The Pillow Book

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF SEI SHONAGON

Sei Shōnagon was a real-life figure in Heian Japan. She was the daughter of Kiyohara no Motosuke, a provincial governor and noted poet. Little is known of Sei's biography beyond the experiences she records in *The Pillow Book*. Even her personal name isn't known for sure—"Sei" is a variation of the family name, Kiyohara, and "Shōnagon" might be a reference to a husband's or other relative's rank. She was probably married to a courtier named Tachibana Norimitsu while still in her teens, and they may have had a son, but the marriage does not seem to have lasted. Sei entered Empress Teishi's court at the imperial capital of Kyoto sometime in 993 C.E. In her late twenties at the time, she was about 10 years older than both the Empress and most of the other gentlewomen who served the Empress in court. Sei probably continued to serve in court until Empress Teishi died in the year 1000 C.E., and nothing is definitively known of Sei's life after that point.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Pillow Book was written during Japan's Heian period, which spanned the years between 794 and 1186. The Japanese imperial court was at its height during these centuries. The Heian period was marked by peace and prosperity, as well as the influence and absorption of Chinese culture in Japan. Chinese was the language of business, education, and high culture; therefore, it was regarded as a language for men, though Sei was familiar with it. The major events of Sei Shōnagon's life revolved around her service to Empress Teishi (977–1000), who was consort to Emperor Ichijo and daughter of his powerful regent, Fujiwara Michitaka. Teishi reigned over a court which devoted much time to literary pursuits, as *The Pillow Book* amply illustrates. Empress Teishi's ladies-in-waiting were expected to exhibit a working knowledge of classic Japanese poetry, such as the collection called the *Kokinshu*—both being able to recite such poems from memory and to incorporate allusions to them into their own poetic compositions. One's poetic compositions (and their artful display on paper) were thought to express a great deal about one's aesthetic sensibility and one's character. After Empress Teishi's father died in 995, her uncle rose to prominence in court, and during the last few years of Teishi's life, she was forced to reign as co-empress with her uncle's daughter. Teishi had three children and died in childbirth while still in her early twenties. *The Pillow Book* was compiled after Teishi gifted Sei Shōnagon a bundle of paper ("pillow book" probably refers to a diary kept at one's bedside), perhaps wanting Sei to capture the flavor of court culture. The book might also have been intended to serve as a catalogue of images or topics for poets.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The Tale of Genji is the most famous fictional work set during the Heian period. It was written by Shikibu Murasaki, who served in the imperial court in the decade after Sei Shōnagon did, and like her predecessor, was unusually well-read for a woman of the time. Like Sei, Murasaki also wrote a diary (*The Diary of Lady Murasaki*) that may even have been inspired by Sei. However, she actually mocks Sei in this work ("Sei Shōnagon [...] was dreadfully conceited. She thought herself so clever and littered her writings with Chinese characters; but if you examined them closely, they left a great deal to be desired"). Throughout *The Pillow Book*, Sei refers to the *Kokinshu*, a poetry anthology that was published around 905 and was avidly studied in Empress Teishi's court. Yoshido Kenko's *Essays in Idleness* (*Tsurezuregusa*), written in the 1300s, is an example of a work similar in structure—it's a compilation of loosely connected sayings, narratives, and other passages—though written from the perspective of a Buddhist monk.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Pillow Book (Makura no soshi)
- **When Written:** c. 994–c. 1002
- **Where Written:** Kyoto, Japan
- **Literary Period:** Classical Japanese (Heian period)
- **Genre:** Diary
- **Setting:** The imperial court of Kyoto, Japan in the 990s C.E.
- **Antagonist:** N/A
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Cultivating Delight. The Japanese word *okashi* appears frequently throughout *The Pillow Book*, often translated as "amusing," "delightful," or "lovely." *Okashi* is a kind of aesthetic response to an object or experience, and Sei Shōnagon's classification of things as *okashi* in *The Pillow Book* would have resonated with the cultural sensibility of her audience, while enhancing the reputation of the court as a place where such a sensibility flourished.

Dear Diary. *The Pillow Book* helped give rise to a genre called *zuihitsu* ("rambling," or "following the calligrapher's brush")—collections of personal essays and fragmentary observations and musings.

PLOT SUMMARY

Sei Shōnagon, a gentlewoman serving in the imperial court of Empress Teishi in Japan in the 990s C.E., keeps a diary. This "pillow book" is a blend of short narratives, personal musings, and many lists of observations and experiences which Sei finds beautiful or interesting. These components are loosely connected and are not compiled in chronological order.

