world of the geisha is traditionally run entirely by women. In a Japanese society where women have few avenues for personal or economic independence, women can gain autonomy by running *okiya* or teahouses.*



Mameha tells Chiyo that dance is the most revered art form, and the most important one for seducing men into wanting to be her *danna*. Though Chiyo doesn't feel she has any natural talent for dance, her determination to become a geisha makes her work hard in class. Yet she still feels as if she fails to impart her movements with any emotion. One night she thinks of her family and feels a melancholy heaviness come upon her. She then casually moves her arm, and realizes that she has done so with great dignity. Chiyo discovers that when her body feels heavy, she can move with greater expressiveness and dignity. From that day on, Chiyo dances as if the Chairman were observing her movements, which gives her dance a deep sense of feeling.

CHAPTER 13

In the spring of 1934, after Chiyo has been training for two years, Mother decides that it's time for Pumpkin to make her debut as an apprentice geisha. Dressed in the kimono of the apprentice, Pumpkin heads out to perform a ceremony with Hatsumomo that will bind them as sisters. Seeing them going off, Chiyo feels jealous that she can't make her debut as well.

When Chiyo goes to Mameha's apartment a few weeks later, Mameha says that she has truly grown into a lovely woman over the last two years. On an outing together, Mameha tells Chiyo that she will have her debut in three weeks, but first she must learn how to use a geisha's most powerful asset: her **eyes**. Mameha says that geisha can send men messages just by looking at them. Mameha tells her that a true geisha can make a man faint just by looking at him.

As they continue to walk, they pass a young man carrying boxes, and Mameha tells Chiyo to look at him in a way that will make him drop his boxes. She then walks off to watch from a distance. Chiyo keeps her **eyes** away from the man until they brush past each other. Chiyo quickly flicks her eyes up and gazes into the man's eyes. Entranced, the man slips and falls. Chiyo and the man laugh together at his clumsiness before Chiyo helps the man collect his boxes. Chiyo then runs off to meet up with Mameha, who says that Chiyo is as ready to be a geisha as she'll ever be.

That night Chiyo can't sleep. She stays up imagining herself entering a tearoom in an exquisite kimono, turning men's heads. After feeling invisible as a maid in the *okiya*, Chiyo is excited to finally get some attention from the people around her. She imagines pouring the Chairman a cup of tea while feeling his **eyes** peering at her face.

Chiyo's realization about her dance movements recalls Tanaka's belief that she will learn to make beauty out of suffering. In this way, true beauty is melancholic, in the sense that it cannot be an artifice – a mimicry of suffering – but instead it must emanate from a true, internal source of pain. Though some dancers might be able to artificially replicate this appearance of pain, Chiyo will become a greater dancer because her pain is real, thus making her transformation of it more than just an artifice or appearance.



In addition to learning the arts of the geisha, Chiyo has also begun to develop one of the negative characteristics the novel associates with geisha: jealousy. Hatsumomo, for example, is the epitome of this trait. As Chiyo matures and learns more about becoming a geisha, she will have to resist the negative effects geisha life can have on one's personality.



Mameha's view of a geisha's eyes links the symbol of eyes to artifice and deception. According to Mameha, a geisha's eyes can create the illusion that a geisha desires her clients. In this way, Chiyo's eyes, which are very honest and revealing of her personality, contrast with how most geisha use their eyes to deceive.



Chiyo now begins to lose the honesty in her eyes, instead learning how to manipulate men by using the artifice of her beauty and uniqueness. By looking at the man in this way, Chiyo essentially sends him erotic messages that make him trip. Chiyo shows that she retains her good-natured personality, however, by helping him up. Thus, even as she learns to deceive, she still holds onto her kindness.



Still naïve, Chiyo does not yet understand the dangers of becoming an object for the pleasure of men to look at it. As she will learn, if men see her as an object, then they will feel free to use Chiyo's body against her will as an object to fulfill their sexual desires.



CHAPTER 14

In the weeks before her debut, Chiyo goes to a hairdresser to have her hair done in the manner of an apprentice geisha. Since geisha wear extremely elaborate and expensive hairstyles, no geisha goes to a hairstylist more than once a week. Washing their hair would ruin the hairstyle, so geisha often hide the odor by wearing perfume in their hair. Auntie also teaches Chiyo how to wear the geisha's many-layered kimono and put on the traditional makeup.

Finally, the day comes when Mameha and Chiyo perform the ceremony binding them as sisters. The ceremony takes place at a teahouse where a maid brings out a tray with several sake cups. First Chiyo takes three sips from a cup, and then Mameha takes three sips. They do this for three different cups. From this moment on, Chiyo is known as the geisha Sayuri.

Mameha's fortuneteller had helped picked out the name "Sayuri." The name comes from the characters *sa*, meaning "together," *yu*, from the zodiac sign for the hen (in order "to balance the **water** elements in her personality"), and *ri*, meaning "understanding." Sayuri feels odd about her new name, because it feels as if a little girl named Chiyo has been destroyed by the young woman Sayuri.

For the rest of the afternoon, Mameha takes Sayuri around Gion, introducing her to the mistresses at various *okiya* and teahouses. Though Sayuri is exhausted by the end of it, Mameha tells her to prepare for tonight when they will be entertaining men at a party. Sayuri returns to her *okiya* to bathe and dress for the event.

At the party, the men drink heavily, tell jokes, and listen to the geisha tell humorous, somewhat suggestive stories. Mameha tells a story about a male wig maker who overheard her urinate and then wrote her a love letter about "the beautiful tinkling sound more lovely than a waterfall." After Mameha concludes the story, Pumpkin and Hatsumomo come into the teahouse and sit down with the group.

The geisha's hairstyle is in some ways the most deceptive and artificial part of her outfit. Though beautiful, the hair itself is dirty and various perfumes are used to conceal its smell. In this way, we can see how the geisha's physical beauty is more artifice than truth.



The simplicity of the ceremony illustrates that the bonds between people entail more than just simple ritual. To be real sisters, two women must do more than just drink out of the same cup – they must also relate to each other with love and empathy.



Taking on a new name symbolically marks Chiyo's transition into adulthood. As she becomes the adult Sayuri, the child Chiyo (in some ways) disappears—and she loses any link to her past, giving herself totally over to the beautiful and artificial world of the geisha. The process of picking the name once again shows how geisha traditionally rely on fortunetellers to gain some control over their lives.



Mameha's presentation of Sayuri to the head women in the geisha society again shows how women, rather than men, are in charge of geisha culture. In this sexist and oppressive society (at least as Golden portrays it), becoming a geisha is one of the few ways for women to gain some autonomy.



Whether these stories are true or not doesn't matter—what matters is that they entertain the men. In essence, the geisha's job is not to tell the truth, but to entertain. As a result, this scene acts as commentary on the nature of storytelling: entertainment is often more important than truth. Perhaps, then, Sayuri in the present isn't telling the full truth of her memoirs either—she may be embellishing the truth to make a better story. On a more "meta-narrative" level, this idea could be used to interpret Golden's writing as well—he might be exaggerating or embellishing parts of geisha culture to entertain his Western readers.



CHAPTER 15

Hatsumomo laughs and says she just remembered the funniest story about Sayuri. Hatsumomo says she was walking in Gion when she saw the young Sayuri being blown backwards by a gust of wind. Hatsumomo says that Sayuri landed right onto the hood of car. Since the wind had lifted up Sayuri's kimono over her hips, the driver could see her private parts pressed against the windshield. When the men all start laughing, Hatsumomo mock scolds them, saying they shouldn't laugh because Sayuri is like a baby who probably has no hair down there at all. Hatsumomo asks Sayuri if she has any hair, and Sayuri says that she does, pointing to the hair on her head. The men laugh and Hatsumomo glares at Sayuri. At that, Mameha and Sayuri excuse themselves and leave.

Back at the *okiya* after bathing and removing her makeup, Sayuri is talking to Auntie when Hatsumomo comes home and slaps Sayuri across the face. Sayuri is so stunned by the slap that she cannot recall what happens immediately afterward. The next thing she remembers is Hatsumomo yelling at Auntie that if Sayuri ever embarrasses her again in public, she'll slap her on the other side of the face. Sayuri asks how she embarrassed her. Hatsumomo answers that Sayuri knew perfectly well that Hatsumomo wasn't referring to the hair on her head. Before stomping off, Hatsumomo says that she will get Sayuri back for what she did.

The next night, Mameha and Sayuri go to another party, but Hatsumomo and Pumpkin show up shortly after they arrive. Mameha and Sayuri leave so that Hatsumomo won't have a chance to tell more lies about Sayuri and ruin her reputation. When they arrive at another party, Hatsumomo and Pumpkin again arrive a few minutes after them. Outside, Mameha tells Sayuri that they will have to suspend her debut until they can figure out a way to stop Hatsumomo from following them. Otherwise, Hatsumomo will continue to spread rumors wherever they go.

A few weeks later, Sayuri receives a note from Mameha telling her to come to her apartment immediately. At the apartment, Mameha says that her *danna*, a man she calls the Baron, has arrived today from Tokyo. Mameha wants him to meet Sayuri. Mameha leads her to the reception room, where Sayuri kneels before the Baron. Mameha introduces Sayuri to him, but he barely seems to be listening, and doesn't even glance at Sayuri.

Just as Mameha exaggerates to please the men, Hatsumomo makes up a total lie in order to embarrass Sayuri. In this way, storytelling conveys more than just the content of the story. Mameha's story implied that she is so beautiful that men want to hear her urinate, while Hatsumomo's story implies that Sayuri is an ungraceful and indelicate geisha. Thus, when reading Sayuri's memoirs, we should stay attuned to what Sayuri tries to convey beyond the facts of her life story.



Hatsumomo's anger shows the importance of a geisha's public appearance. Geisha rely on cultivating a public image of flawless beauty and perfect gracefulness, so anything that breaks that illusion (for example, being embarrassed by an apprentice geisha) risks undermining the whole facade. For example, if the men ever learn of Hatsumomo's cruel and ugly personality, then they might find her artifice less enchanting.



Hatsumomo's rumors show how little control Sayuri has over her own life. Sayuri's livelihood and success are tied up with how the men in Gion perceive her, so if she gets a bad reputation, then she will lose all hope of becoming a geisha. These rumors and perceptions show how external and human forces – rather than the unknown powers of destiny – are powerful factors in shaping a person's life.



The Baron's reaction to Sayuri shows how some men treat women as insignificant, and not even worthy of being looked at. Since Sayuri's role as a geisha is to be an object for men to gaze upon, the Baron undermines her ability to perform her duties as a geisha by ignoring her. Thus, his neglect makes Sayuri doubt herself and her skills.



The Baron, Mameha, and Sayuri sit together, but the Baron and Mameha do all the talking. Feeling that she has nothing to contribute to the conversation, Sayuri doubts that she will ever become a good enough geisha to keep powerful men like the Baron entertained. At that moment, Sayuri becomes aware of all the magnificent silk wrapped about her body, and feels as if she might drown in beauty. Sayuri thinks that beauty itself is “a kind of painful melancholy.”

Sayuri’s perception of beauty further establishes the link between beauty and suffering. At this moment, Sayuri does not feel she deserves to be in the presence of so much beauty, and so it becomes a “painful melancholy” because it reminds her of her own self-doubts.



CHAPTER 16

A few weeks later, a messenger arrives at the *okiya* and hands Sayuri a note from Mameha that says Sayuri should come to Mameha’s apartment that afternoon. When Sayuri arrives, Mameha gives her one of her most beautiful kimonos to put on. Mameha says they’re going to a sumo match where they will entertain Ken Iwamura and Toshikazu Nobu, the joint directors of the Iwamura Electric company. Mameha says that the match is sold out, so Hatsumomo will have no way to get inside and ruin their time. When they get to the stadium, Sayuri notices that the geisha Korin is there, and she worries that she’ll tell Hatsumomo that Sayuri has arrived.

Hatsumomo has so effectively prevented Sayuri from entertaining men in Gion that Sayuri’s first engagement in weeks must be at a sold-out sumo match, not at the traditional location of the tearoom. As of yet, Sayuri has been unable to adapt to Hatsumomo’s tactics, thereby failing to make use of the flexibility of the “water” in her personality. However, in this and the next chapters, Sayuri will begin to finally start outsmarting Hatsumomo.



Mameha leads Sayuri to the front row of the stadium, where she introduces Sayuri to Nobu. Sayuri sees that Nobu has terrible burn scars on his face that make him look like a “melted candle.” But Sayuri doesn’t stare at Nobu long, because right next to him she recognizes Mr. Tanaka. She can only see the back of Mr. Tanaka’s head, but she notices him immediately. Sayuri thinks that although she would prefer to show her true feelings and yell at Mr. Tanaka for sending her away from her home, she knows she must act like a proper apprentice and pour his tea without spilling it on his legs, or telling him that his fish odor reminds her of home.

Sayuri’s decision to conceal her true feelings marks one of the first times she crafts an illusion in order to conform to the expectations of her male clientele. While a younger Sayuri might have simply spoken her mind, the geisha Sayuri must now reign in her impulses and desires in order to seem like a proper and cordial apprentice. In this way, the traditions that demand geisha not to be confrontational prevent her from acting on her desires.



Mr. Tanaka turns his head towards Sayuri and suddenly Sayuri feels everything around her grow quiet, “as if he were the wind that blew and I were just a cloud carried upon it.” Seeing the man’s face, Sayuri realizes she made a mistake. It is not Tanaka, but the Chairman.

The Chairman’s sudden reappearance suggests that “destiny” might indeed be bringing Sayuri and the Chairman together. At this point, it seems as if unknown, possibly mystical forces are at work in guiding Sayuri to the man she loves.



CHAPTER 17

Sayuri had only seen the Chairman for the briefest moment years ago, but she had spent many evenings holding his **handkerchief** to her cheek and imagining his face, so she feels confident that it is him. Mameha introduces Sayuri to the men, and as Sayuri pours the Chairman his tea, she notices him staring at her. The Chairman asks her if it's her first time at a sumo match, but before she can respond, there's a giant booming and the match begins.

As the men concentrate on the match, Sayuri finds herself staring at Nobu's scars. She had been so preoccupied by the Chairman's presence that she hadn't even realized that Nobu was missing an arm. Though Sayuri didn't know it at the time, Nobu had lost his arm and received the scars while in the army. With an incoming shell heading straight for Nobu's commanding officer, Nobu laid himself over the man and was severely injured as a result. In the present, Sayuri says that if she knew of Nobu's heroism at the time she met him, she would have felt ashamed of herself for feeling repulsed by his injuries.

When the first match ends and the crowd quiets down, Sayuri turns back to the Chairman and says she has never been to a sumo match before. Hearing this, Nobu turns to Sayuri and says that if she wants to learn about sumo then she should talk to him. So as not to offend Nobu, Sayuri pulls her gaze away from the Chairman to talk to him. Nobu asks why Sayuri didn't follow the geishas' "foolish tradition" of taking the first part of her older sister's name. Sayuri says that Mameha's fortuneteller thought it was too inauspicious to do so. When Nobu says that she should stop listening to fools, the Chairman says that while Nobu might sound like a very "modern man," Nobu actually believes more strongly in destiny than anyone else the Chairman knows. Nobu responds that everyone has a destiny, but that doesn't mean we should listen to the lies of fortunetellers.