Sei especially enjoys describing the customs of Empress Teishi's court throughout the year, such as New Year games and parades, and the rich, carefully selected **clothing** worn during various court festivals. She has especially fond recollections of exhilarating events like the Kamo High Priestess's procession, and a Sutra Ceremony at which Her Majesty was particularly radiant and even invited the youthful Sei to witness proceedings from the imperial seating area. She also describes pilgrimages to shrines, journeys that have both religious and sightseeing aspects.

Sei's descriptions of palace life often revolve around poetry—an obsession of Empress Teishi's court. For example, once Teishi orders her ladies to jot down any ancient poem they can remember, with the aim of discerning what's uppermost in their hearts. Another time, she recites the beginnings of various poems from the *Kokinshu*, a classical compilation, and asks the ladies to supply the closing lines of each. Such games are ways of passing the time in the secluded court, but they are also ways of displaying one's cleverness (especially for the quick-witted Sei) and distinguishing oneself before the Empress. Sometimes such games had a romantic gloss, like when the famous poet Sanekata sends a flirtatious poem to a young gentlewoman, who is too shy to fulfill social expectation by responding with her own.

Sei also relates anecdotes of exchanges with friends, most often male courtiers like Yukinari or Tadanobu, which often feature joking exchanges of poetry. Sometimes, Sei actually downplays her poetic skill in order not to appear unladylike (for example, she hides her knowledge of Chinese, which was considered a masculine language). However, she generally holds her own in these good-natured tests of skill (at least in the anecdotes she chooses to record), and the Empress delights in Sei's good reputation as well. In general, the male and female courtiers' lives are carefully segregated, though Sei mentions secret affairs often enough to suggest that they were common (without giving away any names). Sei also devotes many of her entries to describing court outfits, because these—for example, the rich green robes of a Chamberlain—differentiated courtiers of various ranks.

When Sei makes lists, she often includes geographical features or sites—such as mountains, pools, and rivers—but her interest in them is driven by the poetic associations of the place-names, or with the legendary backstory of a given place. Sometimes a particular tree, for example, is associated in poetry with a certain bird—like the orange tree with the *hototogisu*, which is especially beloved in the poetic tradition. Other lists cover topics such as "dispiriting things"—like not receiving a poem from someone you care about—or "things that make your heart beat fast," like seeing a sparrow with her nestlings or putting on incense-scented clothes. Sei is especially fond of the beauty and melancholy transience displayed by the change of seasons, or the way moonlight or weather put a special cast on romantic encounters. In all these things, Sei "can never be insensible to anything that [...] fascinated" her. Sometimes, however, her lists have a disdainful tone, especially toward commoners (who are viewed as disruptions of beautiful scenes) or men (whom Sei views as generally lacking in sensitivity). Sei also includes occasional short, heavily descriptive scenes—such as an account of the morning after a lover's secret visit—like those tales gentlewomen would tell for entertainment, or as if she intends to develop them into longer stories.

Sei only makes the vaguest allusions to historical events, such as the Regent's death, which led to Teishi's fall from favor and removal from the palace, and Sei's own brief estrangement from the imperial household on the basis of her rumored association with a conspirator. After describing a glorious festival in the company of the imperial family, Sei does nothing more than allude to her "heavy heart," because in fact Sei is looking back on the event after Teishi's untimely death.

The Pillow Book ends with a possible explanation of the diary's origin: the courtier Korechika gave Empress Teishi a gift of a bundle of paper, which the Empress in turn gifts to Sei. Sei begins filling the book with those things she finds delightful or impressive, never intending it to be seen by others, she claims. When Provincial Governor Tsunefusa spots the book during a visit to Sei's home, he takes it with him despite her protests. "That seems to have been the moment when this book first became known," Sei concludes.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Sei Shōnagon – Sei Shōnagon is the author of the diary entries that comprise *The Pillow Book*. She is a gentlewoman in the service of Empress Teishi. She would have been in her late twenties when she became a courtier, and she remained in Teishi's court until the Empress's death around the year 1000 C.E. Sei reveals relatively little about her life and relationships within *The Pillow Book* itself. She seems to have been married to Norimitsu for a brief period. While in court, she appears to have enjoyed Empress Teishi's warm regard, in part because of her talent for poetry—Sei describes herself as often having a poem or quote ready for an appropriate occasion. This wins her the respect of her peers, particularly male courtiers like

Tadanobu. Sei is sensitive to the quality of *okashi*, roughly translated "delight," a significant aspect of Japanese culture during the Heian period during which her diary entries were written. This tradition placed importance on aesthetic beauty and finding small instances of "delight" in one's everyday surroundings. Accordingly, Sei makes well over 100 lists of things she finds particularly beautiful or interesting (or the opposite) in her diary. Sei is disdainful of commoners and can be sharp-tongued at times, but she is also readily moved by the affairs of the close-knit imperial household.

Empress Teishi – Empress Teishi reigned in the imperial capital of Kyoto, Japan, during the 990s C.E. She is the consort of Emperor Ichijo and daughter of the Regent. Teishi is described frequently and in reverent terms by Sei Shōnagon, one of the many gentlewomen who attended her in the secluded women's quarters of the imperial palace. Teishi has a great love for literary pursuits and demands that her ladies study classical poetry, often quizzing them and setting other writing challenges. She is portrayed as a kind woman who makes a special effort to draw Sei out of her shell, and she is attentive to her ladies' likes and dislikes. Teishi had to reign as co-empress after her family lost favor in the court (though these events are not directly described in *The Pillow Book*) and she died soon after giving birth to a child in 1000 C.E.

Korechika – Korechika is a Grand Counsellor in the imperial court, a relative of Teishi, and is a frequent fixture in Teishi's court. He tries to draw Sei out of her shell when she is a new, bashful gentlewoman in service. He is knowledgeable about poetry, frequently called upon to recite or to lecture on the subject. He gives Empress Teishi the bundle of paper which becomes Sei's *The Pillow Book*.

Fujiwara Tadanobu – Tadanobu's title is Secretary Captain. At one point, he spreads "baseless and ridiculous rumors" about Sei, though he later tries to make amends with her by sending a poem. They even seem to have a flirtatious dynamic at one point. Tadanobu is particularly skilled at poetry recitation, prompting jealousy from Nobukata.

Tsunefusa – Tsunefusa is a senior courtier who serves as a provincial governor for a time. He and Sei are friends, and he sometimes visits her at home. According to Sei's account, Tsunefusa is responsible for the circulation of *The Pillow Book*—the volume was accidentally left out during one of his visits, and he carried it off with him, despite Sei's protests.

Norimitsu – Norimitsu is believed to have been Sei's husband for a short time, though they are not married during the events depicted in *The Pillow Book*. Though he and Sei occasionally cross paths around the palace grounds, Sei has little to say about him except that he has little poetic sensibility, which eventually contributes to a falling-out between the two.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Emperor (Ichijo) The Emperor is Empress Teishi's husband. He seldom appears directly in *The Pillow Book*, except in occasional exchanges with Sei or in reference to his wife. Historically, Ichijo reigned for about a decade following his wife's early death.

The Regent (Michitaka) The Regent is Teishi and Genshi's father, and acts as a powerful advisor to the Emperor. However, his family's influence at court is eclipsed over the course of Teishi's reign, and after his death, Teishi loses favor altogether.

Fujiwara Yukinari – Yukinari's title is Secretary Controller of the Office of the Empress's Household. He and Sei are good friends who often tease each other and also enjoy exchanging quotations from poetry and other literary works.

Kohyoe – A young gentlewoman who receives a flirtatious poem from Sanekata during the Gosechi Festival and isn't sure how to respond.

The Shigeisa (Genshi) – The Shigeisa is Empress Teishi's younger sister. Her arrival at court stirs great excitement, and Sei finds her as beautiful as a work of art.

Sanekata – Sanekata is a renowned poet who appears twice in *The Pillow Book*, both times sending poems to favored ladies—one of them Kohyoe—in hopes of a reply.

Nobukata – Nobukata is a senior courtier. He envies Tadanobu's skill at chanting poetry and gets the latter to coach him in the art. His friendship with Sei sours after she jokes about rumors concerning him.

Masahiro – Masahiro is a chamberlain whom Sei regards as a laughing-stock. He wears elegant clothes, yet he's clumsy and frequently bungles his phrases.

Narinobu – A captain whom Sei rejects on a rainy night.

Emperor Murakami – A former emperor. He was the grandfather of Emperor Ichijo, who is Emperor during most of *The Pillow Book*.

Hyoe – A Lady Chamberlain who served under former Emperor Murakami and whose skill with poetic allusions Sei admires.

Narimasa – A senior courtier whom Sei teases for having built gates that were too small.

Consultant Kinto – A highly accomplished poet with whom Sei exchanges poems.

THEMES

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COURT LIFE VS. COMMON LIFE

The Pillow Book is a diary composed by Sei Shōnagon, a young woman who served in the imperial court at Kyoto during Japan's Heian period. Specifically, Sei was a gentlewoman in the service of the Empress Teishi, from roughly the year 993 until 1000 C.E. Sei herself was born in an outlying province where her father served as a governor. Once she moves into Empress Teishi's household in early adulthood, however, the rural province of her birth seems like an entirely different world. This shift is reflected in Sei's diary, which tends to draw a firm distinction between court life and common life. By generally describing aspects of court life as delightful and contrasting them with undesirable common life, Sei creates a picture of higher imperial society as inherently worthy of being seen and enjoyed, and of commoners' lives as rightly disparaged and ignored.