During the next match, Sayuri notices out of the corner of her eye Hatsumomo staring at her. When she sees her, Sayuri feels as if she has touched an electric wire. Worried that Hatsumomo will try to embarrass her in front of the Chairman, Sayuri points her out to Mameha. Mameha and Sayuri excuse themselves from the men so they can talk about what to do in private.

The handkerchief acts as a reminder of Sayuri's goals and ambitions, and every night that she holds it to her face, she remembers that love and kindness exist in this world. The handkerchief thus helps her bear the struggles of working toward her true desire of being with the Chairman. This all seems rather sentimental and naive in one way—as she has only met the Chairman once—but it does provide Sayuri with hope and purpose.



Nobu represents the absolute opposite of Hatsumomo with regard to the Beauty, Truth, and Artifice theme. While Hatsumomo is beautiful on the outside but cruel, vengeful, and conceited on the inside, Nobu is physically unattractive but a loyal and noble person. Again, this novel emphasizes the idea that appearances can be deceiving.



Nobu's remarks about destiny illustrate the potential divide between his view of destiny and Mameha's. Mameha believes that a person can know their destinies by consulting almanacs and fortunetellers, but Nobu suggests that these methods are foolish nonsense. As will become clear, Nobu's view of destiny is a more nuanced one—here, he insinuates that fortunetellers can't give insight into a person's destiny because people in fact control their own personal destiny or life's purpose. Our actions make our destiny – fortunetellers have no say in the matter.



Sayuri has spent the last two years of her life working towards this moment: an encounter with the Chairman. But Hatsumomo has the power to ruin all of her hopes in just one afternoon. Still unsure how to handle Hatsumomo, Sayuri is almost powerless to stop her.



Mameha tells Sayuri that Hatsumomo will leave her alone if Hatsumomo thinks that Sayuri is already embarrassing herself. Mameha explains that though Nobu is a loyal and trustworthy man, Hatsumomo only sees him as “Mr. Lizard” because of his facial scars. If Hatsumomo thinks that Sayuri is enjoying her evening with Nobu, then Hatsumomo will leave her alone, because she will think Sayuri is embarrassing herself.

When the women return, Sayuri fawns over Nobu, showing interest in whatever he says about sumo. When Sayuri looks over in Hatsumomo’s direction, she sees Hatsumomo clapping in delight over Sayuri’s apparent affection for “Mr. Lizard.” To keep herself engrossed in the conversation, Sayuri imagines Nobu as the Chairman. At one point she convinces herself that she and the Chairman are alone in quiet room.

Caught up in her fantasy, Sayuri makes a comment which provokes Nobu to yell that that only a fool could say such an ignorant thing. Thinking that a girl truly in love with a man would tear up at a moment like this, Sayuri casts down her **eyes** and makes her lip tremble, hoping that this display will convince Hatsumomo of her infatuation with Nobu. Seeing her hurt, Nobu apologizes and says that she is a charming girl. Nobu is about to say more, but the crowd begins to cheer as the famous sumo wrestler Miyagiyama comes into the ring.

To cheer her up, Nobu kindly tells Sayuri to watch how the masterful Miyagiyama taunts his opponent by refusing to look at him in the **eyes**. Angered that Miyagiyama is showing him such disrespect, the other wrestler rushes at Miyagiyama. Right at the edge of the sumo ring, Miyagiyama uses the force of his opponent to knock him off balance and push him out of the ring. With his opponent out of the ring, Miyagiyama wins the match. Seeing this occur, Mameha whispers to Sayuri that she just got an idea for how to throw Hatsumomo off balance.

CHAPTER 18

Now that Sayuri knows the identity of the Chairman, she begins to read every news magazine she can in hopes of learning more about him. She learns that he was born in 1890 and built his own electric company. The Chairman hired Nobu to manage the day-to-day operations of the company. The Chairman often says in interviews that he owes Nobu a great debt because Nobu steered the company through several crises.

Hatsumomo’s incapability of looking beyond Nobu’s appearance to the truth of his personality shows that she is only concerned with superficial appearances. This might suggest why she feels no remorse about her cruelty. Since she believes outside beauty is all there is, she can’t even perceive her own inner ugliness.



Here, Sayuri deceives Hatsumomo at the same time that she deceives herself. In order to bear flirting with Nobu, Sayuri creates the illusion that Nobu is actually the Chairman. In this way, Sayuri’s flirting actually appears truthful, because she herself has tricked herself into believing she is talking with the man she loves—just as when she dances, she tricks herself into feeling the pain she once experienced.



Sayuri’s performance shows that she is truly growing into a masterful geisha. Geisha not only learn the arts of music and dance, but also learn how to become actors or performers, creating illusions for the men they entertain. In this case, Sayuri creates the illusion that she is hurt by Nobu’s words, convincing both Hatsumomo and Nobu of her affection for him.



Miyagiyama’s fluid movements and wrestling moves suggest that he, like Sayuri, might have “water” in his personality. Instead of attacking the other wrestler head on, he adapts his movements and body weight to meet the opponent’s. To defeat Hatsumomo, Sayuri must harness her own fluidity and use Hatsumomo’s weaknesses against her. Sayuri succeeds in this scene by taking advantage of Hatsumomo’s superficial perceptions of Nobu.



Though we now know some facts about the Chairman – his name, date of birth, and profession – we are still in the dark about his actual personality. Was Sayuri’s first impression of him accurate, or did his handsome appearance and kind demeanor hide something more sinister? It is also telling that he is seemingly defined by his business position—he is always referred to as “the Chairman,” not by his real name.



Several weeks pass, and then one day Sayuri receives a note that tells her to come to Mameha's apartment. Mameha tells her to put on a beautiful kimono that has a tear near the thigh. Mameha explains that she has a plan for making Hatsumomo stop following them, but for it to work, Sayuri must seduce two men: Nobu, and a certain doctor that she will meet today. Sayuri begins to feel sick when she hears that Mameha wants her to continue seducing Nobu, because a man will never have an intimate relationship with a geisha who has been the mistress of a close business associate or friend. Since the Chairman is Nobu's business partner, Sayuri fears that she will never be able to be with the Chairman if she develops a relationship with Nobu.

Mameha then leads Sayuri to a little room where the cook is waiting. Mameha says that the cook will make a small cut in her leg so that Sayuri has reason to meet the doctor. Though she feels like a piece of raw tuna about to be eaten, Sayuri agrees. The cook makes the cut, and when Sayuri sees the blood trickling down her leg, she faints. The next thing Sayuri remembers is being in a rickshaw outside the hospital.

Sayuri and Mameha wait for the doctor inside an examination room. When the doctor comes in, Sayuri notices that he looks like a crab, so she gives him the nickname Dr. Crab – though she doesn't call him that to his face. While carefully examining the cut, Dr. Crab asks how she injured herself. Sayuri says she was walking to the bathroom when she got tangled in her kimono and fell onto something sharp. The doctor responds by saying, "It's a wonder you didn't void your bladder." Dr. Crab bandages the cut and tells Sayuri that it was nice meeting her.

Back in the rickshaw, Sayuri tells Mameha that the plan didn't work because Dr. Crab didn't show any interest in her. Mameha disagrees, explaining that despite the room being cold, a single bead of sweat appeared on his forehead while he was touching her thigh. Mameha takes this as a sign that he is interested in her.

CHAPTER 19

Over the next few weeks, Sayuri and Mameha attend small parties and gatherings with Nobu and the Chairman. Before going out every night, Sayuri tells Auntie – in Hatsumomo's presence – that she's going to meet Nobu. Since she thinks Sayuri is embarrassing herself by spending time with "Mr. Lizard," Hatsumomo doesn't follow her to the parties.

The unwritten social code that prohibits men from having a relationship with the same geisha privileges the friendships and business partnerships between men over any possible romantic relationship with geisha. In this way, male-to-male relationships take precedence over relationships with the geisha—as if women were simple objects for the entertainment of men, ones that shouldn't get in the way of "serious" and "important" male relationships.



Sayuri's comparison of herself to a piece of sushi suggests that she is at some level aware of how being a geisha is not that different than being food. While people literally consume food, men consume geisha as visual objects, delighting in their beautiful appearance and company—but still objectifying them.



Sayuri puts on a performance of helplessness to seduce the Doctor into finding her attractive. In this way, Sayuri tries to conform to the male fantasy that women rely totally on them for help. On a deeper level, this fantasy reveals how men want women to appear as if they lack the capacity for self-determination, which makes men feel better about upholding the customs of a society that hinders women from achieving autonomy and independence.



Sayuri again misreads the outward appearance of the people she meets. Mameha – who is experienced in detecting men's desires – can tell from the single bead of sweat that the Doctor is interested, even though he shows no other overt signs.



Since Hatsumomo puts value only on superficial appearances, she seems unable to see the deeper motives behind people's actions (unless they are motivated by revenge or greed). Thus, she cannot recognize Sayuri's true motives for entertaining Nobu.



At the parties, Sayuri follows Mameha's instructions by continuing to cultivate a relationship with Nobu. At one party, Sayuri kneels closer to Nobu than she intended, causing Nobu to slam his sake cup onto the table in annoyance and shift away from her. When Sayuri and Mameha leave the party, Sayuri says that Nobu must not like her very much. Mameha responds that if Nobu didn't like her, he wouldn't keep inviting her to parties. Mameha says that though Nobu's temperament seems as "gentle as a sack of gravel," he is actually a kind man in his own way.

On one occasion, Sayuri and a group of geisha are entertaining Nobu, the Chairman, and some other businessmen at a teahouse when Hatsumomo appears. All night, Sayuri doesn't even look at the Chairman for fear that her **eyes** will reveal her attraction to him. Sayuri knows that if Hatsumomo sees that she has feelings for the Chairman, then Hatsumomo will immediately try to ruin any chance Sayuri has with him.

To convince Hatsumomo that she likes Nobu and not the Chairman, Sayuri loosens one of her ornaments so it lands in Nobu's lap. At first, Sayuri was planning to pick it from between his legs, but she feels too embarrassed to continue with her plan. All the guests watch as Nobu picks up the ornament and then tells a maid to fetch a package he has brought. Inside the package is a beautiful ornamental hair comb. Nobu tells Sayuri that he was going to give her this gift at the end of the night, but Sayuri's hair ornament falling out seemed like a sign that he should give it to her now. Hatsumomo helps Sayuri put it in her hair and then gives a theatrical sigh, as if she were watching a budding romance.

A few months after Mameha and Sayuri's encounter with Dr. Crab, he invites them to have tea with him. Mameha suggests they meet at a small teahouse that Hatsumomo would feel too embarrassed to be seen in. At the teahouse, Mameha tells stories while Sayuri pours tea for the Doctor. Dr. Crab is quiet all night. Though Sayuri thinks that they are boring him, he begins inviting them to tea every week.

A few months later, Hatsumomo brags to Sayuri that she and Pumpkin will be leading the German Ambassador around Gion. Feeling satisfied that she has been tricking Hatsumomo this whole time, Sayuri shows no expression when Hatsumomo says this. Hatsumomo gives Sayuri a suspicious look and then walks off. A few days later, Sayuri and Mameha go to the teahouse to meet Dr. Crab. As they're about to enter, they see Hatsumomo and Pumpkin leaving. When Mameha and Sayuri enter the teahouse, Dr. Crab brushes past them, saying he doesn't like it when people deceive him.

Nobu's external "gravel-y" personality further contrasts with Hatsumomo's sweet outward one. In public and in front of her clients, Hatsumomo acts as a proper geisha, concealing her cruel, hateful personality. In contrast, Nobu is harsh and rude in public, perhaps concealing the softness and kindness of his character. Once again, this contrast in character traits suggests that we shouldn't mistake appearances for reality.



While Sayuri used her eyes to create the illusion that she was in love with Nobu at the sumo match, here Sayuri's eyes fail to convey anything but the truth of her affection. The truth of her love for him will break through any deception she tries to create, and so she must avoid looking at him at all when in Hatsumomo's presence.



Nobu's gift shows that he has a kinder, more sentimental side. Though in the earlier passage he insulted fortunetellers, here he suggests that people can read the signs of their environment (like Sayuri's hair ornament falling) to interpret how they should act. As we will learn later, Nobu's view of destiny is less about a preordained future and more about working towards achieving what one wants in life. Thus, Nobu takes the opportunity that presents itself here to flatter Sayuri with a gift in an attempt to get what he wants: Sayuri's affection.



Sayuri's confusion about the Doctor shows how naïve she still is about the role of the geisha. Dr. Crab is not interested in conversation or stories. As will soon become clear, he wants a single thing: to take Sayuri's virginity.



Hatsumomo finally figures out the truth behind Sayuri's actions when Sayuri fails to keep up the superficial charade. Because Hatsumomo can only interpret appearances and selfish motives, Sayuri should have acted distraught at hearing about Hatsumomo's meeting with the ambassador. Since Sayuri shows no outward distress or jealousy, Hatsumomo assumes she must be hiding something that is making her more confident.



Distressed that her plan is falling apart, Mameha tells Sayuri to ask Pumpkin how Hatsumomo found out about Dr. Crab. Sayuri asks why they need the Doctor's help anyway. Though worried that Sayuri will let something slip to Hatsumomo, Mameha agrees to her tell her plan. Mameha says it all has to do with Sayuri's "mizuage." Mameha explains the term by saying that men have an "eel" that likes to wiggle around in a woman's "cave." A "mizuage" is when a woman has an eel inside her cave for the first time – when she loses her virginity.

Mameha explains that Dr. Crab paid a record amount in Gion for Mameha's mizuage years before. Mameha says that she hopes to start a bidding war between the Doctor and Nobu over Sayuri's mizuage. If the bidding gets high enough, then Sayuri will be able to pay off her debts. Mameha hopes that this success will throw Hatsumomo off balance, possibly even making Hatsumomo do something rash that will sully her own reputation. If Hatsumomo dishonors herself, then people will be less likely to heed her rumors about Sayuri.

Mameha speaks in euphemisms – indirect expressions used to talk about embarrassing or unpleasant things – yet by comparing sex to an eel wriggling around in a cave, Mameha actually makes sex seem more unpleasant. This is understandable, however, since most geisha have sex with their danna rather than with people they actually love or find attractive. Mameha's euphemism suggests that when sex is an economic transaction – as it is between danna and geisha – all the physical and emotional pleasure of sex disappears.



Mameha's explanation illustrates that the mizuage is basically a highly ritualized and socially-sanctioned form of rape. Men will pay the mistress of an okiya to have sex with an underage apprentice geisha. These girls have no say over who will take their virginity or when it will happen. This tradition shows just how oppressive geisha culture (at least as it is portrayed in Golden's book, which at least real geisha has disputed) is for young women.