Sei sees court life (that is, higher society) as a more valuable form of existence than life as a commoner. Sei views commoners as generally unworthy of being seen or heard: "Women without prospect, who lead dull earnest lives and rejoice in their petty little pseudo-pleasures, I find quite depressing and despicable. People of any standing ought to give their daughters a taste of society. They should show them the world and let them become familiar with its ways, by serving as attendants at the palace or other such positions." Sei's tangible disdain for such women's "dull earnest lives" reflects her own change in status once she moves from the country to the court. Though the Empress's court is a small, self-contained universe in its own right, Sei believes it's a world that offers more authentic pleasures and prospects than anything the provinces have to offer. In a list Sei titles "Unsuitable things," her bias against the "common" comes through again: "Snow falling on the houses of the common people. Moonlight shining into such houses is also a great shame. So is meeting with a plain roofless ox cart on a moonlit night, or seeing a cart of this sort being drawn by an auburn-coloured ox." (An endnote clarifies that auburn-colored oxen were prized by the aristocracy.) The reason Sei considers each of these things to be "unsuitable" is that things of great beauty—snow, moonlight, auburn oxen—are set against a background of "common" life. The suitability, and hence the worthiness and desirability of something, seems to depend on its fittingness within its setting—meaning that, for Sei, "common" things can never really be beautiful. This attitude suggests that Sei is trying to distance herself from her own provincial upbringing.

Whereas common things lack beauty and are even despicable (unworthy of being seen) by Sei's estimation, court life is largely based upon displaying beauty and enjoying others' beauty. A significant aspect of court life is the complicated system governing the types and styles of **clothes** which differentiated various members of the Japanese imperial court. For example, Sei describes "a Chamberlain of the sixth rank" as being a particularly "splendid" sight "in those special green robes he's allowed to wear." Subordinate officials look "inconsequential," "but if they become Chamberlains they undergo an astonishing transformation," like "heavenly beings descended to earth!" In other words, court culture dictates that only specific officials are allowed to wear certain colors and fabrics, and being granted the privilege of wearing particular clothing transforms the way others see that individual—to such an extent that these individuals go from being regarded as "inconsequential," unworthy of notice, to "heavenly." Ideally, most activities of court life involve opportunities to display beauty that's befitting of one's rank, and to be recognized by others of equivalent rank. Sei describes an occasion when a group "sets off together from the palace to visit a temple or some other place. The sleeves spill tastefully out from their carriage, scrupulously, even overscrupulously, arranged [...]," but there are no passersby to admire them. Sei continues, "It's quite extraordinary how, from sheer vexation, you find yourself longing for even some passing commoner to have the sensibility to appreciate the scene, and later spread the word." Sei's mentioning "even some passing commoner" implies that such commoners, who are unable to embody beauty themselves, are nevertheless useful to flatter the whims of court members. In other words, commoners aren't worthy of notice or respect in themselves; they're only valuable insofar as they recognize the beauty of the court, reinforcing the latter's self-perception as beautiful.

Indeed, throughout the book, there's generally a correspondence between the beauty of one's attire and the "quality" of the wearer. When a beautifully-dressed member of the court behaves in a way that *doesn't* match his attire (that is, he behaves more like a commoner), that person is scorned and shamed. Sei describes a notoriously foolish chamberlain as follows: "Masahiro is a great laughing-stock. [...] He comes from a household where they prepare their clothes beautifully, and seeing him wearing those wonderfully coloured train-robes and elegant cloaks [...] people sigh and say, 'If only they were on someone else instead of Masahiro!'" Masahiro's shame, in other words, is that he embodies a mismatch between imperial elegance and oafish awkwardness, which only befits a commoner. When there's a mixing of these two worlds, as in Masahiro's case, the logic of court life is disrupted, and the undesirable contaminates the elegance of the desirable.

POETRY AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS

In Empress Teishi's court, knowledge of classical poetry was neither an academic pursuit nor a frivolous pastime. Rather, courtier Sei Shōnagon's diary entries in *The Pillow Book* suggest that poetry was woven into everyday conversations and was often a defining aspect of one's social status and relationships. Courtiers like Sei would

have avidly studied classic poetry collections like the Japanese anthology *Kokinshu*, and would have also been skilled in composing poems on the spur of the moment in response to various social situations. Through a variety of illustrations from Sei's life in court—her own interactions with Empress Teishi, as well as exchanges she's witnessed between peers and lovers—Sei shows that poetry is far more than a way of expressing oneself—it's a delicate yet consequential medium for securing and maintaining relationships in the world of the imperial court.