CHAPTER 20

In the present, Sayuri says that this conversation marked a shift in the way she viewed the world. Before this, she had been naïve about why men showed so much interest in talking with her, but this conversation revealed to her what men truly desire.

On the night Sayuri has this conversation with Mameha, she stays up until Pumpkin and Hatsumomo come home from entertaining. Hatsumomo tells Pumpkin to go out and buy her some noodles. When Pumpkin leaves the okiya, Sayuri slips out behind her. Sayuri asks Pumpkin what Hatsumomo said to the Doctor. At first nervous to be talking with Sayuri against Hatsumomo's wishes, Pumpkin says that Hatsumomo will be very angry if she tells Sayuri anything. Pumpkin is exhausted from the day's work, and she begins to cry because she hates spending so much time with the cruel Hatsumomo. Wanting to do something good to set herself apart from her older sister, Pumpkin decides to tell Sayuri what Hatsumomo said.

Learning about men's sexual desires is a key moment in Sayuri's growing up. She now knows that while men appear interested in geisha for their stories or arts, they often just want one thing: sex.



Pumpkin's disobedience to Hatsumomo shows that Pumpkin wants to be more independent and take more control over her life choices. As the younger sister to Hatsumomo, Pumpkin has to spend her days following Hatsumomo around and obeying her every command – something that can't be much fun, considering Hatsumomo's cruelty. However, by telling Sayuri the truth, Pumpkin takes a small amount of control and independence back.



Pumpkin says that Hatsumomo suspected that Sayuri and Mameha were planning something when Sayuri didn't seem dejected about Hatsumomo leading the German Ambassador around Gion. Pumpkin says Hatsumomo asked around Gion and learned that Sayuri and Mameha had been going to one specific teahouse together. When Hatsumomo and Pumpkin went to investigate, they saw Dr. Crab. Since the Doctor is known around Gion as a lover of *mizuage*, Hatsumomo immediately figured out their plan. Hatsumomo told the Doctor that Sayuri had a boyfriend who often visited their *okiya* at night, thus insinuating that Sayuri was not a virgin and her *mizuage* was worthless.

Sayuri thanks Pumpkin for the info. Sayuri apologizes that Pumpkin is stuck with Hatsumomo as an older sister. Pumpkin says that at least some good has come from it: Mother has decided to adopt Pumpkin. Sayuri feels sick at these words, because she was hoping to be adopted by Mother.

At Mameha's apartment the next day, Sayuri tells her what Pumpkin said. Mameha says that if they convince the Doctor that Hatsumomo was lying, then perhaps they can still start a bidding war. If the price gets high enough, then Mother might consider adopting Sayuri instead. They go to a confectionary shop where they buy two "ekubo" – white cakes with a red dimple on top. According to tradition, an apprentice geisha presents these cakes to men to show that she is eligible for *mizuage*.

Giving the cake to Nobu is a simple matter, but Mameha and Sayuri have to find a way to contact Dr. Crab, who hasn't called upon their company since talking with Hatsumomo. After asking around town, Mameha finds out that Dr. Crab is at a party being thrown that evening. The women go there and wait for him to come out of the reception room. When he does, the women approach and present him the cake. The Doctor says it's a poor reflection on Mameha's character to have Sayuri as a younger sister. When Mameha asks why he would say such a thing, he responds that she should ask the boy in Sayuri's neighborhood.

Pumpkin's story reveals how a geisha's worth in this society is often tied up with her virginity. This belief objectifies women, making them into commodities that decline in value, rather than human beings with the right to control when and with whom they have sex. It should be noted, however, that Iwasaki, a geisha Golden interviewed for the book, claimed that his portrayal of mizuage was wrong, and that no such practice took place in Gion when she was a geisha.



Sayuri's jealousy at hearing this shows a surprising lack of compassion. If Sayuri truly sympathized with all that Pumpkin had to go through as Hatsumomo's apprentice, then she would recognize that Pumpkin deserves to be adopted as much as she herself does.



With their red dimples on top, the ekubo look like breasts, and so in essence they act as visual euphemisms. The men don't want to have awkward conversations about bidding on a girl's virginity, so geisha give men these subtly erotic cakes instead. By avoiding the conversation, men keep up the appearance that they are interested in more than just sex.



A geisha's livelihood depends almost entirely on her reputation. Without a good reputation, men will treat her as if she is worthless. In this way, the male clients assert an oppressive amount of control over a geisha's life. Geisha cannot sleep with men for pleasure without risking sullyng their reputations, and thus their livelihoods. This means that geisha have to make the tragic choice between sexual freedom and economic security.



Mameha tries to laugh off the matter, saying that Hatsumomo has been spreading this rumor out of jealousy, because Sayuri took a major part in the upcoming spring Kyoto dance performance. Mameha says that Hatsumomo hoped the role would go to Pumpkin. Mameha says she is willing to stake her reputation on Sayuri's honor, and that the Doctor must decide who is lying – Mameha or Hatsumomo – because they both can't be telling the truth. After pondering for a moment, the Doctor accepts the cake.

At first Sayuri thinks that Mameha lied about the dance, but the next day she learns that Mameha used her connections to get Sayuri a role in the performance. Mameha, one of the best dancers in city, will also be performing. Sayuri has a month to rehearse the role. Mameha tells her that this will be her first opportunity to shine in the public eye.

CHAPTER 21

A few weeks later, Sayuri is taking a break at rehearsals for the dance performance when Mameha comes up to her. Mameha says that the Baron is throwing a party in honor of the famous kimono maker Arashino, who is a great friend of Nobu's. Mameha is going to persuade the Baron to invite both the Doctor and Nobu. Mameha hopes that they will compete over Sayuri's affection, which will hopefully lead to an increase in bidding over Sayuri's *mizuage*.

At the Baron's luxurious house later that week, Mameha and Sayuri serve tea to the Baron's guests around a pond. Nobu watches Sayuri as she sits near Dr. Crab. Sayuri tells the Doctor that she has been practicing her balance so that she won't fall again. She says that every night after her bath, she stands naked on one foot. Sayuri then claps a hand over her mouth in mock embarrassment.

Overhearing the conversation, the Baron says that he would pay large sums of money just to watch Sayuri take a bath. Though the Baron didn't pay attention to Sayuri the last time he saw her, now he ogles her, perhaps because Sayuri has grown into an attractive woman. When Mameha says that they should spare the apprentice geisha this conversation, the Baron waves her off, saying Sayuri needs to know the truth about the world: plenty of men act chaste, but they all want the same thing. To save her from the awkward conversation, Nobu excuses himself to use the bathroom and asks Sayuri to accompany him.

Mameha is able to use her good reputation to convince the Doctor of Sayuri's sexual chastity. The Doctor knows that Mameha wouldn't risk sully her own reputation by lying, because she would, as a result, lose her prestige among the men and the other geisha. In this way, reputation can be a powerful asset for a geisha to get what she wants.



Since dance is the highest art form for geisha, this performance will allow Sayuri to establish her reputation in Gion as a masterful dancer and a desirable geisha. As we have seen, reputation is everything, so a lot will depend on her performance.



The competition between Nobu and the Doctor over Sayuri marks the first love triangle in the novel. In traditional love triangles of two men and one woman, the woman usually must decide between the two men, both whom she loves in different ways. Yet Sayuri's love triangle is one that can only exist in the world of a geisha. Sayuri has no love for either man and, instead of competing for Sayuri's affection, the men compete for her virginity.



Sayuri's story and mock embarrassment reveal the nature of men's fantasies. In this society, men want geisha to be both innocent and sexually alluring at the same time. To do this, Sayuri tells a story that prompts the Doctor to think of her naked, but she also pretends as if she is too innocent to realize the story's suggestiveness.



*The Baron's cynical view that men only care about sex seems brutish, but is in fact more honest than the euphemisms and posturing of the other men we've seen. Even Sayuri seemed to develop this same viewpoint after learning about *mizuage*. Eventually, however, Sayuri will come to realize that some men – at least the good ones – are looking for something more than just sex.*



On the way to the bathroom, Nobu stands in front of a glass case displaying an antique sword. Nobu says the Baron is an antique just like this sword. Sayuri can tell that Nobu thinks the Baron is a relic of a feudal age.

Nobu has apparently taken offense at the Baron's comments, which shows that he most likely disagrees about men's desires. Nobu thus suggests that he himself might care for Sayuri as a person and not as a sexual object.



By the time the men start to eat dinner, the Baron is so drunk that his eyes slosh around in his head. During dinner, the Doctor asks Sayuri to accompany him to the bathroom. The Doctor stops at the same glass case where Nobu did. Aware that Nobu is interested in Sayuri, the Doctor insults Nobu by saying that he is an uncultured man who would have no appreciation for antiques like those in the box.

The novel juxtaposes how Nobu and the Doctor speak to Sayuri by having them both stop in front of the same glass case. Both men use the sword to expound upon their own opinions, but Nobu at least isn't petty and jealous like the Doctor.



After dinner, the Baron suggests that Mameha wear one of Arashino's kimonos to the Baron's party next week. Mameha says she can't go because she has a doctor's appointment. The Baron says she should just cancel it, but Mameha says she cannot. The Baron gets angry and says that it's not like she's getting an abortion. A long, embarrassed silence follows. Realizing that Mameha is going for an abortion, the Baron says that she should have told him about the appointment in private. The Baron then says that if Mameha can't come, he wants Sayuri to come in her place. Mameha says that Sayuri has rehearsals, but the Baron gets angry and demands that Sayuri come. Mameha agrees.

Mameha's abortion reveals, once again, that her relationship with the Baron is devoid of actual love or affection. Without any love for each other, there seems to be no question in either of their minds that she will have the Baron's baby. All the Baron wants from Mameha is sex, not a family. In this scene, the novel implies that abortion is an unspoken reality of a geisha's life.



On the rickshaw ride back, Mameha tells Sayuri to be cautious at the party. She says that "an apprentice on the point of having her *mizuage* is like a meal served on the table." Sayuri knows perfectly well that she is talking specifically about the Baron.

Earlier, Sayuri compared herself to sushi, and now Mameha compares her to a meal, again showing that society views geisha like objects or food for the pleasure and consumption of men.



CHAPTER 22

On the day of the Baron's party, Sayuri waits for the train. The party is at the Baron's estate in Hakone, a few hours away from Kyoto by train. Sayuri is accompanied by Mr. Itchoda, Mameha's dresser, who is coming to help Sayuri tie her intricate obi in preparation for the party. Sayuri feels an unpleasant sensation swelling inside of her as the train pulls into the station. She remembers how the last time she boarded a train was with Satsu. Sayuri feels ashamed that, for the last few years, she has tried to stop herself from thinking about Satsu or her parents.

In order to cope with her feelings about her family, Sayuri has blocked out any thoughts of them. In this way, she has yet to learn how to come to terms with the traumas and suffering of her life. Instead of dealing with them in a healthy or productive way, she simply tries, once again, to mentally "run away" from her problems.



When Sayuri and Mr. Itchoda arrive in Hakone, a car picks her up and takes her to the Baron's estate. The Baron comes over to her and says she should walk around the property so that all the male guests can marvel at her beauty. After a few hours of walking around, she runs into the Chairman. Surprised at seeing him, Sayuri stares affectionately at him. The Chairman says he's leaving the party, so Sayuri offers to escort him to his car. On the way, the Chairman shows her an antique cosmetics box that he is going to give the Baron as a gift. Sayuri finds the box so dazzlingly beautiful that she feels herself holding her breath while she looks at it.

As Sayuri and the Chairman approach the Chairman's car, they run into the Baron. The Chairman gives the Baron the gift. The Baron says the box might even be lovelier than Sayuri, whom he refers to as an "exquisite creature." The Baron tells Sayuri that he has a gift of his own for her, but she must wait till everyone leaves before he can give it to her. As the Baron walks away, the Chairman gets into his car. Before driving off, he warns her to be careful when a man like the Baron decides he has something to give her.

After the Chairman drives off, Sayuri feels elated that she had the chance to talk with the Chairman privately, if only for a moment. Sayuri's happiness makes her forget the Chairman's words of warning. After all the guests leave the party, Sayuri goes to wait for the Baron in the entrance hall of his house. The Baron appears in a thin cotton dressing robe, and Sayuri suddenly remembers the Chairman's warning. She feels sick with worry.

The Baron tells Sayuri to follow him to his room so that he can give her the gift. In the present, Sayuri interrupts the narrative by saying that if she were wiser at the time, she would have ran out of his house at that very moment. Instead, feeling indebted to the Baron for inviting her to the party, Sayuri follows him inside. In his room, he gives her a beautiful, antique kimono. The Baron tells her to undress and try it on. Afraid to disobey the Baron in his own house, Sayuri takes off the outer layer of her kimono.

Over the last few years, Sayuri has developed the habit of tying the Chairman's **handkerchief** to the inside of her kimono before going out to entertain men. Now, as she takes off the kimono, she sees the handkerchief flutter out of it.

The Baron thinks that all Sayuri can offer to the men around her is her beauty. In contrast, the Chairman shows Sayuri an actual beautiful object, instead of dehumanizing her into a beautiful object. The Chairman thus seems kinder and less sexist than the Baron. It is still important to remember, however, that no matter how kind and noble the Chairman seems, he too is paying for the company and flattery of women.



The Baron's comment about Sayuri being an "exquisite creature" dehumanizes her. Instead of recognizing her dignity as a human being, he thinks of her as on the same level as the cosmetics box: a beautiful object. The Chairman's warning again shows that he is kindly looking out for Sayuri's best interests, but he still sees no problem in placing her at the Baron's mercy.



The Baron's appearance in a cotton robe signals the danger that Sayuri is in. Since the Baron sees her as more of an object than a human being, he might feel like he has the right to take advantage of her sexually—and there is little she can do to defend herself.



Ever since Ms. Fidget violated Sayuri's body without permission, Sayuri has learned from society that her body is not her own and that she must concede to the wishes of others. Now it seems as if the Baron might rape her—an extreme instance of a character taking away Sayuri's right to her own body and sexual freedom.



Since the handkerchief represents the possibility of love, the fact that it falls out now suggests that the Baron's grotesque actions might shatter her belief in this ideal.



Sayuri stands in front of a mirror as the Baron takes off her under-robe. She tries to push his hands away, but he takes off her robe so that she is standing naked before the mirror. Sayuri turns away from the mirror in shame as she feels his warm breath on her neck. The Baron then puts his hand into his own robe. Sayuri tries not to think about what he is doing with that hand. Sayuri begins to cry, and a few moments later, the Baron leaves the room without her realizing. She quickly gathers up the Chairman's **handkerchief** and puts on her kimono.

The Baron soon returns with a **handkerchief** – bearing his monogrammed initials – for her tears. He instructs her to keep it, but after she uses it to wipe her **eyes**, she leaves it on a table. The Baron takes her outside, and a car drives her back to the inn where she is staying the night.

At the inn, Mr. Itchoda sees Sayuri's poorly tied kimono and messed up makeup. He knowingly asks if the Baron undressed her and looked at her in the mirror without touching her or lying on top of her. Feeling guilt at what happened, Sayuri confirms Mr. Itchoda's suspicion by saying, "I'm sorry." Mr. Itchoda responds, "That's fine, then." They don't speak another word to each other for the rest of the trip back.

CHAPTER 23

Arriving back in Kyoto, Sayuri feels like a **lake** quivering after being struck by a stone. A few days after her return, Sayuri goes to Mameha's apartment. Sayuri assumes that Mr. Itchoda told Mameha about what happened between Sayuri and the Baron, but if he did, Mameha shows no indication that it bothered her. Excited for Sayuri's performance in the upcoming dance, Mameha seems as devoted as always to making Sayuri a success.

On the night of the performance, Sayuri tucks the Chairman's **handkerchief** into her sleeve as she puts on her costume. Sayuri is playing a maiden who goes for a swim and falls in love with a dolphin prince. Her costume is a pink kimono with a **water** design in grey. After she gets ready, Sayuri goes backstage to watch Mameha's performance.

The Baron's reasons for not having sex with Sayuri are ambiguous. Since he sees Sayuri as more of an object than a person, his actions most likely do not stem from his recognition of the immorality of such a thing. Instead, since Sayuri's virginity has monetary value, by having sex with her he would essentially be stealing from the okiya. He seems to respect the laws regarding property more than those regarding sexual assault.



While the Chairman's handkerchief represents the possibility of love, the Baron's represents how some men only want sex and will do anything to gratify their desires. By leaving the Baron's handkerchief behind, Sayuri symbolically rejects its metaphoric meaning, choosing to hold on to her belief in true love—even when that ideal seems impossible.



Mr. Itchoda's knowing questions suggest that the Baron has a reputation for doing this to girls. Since the Baron is a powerful man and geisha have little political influence in Japanese society, no one has publically accused him of this crime. In this way, the novel shows how few protections these women have from sexual assault.



Mameha's lack of reaction illustrates, once again, the Baron's reputation for abusing young geisha. By not even mentioning it, Mameha silently condones his behavior as normal, showing her own internalization of sexist and oppressive norms. This seems especially grotesque because the Baron is supposed to be her "boyfriend."



The fact that Sayuri keeps the handkerchief shows that the Baron's disgusting acts have not shattered her hope that love can exist for a geisha. The subject matter of Sayuri's dance also reinforces her connection to water.



Mameha's dance tells the story of a married courtier who carries on an affair with another woman. Sayuri watches Mameha perform the wife's dance of lament at learning of her husband's disloyalty. Mameha's graceful dancing has a significant emotional effect on Sayuri. Sayuri starts to feel like the wife betrayed by her husband.

While waiting backstage to perform her own dance, Sayuri feels a heavy weight descend on her from the sadness of seeing Mameha dance. As Sayuri goes out on stage, she uses this feeling to dance elegantly without difficulty or nervousness. At every performance for the rest of the month, Sayuri conjures up the memory of seeing Mameha dance, which makes her feel that same heaviness so that she can dance with dignity and grace.

One afternoon a few days after the first performance, Sayuri visits Mameha at her apartment. Mameha tells her that bidding has begun on her *mizuage*. Back at the *okiya* three days later, Auntie tells Sayuri that Mother wants to see her. As Sayuri goes to Mother's room, she sees Pumpkin coming out in tears.

Mother suddenly pulls hard on Sayuri's earlobe and says that now Sayuri is a very expensive commodity. Referring to Sayuri's virginity, Mother says that Sayuri must not give away for free what she owes to the *okiya*. Mother then releases her and more calmly says that Sayuri's status in the *okiya* is going to change. Mother says that she is going to adopt Sayuri next week, and explains that this means that Sayuri will one day inherit the *okiya*. Though Sayuri isn't sure why Mother changed her mind about adopting Pumpkin, she still feels very excited.

CHAPTER 24

The following day at Mameha's apartment, Sayuri tells Mameha what happened at the *okiya*. Mameha says that she knew Mother would adopt Sayuri, because yesterday the bidding ended with Dr. Crab agreeing to pay 11,500 yen for her *mizuage* – the highest amount ever paid for a *mizuage* in Gion. The amount is enough to pay back all her debts. Mameha explains that if Mother hadn't adopted Sayuri, then some of the money would have gone straight to Sayuri herself. But when Sayuri becomes the daughter of the *okiya*, any money she makes as a geisha will go to the *okiya*, meaning that Mother will make even more money off Sayuri.

Sayuri's emotional response to Mameha's dance shows the power that art has in engendering emotions in others. In this way, an artifice (as Mameha is not actually the courtier's wife) can produce real emotions in the audience.



Once again, the novel links beauty and suffering by showing how Sayuri's sadness allows her to perform elegantly. By channeling her pain into beauty, Sayuri can cope with suffering. In this way, we could even interpret Sayuri's role as a geisha – which involves the creation of beauty everyday – as helping her cope with her feelings of grief for her family.



*Sayuri's graceful dancing might have had an effect on the bidding war. Since dance is such a revered art form, her movements might have spurred the bidders to begin competing over her *mizuage*.*



*Mother makes it clear that Sayuri is not free to come into sexual maturity on her own terms like a normal teenage girl. Instead, the *okiya* essentially owns Sayuri's virginity (because of her debts), and can choose to sell it to whoever bids the highest. Sayuri also has little sympathy for Pumpkin, showing that Sayuri has a darker, more emotionally callous side to her, and is still very self-centered.*



Mameha's explanation for why Mother adopted Sayuri emphasizes how familial relationships among geisha are merely illusions that conceal the true economic realities. Mother does not adopt Sayuri out of love or affection, but in order to profit off her success. In the world of the geisha, titles like "mother" and "daughter" suggest economic rather than familial relationships.



To Sayuri's surprise, Mameha doesn't seem that pleased about this turn of events. Years later, Sayuri would come to understand that the bidding went so high because Dr. Crab ended up bidding against the Baron and not Nobu. Nobu did bid in the beginning, but soon dropped out when the prices got too high, since he had only a vague interest in *mizuage*. Dr. Crab and the Baron, however, had their minds set on Sayuri's *mizuage* and were willing to bid heavily.

Mother formally adopts Sayuri the following week. As Mother's daughter, Sayuri takes on the last name "Nitta." A few days later, Dr. Crab and Sayuri drink sake together in a ceremony that binds them together in the tradition of *mizuage*. Afterwards, Sayuri and Dr. Crab go to a beautiful inn where, in a private room, Dr. Crab tells her to undress and lie on a futon. He then puts a towel underneath her. The Doctor says that the towel is for absorbing the blood. Since neither Mameha nor Mother told Sayuri what to expect from the *mizuage*, she nervously asks him, "Why blood?" He responds that "the hymen...frequently bled when torn." Though she doesn't understand what any of this means, Sayuri becomes anxious hearing him talk about the blood and rises up a little from the futon. The Doctor then puts his hand on her shoulder and gently pushes her back down.

Dr. Crab takes off his robe and gets on top of her. Sayuri tries to put a "mental barrier" between herself and the Doctor, but it's not enough to keep her from feeling the Doctor's "eel." Sayuri feels uncomfortable and squeezes her eyes tight, wondering why a man would pay so much to do this to her. Sayuri smells a metallic blood smell in the air. Finally he finishes and thanks Sayuri before going to take a bath.

With the *mizuage* over, Sayuri feels such relief that she breaks out into a smile. She finds the whole experience so absurd that she has to stifle her laughter. When the Doctor comes out of the bath, he quickly gets into bed and falls asleep. As part of the customs of *mizuage*, Sayuri stays up all night in case the Doctor should need something. The next morning, the Doctor presents her with some herbs before he leaves. He says she should drink them every morning for a week so that she won't need an abortion.

Nobu's lack of interest in Sayuri's mizuage shows that he desires more from her than just sex – he may even love her. The Baron and Dr. Crab, however, are superficial men who want Sayuri for her virginity, and feel only lust for her. Nobu may love Sayuri, but he still allows his colleagues to treat her like property.



Sayuri's ignorance about the process of losing her virginity emphasizes that she is not psychologically or emotionally ready for this experience. In many ways, she is still a naive young girl. The fact that the Doctor pushes her down also implies the coercion in this scene. Sayuri knows she can't reject Dr. Crab without risking either violence or being kicked out of the okiya for disobeying Mother. Sayuri has no control over her body or her sexual experiences, showing how geisha culture (in Golden's fictionalized version) oppresses women by taking away their agency.



As Dr. Crab rapes Sayuri, Sayuri tries to mentally flee from herself and her body. In essence, the rape forces Sayuri to distance and alienate her mind from her body. Creating this rift between mind and body adds to the dehumanizing aspect of the whole experience.



Sayuri's reaction shows that she has yet to understand the pleasures or desires of sex—as she hasn't had the opportunity. She hasn't experienced the feelings of sexual arousal that might drive a person to pay for sex. Yet we should also be critical of this scene, as Golden, a male author, describes a girl responding to her rape with mild amusement – a highly unlikely and insensitive portrayal.



Before Sayuri's *mizuage*, Mother didn't care that Hatsumomo was causing Sayuri trouble in Gion, since Hatsumomo was the only one bringing in an income to the *okiya*. But since Sayuri's record-setting *mizuage* put "a high price tag" on her, men are now willing to pay a lot just to be entertained by her. Now that Sayuri can bring in money to the *okiya*, Mother puts a stop to Hatsumomo's troublemaking by threatening to make Hatsumomo pay for any money she prevents Sayuri from making. Sayuri now feels that she can go out to any party without fearing that Hatsumomo will get in her way.

Sayuri stops seeing Dr. Crab at the small teahouse, but she continues to see Nobu, who often asks for her company. Whenever she's with him and the Chairman at events, Sayuri hopes the Chairman will show a sign that he has affection for her, but he only acts cordially. Nobu, however, looks at her as though she were the only person in the room. Sayuri worries that the Chairman shares none of the same feelings that she has for him.

CHAPTER 25

Now that Sayuri is free to go to parties with Hatsumomo following her, Mameha takes her around Gion, introducing Sayuri to her wealthiest clients. Sayuri finds most of the events fairly boring because the men just get drunk and tell dirty jokes. After two more years of parties and outings, Sayuri makes the shift from being an apprentice to being a geisha. In the summer of 1938, she turns eighteen and "turns the collar." Apprentices wear red collars, while regular geisha wear white ones. Once a geisha turns the collar, she becomes eligible to take on a *danna*.

Sayuri interrupts the narrative to explain that since moving to New York, she has come up again and again against the perception that geisha are prostitutes. Yet in the West Sayuri has met many women who rely totally on their wealthy boyfriends or husbands for money. Sayuri explains that a *danna* is like this Western boyfriend.

Even Sayuri now thinks of herself as commodity with a price tag rather than a human being that cannot be judged by monetary worth. Sayuri's experience in the world of the geisha has caused her to internalize society's view of women as objects for the pleasure of men, and so she is pleased by the high price her virginity commanded. Perhaps her acceptance of these beliefs makes it easier for her to undergo traumatic events like her rape.



Nobu's continued interest in Sayuri shows that he cares for her even though she has already lost her virginity to another man. He clearly wants more than just to take the virginity of a beautiful girl—he might even be falling in love with Sayuri.



*Sayuri's boredom with the parties shows that she wants something more out of life than entertaining men. Now that she has a more secure financial position as the daughter of the *okiya*, she can begin to pursue a deeper and more substantial goal—and for her, that goal is true love. Now that she is a full geisha, she has the opportunity to become closer to the Chairman, in the hopes that he will become her *danna*.*



*Here Sayuri shows a double standard in the Western perception of geisha. While many Westerners consider geisha to be prostitutes because they receive payment and gifts from their *danna*, Westerners do not consider "kept women" prostitutes. Sayuri puts the *danna-geisha* relationship in Western terms, so that Western readers of her memoirs will better understand the nuances of her position.*



Three weeks after Sayuri turns the collar, Mother tells her that at this time next month Nobu will become her *danna*. Since making an offer for her *mizuage*, Nobu has asked for Sayuri's company more frequently than any other man. Though Sayuri has come to like Nobu over the years, if he becomes her *danna* then she will never have a chance to be with the Chairman, because of the custom that prevents two business partners from pursuing the same geisha. All afternoon, Sayuri feels a buzzing in her head. Being with the Chairman was the one hope that had motivated her through the years. Sayuri feels that if Nobu were to become her *danna* instead, then all her struggles and suffering would have been pointless.

The next day, Sayuri goes to Mameha's to tell her what Mother said. Mameha says she should be proud to have a man as successful as Nobu as her *danna*. In a burst of emotion, Sayuri cries out that she wants more than kindness. Mameha says that a geisha is not entitled to ask for more. When Sayuri asks if Mameha has "strong feelings" for the Baron, Mameha simply responds that their relationship is convenient for him and beneficial for her.

Mameha ends the conversation by saying that Nobu and Sayuri have an *en* – the Japanese word for a karmic bond. Sayuri interrupts the narrative again to explain that in her day, people viewed themselves as pieces of clay that "forever showed the fingerprints of everyone who has touched them." She says that Nobu's touch had made a deeper impression on her than most other people's. Sayuri says that even at the time she knew that "somewhere in the landscape of my life Nobu would always be present."

In the days after her conversation with Mameha, Sayuri loses hope that the Chairman will ever become her *danna*. While entertaining at a group of boring men at a party, she feels for one horrifying moment that she might be the sole living human in all the world. Sayuri feels that the only thing that gives her life any purpose, however small, is entertaining military men. By 1938, troops fighting the war in Manchuria were coming back to Japan on leave. After drinking a few glasses of sake, military men with watery **eyes** would tell Sayuri that nothing kept their spirits up during war as much as their memories of her and the other geisha of Gion.

Sayuri's anxiety about her danna illustrates the second love triangle that occurs in this book: Sayuri, Nobu, and the Chairman. Though Sayuri clearly prefers the Chairman, the book has so far shown that appearances can be deceiving. Thus, we should not immediately assume that Sayuri will ultimately pick the Chairman over Nobu. On the surface level, of course, Sayuri has been showing much more affection (though it is essentially artificial) for Nobu than for the Chairman.



Sayuri is unable to express her true feelings about the Chairman to Mameha. This suggests that her role as a geisha – which entails curbing of her own desires and feelings for the sake of pleasing others – has so completely subsumed Sayuri that now she cannot even express her feelings to her closest friend and ally.



The "en" represents the bonds of destiny that connect people. These bonds are not necessarily supernatural. Sayuri explains that an en represents how our interpersonal interactions affect our lives and ourselves. Since Nobu has had such a significant effect on the course of Sayuri's life, he has left an indelible mark on her personality and future.



Though we have previously seen how one can create beauty from suffering, now we see that beauty itself can provide relief in the face of the horrible suffering of war. In this way, beauty serves the utilitarian purpose of providing comfort. The fact that Sayuri derives meaning from helping others rather than simply achieving her own desire of being with the Chairman shows that she has developed a more mature conception of purpose: aiding those in need.



A few weeks pass, and then one day Mameha tells Sayuri that the time has finally come for her to collect her winnings from her agreement with Mother. Mameha says she's already waited long enough to collect them. Several days later, Mother, Mameha, and Sayuri meet together in the reception room at the *okiya*. When Mother agrees to pay Mameha the other half of what is owed to her, Mameha reminds her that Mother agreed to pay an extra fifty percent over the normal amount. Mother says that Mameha must be misremembering, and suggests that they ask Sayuri what truly happened. Though she feels torn between making Mother angry and betraying Mameha, Sayuri feels she must tell the truth. Sayuri says that she remembers Mother promising Mameha the extra amount. Mother concedes to pay Mameha the due amount, saying she must have grown forgetful in her old age.

After the accounts are settled, Mameha asks Mother about how the search for a *danna* is going. Mother says that she is in the final stages of agreeing upon terms with Nobu. Mameha suggests to Mother that she can make more money if other men compete with Nobu over becoming Sayuri's *danna*. When Mother says that no other men have shown any interest, Mameha suggests General Junnosuke Tottori as a possible *danna*. Sayuri has entertained the General almost every week for the past few months. Sayuri realizes that Mameha must be trying to stop Nobu from becoming her *danna*.

Mameha tells Mother that with the war in Manchuria, it could be helpful to have a military man as a *danna*, because he can provide the *okiya* with things that the government will soon ration off. Sayuri notices Mother worryingly squeeze her tobacco bag to see how much tobacco she has left. Sayuri takes this as a sign that Mameha might have convinced Mother.

CHAPTER 26

A couple of months later, Sayuri and General Tottori perform the ceremony that makes the General her *danna*. It's the same kind of sake ceremony that Sayuri performed with Dr. Crab. Afterwards, Sayuri meets the General in a private room at a small shabby inn. The General gets undressed and she finds his potbelly and his tiny "eel" repulsive. Sayuri feels a queasiness rather than a terror when he gets on top of her. After a few months of meeting with him at this inn, the queasiness slowly goes away, and her encounters with the General become "nothing more than an unpleasant twice-weekly routine."

*Sayuri's decision to pick Mameha over Mother illustrates how Sayuri has won enough freedom and autonomy that she can finally contradict Mother without fearing any serious consequences. With her life as a geisha now relatively secure, Sayuri can assert her own ethical standards by telling the truth. This scene shows how far Sayuri has come from the powerless child she was when she first arrived at the *okiya*.*



*Though Sayuri has expressed some autonomy by picking Mameha over Mother, she still conceives of herself as a person dependent on the influence and power of others. Instead of taking an active role in trying to prevent Nobu from becoming her *danna*, Sayuri relies on Mameha to get her out of the arrangement. Sayuri does not yet realize the power she has to determine the course of her own life.*



*Mameha takes advantage of Mother's greed to get her to do what Mameha wants. This manipulative tactic should remind us that Mameha is a cunning woman with ambiguous motives for her actions, and so we should ask ourselves exactly why Mameha is helping Sayuri find a new *danna*.*



Sayuri is so numb to the appalling reality of her life as a sexual object that the weekly encounters with the General give her little anxiety or worry. But, once again, we should be aware that Golden, as a male author, might be writing off Sayuri's emotional concerns, not realizing the trauma or turmoil of having little agency over one's sexual life.



Other than these encounters with the General, Sayuri sees little of him, but he does supply the *okiya* with food, medicine, and other essentials. During that fall when the General became her *danna*, Nobu ceased inviting her to parties. Sayuri assumes that Nobu must feel betrayed that Mother picked the General over him. Sayuri feels that she played a part in wronging a man who had treated her kindly – a man she had come to think of as a friend. Moreover, since Nobu has stopped inviting her to Iwamura Electric events, Sayuri hasn't seen the Chairman in months. Sayuri worries that if Nobu stays angry at her, then she will never see the Chairman again.

One day in April, a young apprentice approaches Sayuri while Sayuri is preparing for a recital for the spring dance in Gion. The girl introduces herself as Takazuru, and says that she has been entertaining Nobu at the Awazumi Teahouse. Beginning to weep, the girl says that all he talks about is how dumb and ugly she is compared to Sayuri. Takazuru asks how Sayuri pleased him so that she can learn to do the same. Sayuri tells her that Nobu is actually a kind man, but that she can try to impress him by reading a book about a historical event and telling him the story bit by bit. Sayuri isn't sure this suggestion will work with Nobu, but Takazuru seems grateful for the idea.

Feeling bad for making Nobu angry by taking the General as her *danna*, Sayuri decides to wait outside of Awazumi Teahouse in order to run into him and apologize. On the ninth night that she comes to wait for him, she sees him walking to the teahouse. Sayuri acts happy and surprised to see him. When Sayuri asks why he hasn't come to see her in so long, he bluntly states that he lost respect for her after discovering the identity of her *danna*. Nobu says that no one trusts the General with anything important because he is a useless, foolish man. Nobu then says that geisha care so much about their silly almanacs and traditions, but when something really important happens – like picking a *danna* – they simply look away as if they have no control over the matter.

Sayuri responds by saying that life is like **stream** carrying everyone along belly up. Nobu says that if life is truly like a stream, then water can still move freely within the stream. He says that she should have fought and used whatever advantages she had in order to avoid being with the General. Sayuri says that as a geisha, she has no advantages. Nobu responds that if Sayuri had any sense, she would realize that her destiny does not lie with the General, and she will do anything she can to leave him. Before going inside the teahouse, Sayuri asks if she can visit him here again. Nobu says no and explains, "I don't like things held up before me that I cannot have."

Sayuri's betrayal of Nobu foreshadows the climactic betrayal at the end of the novel, where her love for the Chairman will surpass any concern she has for Nobu and his friendship. Here, Sayuri hints at her lack of regard for Nobu's feelings by saying that, ultimately, she cares about seeing Nobu not because he is her friend, but because his friendship provides the only way for her to see the Chairman. Sayuri and Nobu are presented as sympathetic characters who have a real sense of friendship and love, but ultimately their relationship, too, is economic in nature.



Takazuru's request for advice shows how Sayuri has established herself as an eminent geisha in Gion. Not so long ago, she was the young apprentice unsure about how to impress and entertain powerful men, but now an interaction like this shows how much Sayuri has grown up since arriving in Gion.



*Sayuri's love for the Chairman makes her motives for meeting with Nobu less pure. She does not simply want to repair their relationship because she feels guilt for hurting a friend, but also because she hopes to find a way back into the Chairman's life. Nobu's beliefs about the geisha conception of destiny imply that he thinks that their rituals are simply excuses for passivity elsewhere in their lives. These rituals distract the geishas from any efforts at controlling their own destinies. Nobu suggests that they should instead be more assertive in matters where their actions can actually make a difference, like when choosing a *danna*.*



*In his description of water, Nobu implicitly makes a counterargument to Mameha's claim that "watery" people can only flow where the landscape of their lives lead them. While Mameha argued that destiny controls everyone's lives, Nobu argues that people can help determine their own destiny. Even if outward forces push Sayuri in a certain direction, she can still maneuver her exact location within that direction. According to Nobu, Sayuri's role as geisha means that she has to have a *danna*, but she can still pick who that *danna* will be. In this way, Nobu suggests that destiny and self-determination can coexist.*



CHAPTER 27

During the summer of 1938, Mother tells Sayuri that in the last six months she has earned more than either Pumpkin or Hatsumomo. Mother says that this means it's time for Sayuri to get Hatsumomo's bigger room. For the last few years, Hatsumomo and Sayuri have lived side by side in relative peace, but Sayuri thinks that this change will spur her anger.

One afternoon, Hatsumomo begins moving her belongings into Sayuri's room. Hatsumomo makes a ruckus, leaving her clothes all over and accidentally dropping glass makeup containers which break and scatter glass over the floor. When Sayuri goes upstairs to investigate, she finds Hatsumomo reading Sayuri's journal. Geisha are expected to be discreet about the men they entertain, but several years earlier, Sayuri had started keeping a diary of her experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Hatsumomo threatens to give the journal to Mother, but as she leaves the room with it, she steps on a piece of broken glass and cuts her foot. Hatsumomo rushes with the journal back to her own room and Sayuri follows. While she is taking care of her foot, Hatsumomo absentmindedly leaves Sayuri's journal on the makeup table in her room.

In the room, Sayuri sees on the messy floor the emerald brooch that Hatsumomo had accused Sayuri of stealing years ago. Sayuri takes the brooch and the journal and slips out while Hatsumomo is preoccupied with her foot. Sayuri hides the journal and then goes straight to see Mother in Mother's room. Sayuri puts the emerald on her table and says that this is the brooch that Hatsumomo accused her of stealing. Hatsumomo comes into the room and admits that it's the brooch. Hatsumomo says she found it in Sayuri's makeup stand, along with a journal about the men Sayuri entertains. Sayuri thinks about how when Hatsumomo was the *okiya's* principal earner, she could have accused Sayuri of anything and gotten away with it. But now that Sayuri is the prime geisha, Sayuri knows that Mother will side with her.

Sayuri denies having a journal, and Hatsumomo goes to Sayuri's room, frantically searching for the journal to no avail. Mother and Sayuri follow Hatsumomo into the room. Mother tells Hatsumomo to stop lying and to pay Sayuri back for the brooch. Sayuri doesn't know if Hatsumomo hears what Mother says, because she seems too busy glaring at Sayuri.

*Once again, we see how much Sayuri has grown in the last few years, as she is now actually more successful than Hatsumomo. Yet Sayuri still doesn't recognize that with this success comes more power—like the ability to leverage her salary in the *okiya* to gain more autonomy.*



Sayuri's journal shows that she had an interest in recording her life experiences even when she was still a geisha, which makes her motives for recounting her memoirs in the present more understandable. As a geisha, she was expected to hide all her emotions and feelings from the outside world by adopting a cheerful demeanor. Only in her journal can she be truthful, honestly laying out her views and feelings about the world. Thus, her memoirs are a continuation of this self-expressive urge, as well as a resistance against the sexist traditions that force a geisha to remain silent.



*Sayuri's direct confrontation with Hatsumomo shows that she has begun to recognize the power she has in the *okiya*. This act marks an important transition into her adulthood, in that Sayuri now has the power to act in correspondence with her own will and desire. No longer an apprentice following the orders of others, she is now a woman deciding her fate for herself—although, as we will see, this newfound sense of power and agency doesn't yet extend outside of the world of the *okiya*.*



*This scene is a reversal of previous encounters when Mother sided with Hatsumomo over Sayuri. Now with Mother's support, Sayuri is the one in charge, showing the extent of her new power at the *okiya*—but again, it's all about really just about money.*



Sayuri feels that her relationship with Hatsumomo begins to shift after that day. With Sayuri now so clearly the more important geisha in the *okiya*, Hatsumomo's mind begins "to be troubled by doubt." Sayuri thinks that Hatsumomo must know that under no circumstances would Mother take Hatsumomo's side against Sayuri's any longer. Sayuri, however, says that for years now Hatsumomo has been on a path of self-destruction. She is getting drunk more often and has begun showing her cruelty to her male clients, even insulting some of them to their faces. Sayuri says that Hatsumomo is now like a beautiful tree that is rotting around the edges.

At Mameha's apartment the next day, Sayuri tells her what happened with Hatsumomo. Mameha says they should make Hatsumomo's life even more difficult so that she will continue on her self-destructive path. Mameha says they must drive Hatsumomo out of Gion completely, or else she might try to damage Sayuri's reputation again. Sayuri agrees to Mameha's plan.

Almost every evening, Mameha comes to the *okiya* around dusk and waits to walk out the door behind Hatsumomo. Sayuri and Mameha then follow her from engagement to engagement all evening. On the first night they do this, Hatsumomo pretends to find it amusing. But by the fourth night, their presence makes it difficult for her to concentrate on acting cheerful around the men she entertains. The following week, Mameha and Sayuri follow her down an alleyway. Suddenly she wheels around and, her **eyes** burning with anger, yells at them to leave her alone.

One afternoon, they follow Hatsumomo to a teahouse where she is entertaining one of her most loyal clients, a Kabuki actor named Shojiro. At the event, someone asks Mameha to dance. Mameha's exquisite dancing wins over Shojiro's affection, and he starts fawning over Mameha, who flirts back with him. At one point, Shojiro mocks the overacting of English actors by taking Mameha to the center of the room, dipping her over, and planting kisses all over her face.

Hatsumomo shouts that he's making a fool of himself. Saying that Hatsumomo is just jealous, Shojiro pulls her to the center of the room and tries to kiss her in the same way he kissed Mameha. Still angry, Hatsumomo bites his lip hard enough to make him bleed. Shojiro is shocked, and calls her a monster, while the mistress of the teahouse takes her away from the men. Later, Sayuri learns that the mistress actually shoved Hatsumomo into the street.

*Here we see how the pressures of being a geisha weigh on Hatsumomo, causing her to reveal her deeper, more intrinsic ugliness. In the past, her beauty secured a degree of day-to-day stability in her life, but the recent change of events at the *okiya* suggests that she might soon lose her prestige as Sayuri continues to surpass her. Without her prestige, she will become as helpless as Sayuri was when she first arrived at the *okiya*. At that point, the reversal in Sayuri and Hatsumomo's positions will be complete.*



Since Sayuri is now much more successful than Hatsumomo, Hatsumomo doesn't seem to pose any serious threat anymore. Mameha's plan thus seems particularly cruel, in that Mameha wants to sabotage a now-powerless Hatsumomo—Mameha clearly wants revenge against the woman who was once cruel to her, and feels no remorse at taking advantage of Hatsumomo's new weakness.



Once again the roles have reversed, as Sayuri and Mameha follow Hatsumomo instead of the other way around. Every time Hatsumomo sees Sayuri, Hatsumomo must recall her fading prestige and her aging beauty. In this way, Sayuri and Mameha take advantage of Hatsumomo's self-doubt to make her less able to keep up her façade of kindness and politeness—but it also means Sayuri is basically stooping to Hatsumomo's level.



Shojiro's criticism of artificial love scenes highlights the wonderful "acting" of all the geisha. Every day, Sayuri and the rest of the geisha put on a performance by acting as if they are interested in the men they entertain. Geisha do such a good job that most men don't even realize that the women are usually just acting.



In comparison to Mameha's masterful performance of fawning over Shojiro, Hatsumomo can no longer put on the act. As soon as she lets her true feelings show, she is thrown out of the teahouse. If a geisha ever breaks character and shows an emotion that society deems unacceptable (like anger), then she is cast out without mercy.



Hatsumomo doesn't return to the *okiya* until the next day. Her hair is in disarray, she looks terrible, and Sayuri can tell she spent the night drinking. The next day Hatsumomo leaves the *okiya* in a plain cotton dress with her hair completely down. Mother has kicked her out of the *okiya* because Hatsumomo disgraced herself and the *okiya* by attacking Shojiro. Sayuri believes that Mother has probably been trying to get rid of Hatsumomo for years now, because Hatsumomo was no longer earning what she used to. In the present, Sayuri interrupts the narrative to say that she doesn't know what happened to Hatsumomo, but that she heard rumors that she was working as a prostitute.

Hatsumomo's burst of authentic feeling not only gets her removed from the teahouse, but also causes Mother to throw her out of the okiya for good—and so again we see the importance of performance in this novel. If Sayuri or any other geisha refuses to act as a "proper" geisha should – for example, by rejecting the sexual advances of a danna or the man taking her mizuage – then the geisha risks being thrown out of her home and losing her job. Hatsumomo was basically a flatly evil character, but she still comes to a tragic end.



CHAPTER 28

In the present, Sayuri remembers that most geisha in Gion survived the Great Depression fairly easily, because wealthy businessmen and politicians always needed entertaining. However, by 1941, the war has begun to take a serious toll on the residents of Gion. Heavy rationing means that most geisha don't get the food and medicine they need. But because of Sayuri's connection with the General, Sayuri and the *okiya* manage to get by with relative ease. He keeps the *okiya* stocked with foodstuffs and other essentials.

With the war, the seemingly timeless world of the geisha starts falling apart in the face of harsh reality. Sayuri's reflections also show, once again, that a geisha's relationship to her danna is purely practical. Sayuri uses sex like a commodity, trading it for food and medicine in this time of crisis.



However, in December 1942, a military policeman arrives at the *okiya*. The man tells Sayuri that the police took the General into custody that morning for misappropriating military rations. Over the next few days, the military police confiscate the *okiya's* stores of food, fine clothing, gold, and ceramics as punishment for receiving illegal foodstuffs. By 1943, the war has begun to make life increasingly miserable. Many people seem to feel it unpatriotic to even have a good time.

It is almost as if war has stripped Japanese society of its former beauty and artifice. All the beautiful ornaments of society – the clothing, the jewelry, the artistic crafts – are taken by the government for the war effort. In this way, war represents life stripped bare to its most brutal realities: hunger, death, and suffering. There is no place for geisha in such a world.



One day in January 1944, the military government shuts down all the geisha districts in Japan so that the women can better contribute to the war effort. Most geisha expect that they'll have to find work in military factories. The geisha know that work in the factories is grueling and dangerous, because American bombers often target the factories. That night, feeling despondent about her future prospects, Sayuri is on the verge of tears when Nobu suddenly arrives at the *okiya*.

In the brutal reality that is life in Japan during the war years, the geisha have to give up their profession of creating artifice and instead turn to the routine drudgery of life in the factory. During the war, beauty turns back into suffering, and artifice into bare, unadorned reality. Sayuri cannot even bear the thought of this world without beauty.



Sayuri and Nobu talk in the reception room. Nobu says that he heard about the closing of the geisha district and has come to help her escape the factories. Not having seen Nobu since that night at the Awazumi Teahouse, Sayuri asks why he would help her if he is angry that she took the General as her *danna*. Nobu says that he knows that the General isn't her *danna* any longer. Nobu scolds her for wasting her youth on the General, but hopes that she now knows her true destiny. Thinking of the Chairman, Sayuri says that her true destiny lies with the man who runs the Iwamura Electric company. Since Nobu thinks that she is referring to him and not the Chairman, he agrees. He tells her that he has arranged for her to work for Arashino, the kimono maker, in his small workshop outside of Kyoto.

Before leaving, Nobu tells Sayuri that they both will see a lot of suffering in the next few years, but that he will think of her every time he needs to be reminded of beauty and goodness. As Nobu walks away, Sayuri feels herself desperately squeezing the piece of paper that he had given her with Arashino's address on it. Sayuri feels nervous and afraid because she doesn't know when she will see Nobu, the Chairman, or even Gion again. She remembers the fear she felt as a child when Mr. Tanaka took her away from her family. Sayuri feels like she is once again being torn away from her home and from the people she cares for.

CHAPTER 29

For the next year, Sayuri lives with the Arashino family, sewing parachutes for the war effort. As each day passes, she feels herself more and more in Nobu's debt because she doesn't suffer as badly as other geisha, many of whom work in factories or become prostitutes. Sayuri learns that Korin died in a factory firebombing, and that the Baron killed himself for fear that the Americans would invade and take away his aristocratic title and landholdings. Yet Sayuri still suffers as well. The only food she eats is soybean dregs and rice bran, and she feels herself growing thinner every day.

With the Americans firebombing all over Japan, Sayuri worries for the safety of her friends. She also comes to the realization that she might never see Satsu again. Sayuri had always believed that their paths would cross, but now with the chaos of war and Sayuri's new name, Sayuri believes it's unlikely that Satsu will ever find her.

Sayuri's response to Nobu's question about destiny shows how she has taken Nobu's advice to heart. Nobu had advised her to be like water in a river – though she can't direct where the river will flow, she can decide where in the river she wants to be. In this case, Sayuri must respond to Nobu in the way he wants, but she can do so in a way that maintains her inner loyalty and fidelity to the Chairman. In this scene, Sayuri uses fluid and ambiguous language to deceive Nobu, thereby mirroring her watery and adaptable personality.



*Nobu reiterates the idea that beauty is one of the few things that provides comfort during times of suffering. Importantly, it is Nobu who saves Sayuri from the factories – not the Chairman. Nobu's love for Sayuri seems real and concrete, while, as of now, the Chairman's love only exists as a fantasy in Sayuri's imagination. Yet even in this time of war and harsh reality, Sayuri holds firm to her fantasy that the Chairman will one day become her *danna*.*



Sayuri's experience of war reiterates how times of extreme suffering often destroy beauty in the world. Instead of making beautiful kimono, Arashino now makes parachutes for the war effort. Instead of entertaining men with her arts, Sayuri now sews together those same parachutes. Even the Baron – an old fashioned aesthete and connoisseur of all beautiful objects – cannot handle the grimness of war and kills himself.



As war ravages Japan and erases memories of the country's former glory and beauty, so too does it erase any last hopes Sayuri has for reclaiming anything from her childhood. In this way, war and suffering become all-encompassingly destructive.



In the present, Sayuri says that the adversity she experienced during that year made her reflect on the superficiality of her life as a geisha. At Arashino's, she realizes that beneath the elegant clothing and beautiful makeup, her life had no complexity at all, but "was as simple as a stone falling toward the ground." She had spent almost everyday of her life yearning for the Chairman, but now she realizes that it is possible that she might never even see him again. Fearing that she has wasted her life, Sayuri feels like a dancer who had practiced since childhood for a performance she will never give.

Sayuri in the present says that the months following Japan's surrender in August 1945 were the darkest months of the ordeal. Everyone in Japan felt humiliated that the Americans had so completely defeated their country. But within a year after surrender, the country begins to rebound and people start to think that Japan will one day return to its former glory. During the American occupation of the country, Arashino begins making kimono again and Sayuri works in the basement boiling dyes for the clothing. The dyes cause her once beautiful hands to stain and peel. Every night she dreams of Gion, but Sayuri doesn't feel free to return to Gion until Mother summons her. Mother and Auntie survived the war years selling contraband on the black market in a village outside Kyoto.

One afternoon in November, 1946, Nobu comes to Arashino's home to find out why Sayuri hasn't returned to Gion. Sayuri says she would love to, but the decision isn't hers to make. When she says that she is waiting for Mother to reopen the *okiya*, Nobu responds that he will take care of Mother. Nobu then gives Sayuri a piece of rubble from one of his factories. Nobu explains that the Americans bombed nearly half of his factories and that the Iwamura Electric company is in dire straits. But Nobu says that when his business is on its feet again, he will replace the rubble with a jewel. At that time, he will propose to be her *danna*. Sayuri feels her skin go cold at this, but she shows no sign of her feelings so as not to offend her friend who saved her from the factories.

Life during the war strips away most illusions from Sayuri's life. Without all the beautiful artifices of the geisha society, she realizes that her life has little real meaning—and so she has not really changed from the young maid who cried near the stream because her life had no purpose. Sayuri realizes that she has spent too much time on the trivialities of geisha life and not enough on pursuing her one true desire: the Chairman's affection.



The staining of Sayuri's hands with the dyes of the kimono provides a vivid symbol of how beauty is made from suffering. When we see a lovely kimono or beautiful piece of art, we don't immediately think of the human suffering – whether physical or psychological – that went into its creation, but pain is often a necessary ingredient for art. Thus Sayuri's stained hands are a physical reminder of the ugliness – the pain and suffering – that is often required for real beauty to come into existence.



Though Sayuri has known Nobu for years, she still feels unable to express her true feelings and desires around him. This is mostly because of the oppressive sexist expectations that dictate that a geisha silence her own desires if they conflict with those of a male patron. Thus, by conceding to Nobu's proposal, Sayuri fails to take an active role in following her own desires and determining her life for herself.



Nobu continues. He tells Sayuri that he needs her in Gion so that she can perform a task for him. Nobu says that all through the war, the Chairman resisted converting their factories into military factories. By the time he agreed to cooperate, the war was almost over and nothing they made for the war effort was even used in battle. Nonetheless, the American government classified the company as helping the Japanese, which means that the Americans will seize all their assets and bankrupt the company. Nobu says that Sayuri needs to entertain an old client of hers, Noritaka Sato, who is now the Deputy Minister of Finance. Nobu hopes that if they get on the Deputy Minister's good side, then he will use his influence to plead with the Americans to reconsider the case. Sayuri says she doesn't remember Sato. Nobu responds that he's a dull, piggy man who used to stare at her at parties. Because she's in Nobu's debt, Sayuri agrees to help him.

Before leaving, Nobu reminds Sayuri that their destinies are intertwined. Hearing him use the word destiny, Sayuri feels all of her hopes of winning the Chairman's affection flood through her once again. Sayuri asks him if the Chairman will join them when they entertain Sato. Nobu says that he will worry about the arrangements, and that she should simply get herself back to Gion.

CHAPTER 30

A week after Nobu's visit, Auntie comes to Arashino's home to bring Sayuri back to Gion. Auntie has lost all her teeth and her skin looks sickly, but Sayuri thinks she still has the bearing of a strong woman. The next day they leave for Gion. In Gion, Sayuri calls on Mameha, who survived the war as a nurse in a military hospital. Without a *danna*, she moved into a smaller apartment. Sayuri thinks that she still looks beautiful, if a little older around the mouth.

About a week after her return to Gion, Sayuri makes her reappearance as a geisha. For her first engagement, she meets with Nobu and Sato at a teahouse. Sayuri tries to engage Sato in conversation, but he says little more than one word at a time. Sayuri then suggests they play a drinking game. Not very good at the game, Sato ends up drinking so much that he throws up and passes out. While Sato is unconscious, Nobu calls him a fool. Sayuri says that she will bring a couple more geisha next time, and that Nobu should bring the Chairman so that the event will be more lively. Nobu agrees and lugs Sato out of the teahouse to bring him home.

The Chairman's stand against war shows that he is perhaps a more ethical man than Nobu. Though Nobu is a veteran who has seen the brutality of war, the Chairman was the one to stop the government from making their factory part of the Japanese war machine. The Chairman's brave and ethical stand against war shows that he might actually be as noble as Sayuri imagines that he is. Likewise, the Chairman – in contrast with Sayuri – is a person who will not let others make decisions for him. He risked jail or even execution by refusing the Japanese government in a time of war: an act of true self-determination.



Sayuri still believes that mystical destiny – instead of her own actions and choices – will bring her together with the Chairman, but relying on destiny to make her desires real will never get her closer to her goal. In the end, her belief in destiny seems like an excuse for her passivity.



Sayuri's recognition of Auntie's true strength (despite her sickly outward appearance) shows that the suffering of war has matured Sayuri's thinking about appearances. Having lived a life without artifice for the past few years, Sayuri can now perceive some of the truth behind the physical and aesthetic.



Sayuri's suggestion that Nobu bring the Chairman shows that she has begun taking more control over the events in her life. For example, Sayuri here makes use of the water in her personality. Instead of candidly telling Nobu that she wants to see the Chairman, she uses the pretense of making the event more "lively" to convince Nobu to bring him. Sayuri manipulates Nobu's desire to impress Sato so that she can move closer to her aim (or "destiny") of being with the Chairman.



After the engagement, Sayuri meets up with Mameha at a party where a group of drunk, rowdy American GI's are entertaining the geisha more than the geisha are entertaining them. Sayuri invites Mameha to come to her next party with Sato. Mameha agrees, and also suggests that Sayuri bring Pumpkin. Though Sayuri hasn't seen Pumpkin since before the war, Sayuri thinks of her often, feeling sorry that she stole Pumpkin's spot as Mother's adopted daughter. After the war, Pumpkin pleaded with Mother to take her back into the *okiya*, but Mother refused, saying she was a bad investment. Pumpkin ended up in a small *okiya*, but Mameha says she's very popular among the Americans because of her crude sense of humor.

The next afternoon, Sayuri arrives at Pumpkin's *okiya*. Sayuri tries to hug her, but Pumpkin pulls away and gives her a very formal bow. Though Sayuri didn't know it then, Pumpkin had spent two years during the war working as a prostitute. Sayuri notices that her face looks more gaunt, which actually gives her face a womanly elegance. Sayuri asks if Pumpkin would like to help entertain Nobu and his business partner. For some reason Pumpkin is distrustful of Sayuri, and claims that Sayuri must have other reasons for inviting her. Sayuri says that her only ulterior motive is to rekindle their friendship. Pumpkin says nothing. Feeling as if she must have offended Pumpkin somehow, Sayuri says that she would be very pleased if Pumpkin could join them. Before leaving, Sayuri gives her the address and date of the engagement.

CHAPTER 31

On the night of the engagement, Sayuri arrives to find the Chairman all alone in the reception room. Startled to see him after all these years, Sayuri can barely speak. The Chairman invites Sayuri over to sit with him and wait for the others to arrive. As she sits next to him, she notices creases around his eyes and the skin sagging around his mouth, all of which she thinks give his face more dignity. The Chairman tells her that she is still a beautiful woman, but before they have time to talk, Pumpkin and Mameha arrive.

Pumpkin is wearing a beautiful kimono that she says she rented from the another *okiya*. When Pumpkin bluntly says that she's never going to pay the *okiya* for renting her the kimono, the Chairman laughs cheerfully at her forthrightness. Pumpkin asks where the "big shot" businessman is. The Chairman chuckles and says that if she is referring to Sato, then he will be here soon. Pumpkin says that she knows Sato and that he looks like a big pig. Everyone laughs at her bluntness just as Nobu and Sato arrive.

Here we see some cultural differences between Japan and America with regard to dating and love. In Japanese culture, the geisha is supposed to entertain the man, thereby creating the illusion that the man has the love and affection of the beautiful geisha. The American soldiers, however, are more used to being the ones having to entertain women in order to win their affection. We also see how Pumpkin, who basically started out on a parallel path to Sayuri, has ended up less successful and lucky.



*Pumpkin's suspicion of Sayuri reminds us of Sayuri's inability to gain an objective distance from her own narrative. Sayuri has narrated her memoirs in a way that makes Sayuri out to be the hero and protagonist. But what if Pumpkin had narrated her own memoirs? How would we have seen Sayuri through Pumpkin's eyes? Remember, Sayuri took Pumpkin's spot as the daughter of the *okiya*, causing Pumpkin to eventually become a prostitute. Sayuri, however, cannot recognize the negative role she's played in Pumpkin's life, and so cannot understand why Pumpkin might be wary of her.*



This brief encounter with the Chairman suggests that truth is sometimes more beautiful than the illusory or the imaginary. Interestingly, the things Sayuri finds beautiful about the Chairman are not traditionally good-looking attributes—her love for him might actually make him appear more handsome. Love can affect one's perceptions of other people's outward appearances.



Compared to most geisha who conceal their true opinions and feelings, Pumpkin is blunt and honest. The Chairman seems to find this refreshing, which indicates that he might eventually fall in love with Pumpkin—instead of with Sayuri, who has hidden her true feelings of love for the Chairman for years.



The group eats and then plays a drinking game where everyone goes around telling two stories – one truth and one lie. Pumpkin tells funny, ribald stories and the men seem to be having a good time. When it's Sayuri's turn, she considers telling the story about meeting the Chairman when she was a young girl. But after considering that the Chairman paid little attention to her that night, she decides not to tell it. Not very good at the game, Pumpkin and Sato quickly get drunk. When the Chairman leaves to walk Pumpkin home, Nobu asks how Sato enjoyed his evening. Smiling and nodding, he says he enjoyed it very much.

Here Sayuri has the opportunity to show her honesty, a trait that might impress the Chairman, who seemed to value such honesty in Pumpkin. Yet Sayuri's fears of being too forward and breaking the unspoken code of a geisha's silence prevent her from expressing herself. Her own fears and the sexist traditions of society stop her from taking control over her life by finally telling the Chairman her true feelings.



CHAPTER 32

All through winter, Nobu brings Sato to Gion on a weekly basis to drink and talk with Sayuri, Mameha, Pumpkin, and the Chairman. During these months, Sayuri sees more of the Chairman than ever before. She realizes that her mind's image of him didn't fully capture his beautiful **eyes** and expressive mouth. One time while she thinks no one is watching, she gives herself over to staring at him. When Sayuri comes out of the reverie, she realizes that Pumpkin had been watching her the whole time. When Sayuri looks at Pumpkin, Pumpkin wears a smile that Sayuri isn't sure how to interpret.

This scene mirrors the earlier moment in the novel when Sayuri feared to look at the Chairman in front of Hatsumomo, lest her eyes reveal her true feelings. Now, Pumpkin – Hatsumomo's apprentice – has seen the truth of Sayuri's emotions. The symmetry of these scenes, in addition to Pumpkin's ambiguous smile, foreshadow Pumpkin's later betrayal of Sayuri.



One evening in February, Pumpkin comes down with the flu and is unable to join them at the teahouse. To entertain the men, Sayuri performs a deeply sorrowful dance piece called "Cruel Rain." To give her performance emotional weight, Sayuri pretends that Nobu, and not the Chairman, is her *danna*. By the end of the dance, she feels almost overcome with sadness, and when she looks at the Chairman, she sees him quickly flick away a single tear.

*Beauty once again comes from pain and suffering as Sayuri imbues her performance with the pain she would feel if Nobu became her *danna*. Interestingly, Sayuri does not conjure up this beauty by imagining the Chairman as her *danna*. This suggests that for Sayuri (or perhaps Golden), positive emotions like happiness are not as useful for crafting beautiful art.*



After Sayuri finishes the dance and sits back down, the Chairman asks about Pumpkin. Mameha says that she is ill and won't be joining them tonight. The Chairman glances at his watch and says that he too isn't feeling well and must excuse himself. Sayuri feels crushed, thinking that her dance made him shed a tear out of affection for the absent Pumpkin. Sayuri worries that the Chairman developed feelings for Pumpkin despite the fact that Pumpkin is "lacking in refinement."

In a moment of tragic irony, Sayuri's dance makes the Chairman appear to realize his feelings for Pumpkin rather than for Sayuri. Sayuri's comment about Pumpkin also shows her internalization of geisha norms, as she doesn't see the value in Pumpkin's honesty. Sayuri now believes that any geisha who disobeys the traditions of concealing her feelings is "lacking in refinement."



One night a few months later, Pumpkin, Mameha, and the Chairman cannot attend the party, so Sayuri entertains Nobu and Sato alone. Nobu is in a particularly bad mood, and he quickly rushes Sato out of the teahouse and puts him in a cab home. Nobu stands silently in the street, fuming. Sayuri recognizes that something is troubling Nobu, so she leads him back into the teahouse and gives him sake to relax him. After a few drinks, Nobu says that Sato successfully persuaded the American authorities to let their company continue to operate. But afterwards, Nobu says, Sato asked if it were possible to become Sayuri's *danna*, if only for one night. Nobu says that although he feels indebted to Sato, he will never give up what he's wanted for so many years to a man like Sato. Nobu says he could never live with himself if he stooped so low as to ask her to be with Sato.

Sayuri responds by saying that she owes such a debt to Nobu that she would take no favor he asked of her lightly. Shocked to hear that she would consider sleeping with Sato just to please him, Nobu angrily demands to know if she would seriously consider giving herself over to Sato. Sayuri evades the question by trying to calm Nobu down, but Nobu demands an answer. Nobu shouts that he will never speak to her again if she is the kind of woman who willingly gives herself over to just any man. To appease Nobu, she says she would never do such a thing.

Calmer now, Nobu tells Sayuri to bring him the piece of rubble that he gave her at Arashino's. Sayuri feels her skin turn to ice when she hears this, knowing that Nobu will now propose himself as her *danna*. Trying to delay the proposal, Sayuri says it's too late to retrieve the rubble from the *okiya* and then come back. Stubborn as always, Nobu says that he will wait here while she fetches it. Feeling her body move with difficulty, she heads to the *okiya* to find the rubble.

At the *okiya*, Sayuri retrieves the rubble. As she leaves, she runs into Auntie and begins to cry incoherently, calling herself a fool and saying that she is about to throw her life away. Sayuri asks if there is anything Auntie can do to delay her from returning to Nobu, but Auntie says that if Nobu wants her, she must go to him. Sayuri makes her way back to the teahouse and sets the rubble on the table in front of Nobu. Nobu looks at it and says he hopes he didn't promise her a jewel as big as this rock.

Though Nobu feels an obligation to Sato, he does not let this obligation dictate or determine his actions for him. Nobu refuses to give in to his feelings of indebtedness, staying resolute in his decision to pursue Sayuri. Nobu's refusal will contrast with the following scenes, where Sayuri feels as if she must pay back her debt to Nobu by becoming his personal geisha.



*Nobu and Sayuri are complete opposites when it comes to self-determination. While Nobu will heed no one in order to get what he wants, Sayuri will do almost anything to conform to other people's desires. Nobu refused to let Sato become Sayuri's *danna*, but Sayuri would sleep with Sato simply because Nobu requested it of her. Of course, this is also a result of cultural conditioning—a rich man like Nobu expects to get his way (because he usually does), while a geisha like Sayuri is taught to be submissive.*



In another moment of irony, Nobu gets angry that Sayuri would give herself over to a man just because of her feeling of indebtedness. Yet what Nobu doesn't realize is that Sayuri is willing to give herself over to Nobu himself just because of the debt she owes to him for saving her from the factories. Nobu does not realize he is forcing Sayuri to do the very thing he finds so despicable.



*Sayuri's request that Auntie intervene illustrates how Sayuri once again shirks her own agency and self-determination by asking others to make decisions for her. In this moment, the rubble becomes a metaphor for Sayuri's dream of having the Chairman as her *danna* – her dreams also seem to be destroyed and lying in the rubble.*



CHAPTER 33

That night Sayuri lays on her futon and feels the room spinning around her. To cope with what she feels is her inevitable relationship with Nobu, she tries to erase all thoughts of the Chairman from her head, replacing them with thoughts of Nobu. But whenever she pictures Nobu, something about him reminds her of the Chairman and she suddenly find herself lost in thoughts about the Chairman again. Over the next few weeks, Sayuri has little appetite and feels like a ghost going to parties and banquets.

A month or so later, Mother informs Sayuri that Nobu has proposed himself as her *danna*. Mother also says that Nobu and the Chairman have arranged for Sato, Pumpkin, Mameha, and her to fly this coming Friday to a small resort island near Okinawa in celebration of the company's recent success. In an instant Sayuri forgets her worries about Nobu, and starts worrying about flying on a plane.

When Friday arrives, Sayuri boards the plane in terror, thinking the whole thing will break apart before it even takes off. But once it does takes off, Sayuri feels her body relax. She watches the Chairman get up to use the bathroom. She considers how the Chairman is the only man she knows who first met her when she was still Chiyo. Sayuri thinks to herself that if someone ever asked her why she so yearned for the Chairman, she would answer, "Why does a ripe persimmon taste delicious? Why does wood smell smoky when it burns?"

Looking out of the window, Sayuri imagines cutting the bonds of fate that have held her to Nobu so that he plummets into the ocean below. This thought gives Sayuri an idea for how to stop him from becoming her *danna*. Sayuri thinks that if she betrays Nobu by sleeping with Sato, then Nobu will never want to speak to her again, let alone be her *danna*. Sayuri wonders if she is capable of hurting a man who has helped her so much, but she knows that if Nobu becomes her *danna*, then she will never have a chance of being with the Chairman.

When the group arrives at the island, they go to bathe in the hot springs at the inn where they are staying. Sayuri watches Nobu, realizing that he will never understand why she betrayed him. Sayuri thinks that Nobu will just assume that she did it because she found his injuries repulsive. This thought makes her less sure of her resolve to go through with the plan.

Thinking that her dreams of being with the Chairman are in ruins, Sayuri now attempts to conform her fantasies to reality. This shows how instead of changing her reality by taking direct action, she futilely tries to change her desires in reaction to reality. Once again, Sayuri privileges the desires of other people like Nobu over her own. She is still unwilling to fight for what she wants.



Golden foreshadows the transformative nature of this trip by making it also the first time Sayuri flies on an airplane. Just as Sayuri's train ride to the okiya signaled the beginning of a new stage in her life, this flight will completely alter her life's path.



Sayuri's affection for the Chairman partially results from the fact that he provides a link to her childhood and former self—her love for the Chairman is also a yearning for the past. At the same, Sayuri believes that her love is something unchangeable, an inherent part of reality no different from the smell of burning wood. In this way, she suggests that she and the Chairman are meant for each other – "destined" to be together – because their love is as true and obvious as a natural fact.



Sayuri's daydream about cutting "the bonds of fate" reveals a development in her thinking about destiny. Previously, she had thought that her destiny could not be altered, that she shared an "en" – a karmic bond of destiny – with Nobu. Now Sayuri seems to think that she does have control over her life: by betraying Nobu, she will destroy the en, thereby altering her own fate.



In this chapter, the forces of self-determination and destiny will come into collision. If Sayuri can break the en, then her self-determination will defeat destiny, but if she can't, then destiny will "win." Thus the novel's climax will coincide with the culmination of the Self-determination vs. Destiny theme.



The following morning, the group explores the village near their inn. They come across an abandoned theater that Sayuri thinks is a good place to bring Sato if she decides to go through with the plan. On the walk back to the inn, Nobu says to her that this trip must be the furthest she has ever been from her home in Kyoto. In all the years Nobu has spent talking with her, he had never once asked where she grew up, always assuming that she was from Kyoto. This thought makes Sayuri feel as if Nobu won't ever care to learn about her true self. Feeling an immeasurable gulf open between herself and Nobu, Sayuri makes up her mind to sleep with Sato.

Sayuri decides to bring Sato to the abandoned theater that night. All she needs is Mameha or Pumpkin to bring Nobu to the spot and have him open the theater door, catching Sayuri and Sato in the act. Sayuri thinks Pumpkin would be better, because Mameha is too refined to take part in such a plan.

While everyone relaxes outside the inn, Sayuri approaches Sato and says that they should take a private stroll through the village. He agrees, saying that he must first use the bathroom. Surprised that she's actually going through with the plan, Sayuri walks back to her room in a daze. In the room, she finds Pumpkin and asks her to bring Nobu inside the old theater at sunset. Sayuri says that she doesn't have time to explain any further, but that her future depends on Pumpkin bringing Nobu and not the Chairman. Pumpkin responds, "So it's time for a favor from Pumpkin again, is it?" and then walks out.

Though Sayuri doesn't know if this means that Pumpkin has agreed to help, she decides to go through with the plan and hope that Pumpkin will come with Nobu. Sayuri meets up with Sato and takes him down to the village, feeling a sensation similar to the day of her *mizuage* with Dr. Crab. She leads Sato inside the theater and tells him that even though he couldn't be her *danna*, they could still spend some time together in this empty theater. Taking the hint, Sato takes a step forward, kisses her, and starts to take off her clothes.

Sayuri finds the sex painful and unpleasant, but she thinks that life with Nobu would be even worse. When Sato is finished, he lies on top of her. Sayuri is about to push him off when she hears the door open and sees in the doorway Pumpkin and the Chairman.

Sayuri's love for the Chairman comes from the connection she feels between the Chairman and her past self, so it makes sense that Nobu's total lack of knowledge about her former self makes her realize – once and for all – her incompatibility with Nobu. Nobu is apparently only interested in the appearance of Sayuri – her geisha self – rather than her true inward identity or past. That is perhaps why he never asks her any personal questions, so as not to spoil the illusions she has crafted about her identity.



The abandoned theater is the perfect symbolic place to stage the betrayal. In essence, Sayuri will have to act as if she lusts for Sato in order to offend Nobu. The betrayal's location shows, once again, that geisha are the supreme actors.



*By sleeping with Sato, Sayuri breaks the traditions of the geisha code. She sleeps with a man who is not her *danna*, and betrays one of her most loyal male patrons—all so that she can keep alive the possibility of romantic love. In this way, she takes control over fate by casting off the fetters of the sexist tradition that tells women to put men before themselves. It is notable, however, that her "self-determined" fate still revolves around a man, and even her act of "independence" and betrayal involves sex and a man as well.*



Sayuri is such a committed actor that she will have actual sex with Sato just to convince Nobu of her feelings of lust for the piggish man. Having lived her whole adult life playing the part of the submissive geisha, this is her grand finale—but one where she must play the role of the lustful, back-stabbing woman in order to make real the truth of her desire for the Chairman. This might seem like a case of the ends not justifying the means, but Golden pushes the opposite conclusion by having everything work out for Sayuri.



*Sayuri's actions in this chapter seem to disprove the existence of destiny since she appeared to be cutting the bonds of fate that connected her to Nobu. But now it appears as if everything she did was futile. Destiny seems to win, as the Chairman – rather than Nobu – will think that she brought shame onto herself by sleeping with a man who was not her *danna*. Nobu and Sayuri's relationship is thus still potentially secure.*



CHAPTER 34

In the instant before the door opens, Sayuri can almost sense her life expanding like a **river** whose riverbanks have swelled, but when she sees the Chairman, she feels only a sense of chaos. The next thing she remembers is being back in bed at the inn. When she sees Pumpkin come inside the room, Sayuri asks why she brought the Chairman and not Nobu. Pumpkin calmly says that she has been looking for a way to get back at Sayuri since Sayuri stole her place as the daughter of the *okiya*. Pumpkin says that she knew how Sayuri felt about the Chairman because of the way she always looks at him. Pumpkin asks Sayuri how it feels to have something she wants taken away from her. Sayuri sees Pumpkin's face suddenly become consumed with anger, as if the spirit of Hatsumomo had been trapped inside of her and suddenly broke free.

The rest of the trip goes by in a blur. Back in Kyoto, Sayuri spends the days after the trip in a state of shock and sorrow. In the middle of the week, she receives word that Iwamura Electric requires her presence that evening at a teahouse. She expects that Nobu will meet her there and tell her that the *danna* arrangements have been finalized. Resigned to her fate, Sayuri decides to be as cheerful as possible when meeting Nobu so as not to ruin his happiness.

Sayuri waits for Nobu in a private room of the teahouse. She dozes off and dreams of the Chairman touching her shoulder. When she awakes, she sees the Chairman beside her. Sayuri begins to apologize for what happened at the island, but the Chairman interrupts her, saying he did not come for an apology. When Sayuri asks if Nobu will be joining them, the Chairman says no. The Chairman says that he's come to tell her a story. He tells her that around eighteen years ago, he took a walk by the Shirakawa **Stream**. Before the Chairman can say any more, Sayuri removes the Chairman's **handkerchief** from her sleeve and places it on the table.

Recognizing the **handkerchief**, the Chairman asks if she remembers that day as well. Sayuri says that all these years she's wondered if the Chairman knew she was the girl he comforted years ago. The Chairman responds by saying that he could never forget her **eyes**, explaining that since he spent so much time around lying businessmen, he felt an immediate connection to Sayuri because of her open and honest eyes. The Chairman says that he felt as if he were seeing right through her eyes into the deepest part of her self.

*Here, the metaphor of the river aligns with Nobu's ideas of self-determination. Previously, Nobu explained that people have the freedom to choose which part of the river they want to be in. By taking control over her life in the theater, Sayuri felt as if her life had expanded like a river, which means that she felt as if she had more freedom and mobility to move around within her fate. Pumpkin's anger also reveals the unreliability of Sayuri as our narrator. Sayuri barely focused on the fact that she deprived Pumpkin of being the daughter of the *okiya*, which eventually led to Pumpkin becoming a prostitute. If Pumpkin related these same events, then Sayuri might come off as an antagonist no different than Hatsumomo: beautiful on the outside, but uncaring, cruel, and conniving on the inside.*



Having apparently failed at taking control of her life's path, Sayuri now gives in and no longer tries to resist her "destiny." She even decides to suppress her true feelings by putting on another performance: appearing happy in front of Nobu.



Perhaps the Chairman was actually the one "destined" for Sayuri all along, in which case destiny still exists, but Sayuri simply misinterpreted it—assuming that she was fated to end up with Nobu. The handkerchief reappears in this passage, showing that the novel has come full circle in a way. By returning the handkerchief to its original owner, Sayuri symbolically completes her journey: and she may have finally "won" the Chairman's love.



Most characters in the novel are only concerned with the external appearance of beauty rather than inner beauty, so they can only see the superficial beauty of Sayuri's eyes rather than the personality that her eyes reveal. Only the Chairman sees beyond the superficial into the deep inner beauty of her soul—indicating their connection and compatibility.



The Chairman says that after meeting Sayuri that day, he asked Mameha to find and mentor the beautiful young girl with blue-grey **eyes**. The Chairman did this so that Sayuri could one day become a geisha he could spend time with. The Chairman says that the reason Mameha never revealed the Chairman's involvement is because of Nobu.

The Chairman's confession reveals that it was not destiny that brought him and Sayuri together, but in fact it was the Chairman's actions. Working through Mameha, the Chairman orchestrated all the major events of the novel. Thus what appeared like random chance or destiny – Mameha taking Sayuri as her apprentice, and the meeting at the sumo match – was actually all part of the Chairman's plan. This seems to favor self-determination over destiny, but the Chairman himself is almost a godlike figure in the novel, flat and without flaws, so his manipulations seem like a different kind of destiny.



The Chairman says that he values Nobu's friendship more than anyone else's. The Chairman explains that after learning of Nobu's feelings for Sayuri, he decided to keep his affection for Sayuri a secret. But that all changed after seeing her with Sato. When Pumpkin took him to the theater, he angrily demanded why she would bring him there. Pumpkin only responded by saying that Sayuri asked her to bring Nobu instead. The Chairman says that at that moment he realized that Sayuri must have been trying to break off her engagement with Nobu by sleeping with a man he despises.

If Sayuri almost never puts her desires before another's, while Nobu always does, then the Chairman represents the happy medium between these two positions. He curbs his desire to be with Sayuri in order to keep his friendship with Nobu, but as we will see, he also decides to act on his desires when he realizes that Sayuri returns his affection. Thus the Chairman tries to negotiate between attending to the desires of others while still making himself happy.



With great effort, Sayuri admits that she betrayed Nobu because of her feelings for the Chairman. She says that every step she took since that day by the **stream** has been with the hopes of bringing herself closer to the Chairman. Feeling all the heat in her body rush to her face, Sayuri turns away from him. The Chairman asks her to look at him, and she does so nervously. As they stare into each other's **eyes**, the Chairman draws her close and kisses her.

Sayuri turns away in shame because, as a geisha, she has trained her entire life to keep her true feelings a secret. Nothing in her life has taught her that a geisha benefits from speaking her mind, so she is taking a large risk at this moment, and fears that the Chairman will reject her. But she is rewarded for her honesty.



In a break in the narrative, Sayuri says that this is the first time someone ever really kissed her on the lips. Though she had slept with men, they had either avoided kissing her on the lips or had done so without any real passion. Sayuri says that this first real kiss of her life seemed more intimate than anything else she ever experienced.

Paradoxically, the sexualized life of the geisha actually delays Sayuri's sexual maturity. Even though she spends years as the private mistress to the General, Sayuri only experiences true sexual awakening when, in her thirties, she kisses the Chairman, the love of her life.



Sayuri asks why he kissed her if he is still planning to give her to Nobu. The Chairman says that Nobu withdrew his proposal to be her **danna**. The Chairman explains that when he saw Sayuri in the theater, she had the same look of desperation on her face that she did years ago by the **stream**. The Chairman says that he told Nobu what happened, because if Sayuri so dreaded being with Nobu, then Nobu must not have been her destiny. Overcome with relief, Sayuri cries as the Chairman enfolds her in his arms.

The chapter ends by suggesting an ambiguity in the Destiny vs. Self-determination debate. Was it destiny that brought the Chairman to the theater that day, so that he could see Sayuri's eyes and know the truth of her desires? Or was it simply an accident of chance, a result of Pumpkin's desire for revenge? The novel leads it up for the reader to decide.



CHAPTER 35

In the present, Sayuri says that the day the Chairman kissed her marked the end of her grief and suffering. Every day since leaving Yoroido, her life had been a struggle against one obstacle or another, but after the ceremony that officially makes the Chairman her *danna*, Sayuri feels her life become easier, as if she were a tree who finally made its roots.

To make his relationship with Sayuri easier for Nobu to accept, the Chairman has Sayuri stop being a geisha. This way Nobu would not have to see her around Gion. The Chairman pays Mother a considerable amount of money each month so that Sayuri can end her career. Sayuri also learns that since the Chairman is married, she can't move in with him. But he does buy her a house outside of Kyoto, where they spend most evenings together. During the day she finds things to occupy herself with, while at night they talk and enjoy each other's company. Over the next few years, he often takes her to New York City on business trips.

They are happy together and time passes quickly until the summer of 1956. The Chairman had two daughters with his wife and, during that summer, he arranges for his eldest daughter to marry a man named Minoru Nishioka. Without any sons, the Chairman hopes his new son-in-law will inherit the electric company. At the last moment, however, the man changes his mind about the marriage, which distresses the Chairman. Though Nishioka didn't give his reasons for calling off the marriage, Sayuri knows the real reason. Sayuri (in the present) says that if the Chairman's geisha had given birth to a son, then the Chairman might change his mind and turn over the company to his illegitimate son instead of to Nishioka. Sayuri says that Nishioka might have heard rumors that Sayuri had given birth to a son, which might have made him rethink the marriage arrangement. Sayuri then says that she would rather not mention if she truly gave birth to a son, because it might hurt the boy's reputation.

Having reached her life goal of being with the Chairman, all the conflict in Sayuri's life seemingly melts away. This kiss then represents the climax of the novel: the happy ending where two lovers come together in an almost blissful relationship. Of course, this is a totally unrealistic portrayal of love—as if it is a destination, not a continuous journey. Sayuri still believes in the “happily ever after” cliché, and Golden does little to disprove it.



*The revelation of the Chairman's marriage is strangely sudden, and casts new light on the complicated social relationships between men and women in Japan during this time. Apparently it is socially acceptable for a man of the Chairman's prestige to become a *danna* while also being married—but it also shakes our image of the Chairman as the epitome of goodness. This kind of polygamy also carries sexist connotations, since Japanese women were not allowed the same sexual freedom—Mother, for example, shamed Hatsumomo just for sleeping with her boyfriend.*



Near the novel's conclusion, we once again get a glimpse of Sayuri's unreliability as a narrator. Sayuri implies that she has given birth to the Chairman's son, though she frames this admission as a rumor, for fear of damaging her son's reputation. Thus we are left wondering what else Sayuri has left out from her narrative so as not to sully the reputations of herself, her family, or her friends. It is suddenly unclear just how much of the “memoir” is based in reality, and how much is wishful thinking. In this way, the appearance of truth in Sayuri's narrative might just have been another illusion, an artifice to improve and secure her reputation as one of Kyoto's premier geisha.



A week after Minoru Nishioka's change of heart, Sayuri approaches the Chairman and suggests that she should relocate to New York and open up a traditional teahouse for the recent influx of Japanese businessmen and artists. Sayuri says that a child raised between two cultures often has a difficult time, so a mother who moves with her child to the United States would make it her permanent home and have no choice but "never bring her child back to Japan at all." Realizing that Nishioka might agree again to the marriage if he learns that the Chairman's illegitimate son will live in America, the Chairman agrees to let her set up a teahouse in New York.

In August of that year, Sayuri moves to New York and Nishioka agrees to marry the Chairman's daughter. Before long, New York comes to feel as much a home to Sayuri as Gion did. Sayuri runs a successful teahouse where she meets and befriends Japanese artists and intellectuals. Sayuri sometimes thinks of returning to Gion for a visit, but fears that she would be disturbed by all the changes. She says that after Mother died, the *okiya* was torn down and replaced with a concrete apartment building. Eight hundred geisha had worked in Gion when Sayuri first arrived years ago, but now there were less than sixty.

One day, Sayuri and the Chairman walk through Central Park. Standing with two frail hands on his cane, the Chairman breathes in the air and says that the things he remembers are more real than the things he sees. When they arrive home that night, Sayuri says that they "drank each other up with so much yearning."

That night, Sayuri dreams of being at a banquet back in Gion, talking with an elderly man who was explaining to her that his dead wife still lived on inside him. In the dream, Sayuri sips from an excellent tasting broth and thinks that she is drinking up all the people who left her in her life. She awakens with tears streaming down her face and grips the Chairman's hand, fearing his death. But when he dies only a few months later, she understands that he left her "just as naturally as the leaves fall from the trees." Sayuri says that by telling her life story as she has just done, she has relived her life in the richness of her memories.

Sayuri's willingness to undergo self-imposed exile just so that she can help the Chairman's family illustrates her deep love for the Chairman—but she might have other motives as well. Perhaps, after achieving her goal of having the Chairman as her danna, Sayuri found herself wanting a new purpose in life, a new goal to strive for—and so her ambitions then centered on becoming a teahouse manager. In a way, Sayuri takes advantage of the Chairman's familial dilemma to gain financial autonomy by starting her own business.



In New York, Sayuri gains more control over her life than she ever did in Japan. Instead of living as a geisha who is subject to the whims of her clients, she now owns and manages a teahouse. Sayuri has finally achieved the level of success that Mameha once told her to strive for. Specifically, Sayuri now has autonomy—no one can pick her danna for her or make her entertain men. She is her own woman, free to make her own decisions. Throughout the book, Golden seems to elevate American culture (particular regarding women) over Japanese culture, and here he again simplifies that divide—as if everything suddenly becomes easy and ideal for Sayuri once she comes to America.



The Chairman's comment about the nature of truth implicitly argues in favor of the genre of memoirs. If memories seem more real than actual experiences, then Sayuri's memoirs are a way for her to re-experience her life through the act of remembrance—even if that remembrance is different from the factual truth.



Sayuri (and Golden) suggests that perhaps our memories of events are richer than the events themselves, because we are more removed from them and can see their place in the "big picture." By looking at the past, we can see beyond the suffering that had clouded our vision at the time, preventing us from experiencing the joys of daily life. Golden suggests that in this way, one can experience life in a different and fuller way through memory. This also plays into the theme of Artifice, as memory almost always clouds the "real" facts, even if it makes them more beautiful or true at their essence.



Sayuri says that sometimes while in walking through New York City she is struck by the exoticness of her surroundings. But then she thinks that Yoroido would also seem exotic to her now. As a young girl, she believed her life would not have been a struggle if she had not left Yoroido. But now she knows that her struggles never really mattered in the scheme of things, because “our world is no more permanent than a wave rising on the ocean.” Sayuri ends her memoirs by saying that “whatever our struggles and triumphs, however we may suffer them, all too soon they bleed into a wash, just like **watery** ink on paper.”

Sayuri's reflection on New York reveals that our perceptions of the exotic depend on our home culture—American readers might have found the novel's Japan as exotic as Sayuri finds America. Golden also ends with Sayuri's reflection on the ephemerality of life. She realizes that her suffering never really “mattered” (objectively) because – ultimately – all lives end in the oblivion of death. While this truth might sound depressing, the tone of the book's finale is melancholy yet comforting, as if suggesting that readers should not focus too much on the suffering of life, but should instead enjoy the fleeting pleasures of the present, and the joys of love. Like the loveliness of the geisha, happiness and beauty is ephemeral, but that doesn't make it any less important or real.





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