Poetic ability is not only portrayed as a status symbol, but as a means of securing and maintaining one's place in the Empress's favor, and thus, one's status in court. An example of the way poetry functions in the court comes up when Empress Teishi invites her ladies to write down the first ancient poem that comes to mind—sending Sei into a panic. "'Come on, come on,' [the Empress] scolded, 'don't waste time racking your brains. Just quickly jot down any ancient poem that comes to you on the spur of the moment. Even something hackneyed will do.' I've no idea why we should have felt so daunted by the task, but we all found ourselves blushing deeply, and our minds went quite blank." When Sei finally comes up with a poem, she changes a line extolling the "flower of spring" to extolling "your face, my lady." Sei's instincts about the high stakes of this exercise are confirmed when the Empress looks at the poems and comments, "I just wanted to discover what was in your hearts." The panic is justified: the Empress wanted to assess her ladies' attitudes toward her through the medium of spontaneous poetry-writing.

Poetry is not just a form of entertainment, but a sign of cultural attainment in which court ladies feel pressure to prove themselves. On one occasion, the Empress opens the book of famous poems, the *Kokinshu*, and quizzes her ladies by reading a few lines from a poem and then asking the ladies to complete the poem from memory. Recalling this event, Sei wonders, "Why on earth did we keep stumbling over the answers, even for poems we'd engraved on our memories day in and day out? […] Her Majesty then read out the complete poem for each of those that nobody had been able to answer, […] and everyone groaned, 'Oh of course I knew that one! Why am I being so stupid today?' Some of us had copied out the *Kokinshu* many times, and should really have known it all by heart." Sei's regretful recollection of the memory contest shows that, in the imperial court, a simple poetry game is much more than that—it's a way of proving one's skills and distinguishing oneself before one's peers and especially before the empress she serves. Hence, Sei pours many hours into memorizing the *Kokinshu*.

Beyond poetry's role in court life, Sei shows it to be a key mediator of other important relationships, too. Poetry can be a mode of communication between friends, and even a form of flirtation between lovers. At one point, Sei reflects on the potential of poetry exchange to damage promising relationships: "There are also those times when you send someone a poem you're rather pleased with, and fail to receive one in reply. […] [Y]ou do lose respect for someone who doesn't produce any response to your tasteful seasonal references. It also dampens the spirit when you're leading a heady life in the swim of things and you receive some boring little old-fashioned poem that reeks of the longueurs of the writer, whose time hangs heavy on her hands." When one puts one's talent on display—and one's reputation on the line—by sending a poem, in other words, one hopes to receive a reply in kind. A reply that doesn't meet one's expectations reflects poorly on the sender, and can thereby even potentially derail a relationship. On a certain occasion, when a young lady-in-waiting doesn't reply to a captain's suggestive poem, Sei feels more sympathy for the disappointed sender than the girl who's been put on the spot: "Still, I thought, it's no good being bashful and hesitant when it comes to poetic composition. Where does that ever get you? Though your poem might not be so very wonderful, the important thing is that it must be something you come out with on the spur of the moment. And besides, I felt sorry for the [messenger], who was pacing about snapping his fingers in vexation at the lack of poem." In other words, poetry is a serious business. In the context of the imperial court, it's less important to produce a masterpiece than to show the mental dexterity of being able to engage in the language of spontaneous poetic exchange. Failure at this puts other people in a difficult position, showing that poetry isn't just a medium of individual expression, but a kind of cultural glue that cements and reinforces relationships between individuals and their larger society.

AESTHETIC BEAUTY, DELIGHT, AND CULTURAL TRADITION

The Pillow Book is filled with Sei Shōnagon's appreciative observations of the world around her: "Whether it be plants, trees, birds or insects, I can never be insensible to anything that on some occasion or other I have heard about and remembered because it moved or fascinated me." That desire to be "sensible" to things that "move" or "fascinate" is a key part of Sei's experience in the Heian court. Central to that culture was a quality called *okashi*: an aesthetic experience of delight, cultivated through observation of small details of daily life that could be readily shared with others, as in poetry. Thus, though Sei's frequent lists and anecdotes are loosely connected at best, Sei uses them not merely to express her personal likes and dislikes, but to specifically cultivate a sensitivity to the quality of *okashi*. Sei thereby draws upon and even contributes to a longstanding tradition, emphasizing the importance of aesthetic beauty and appreciating small instances of delight within Japanese culture.

Throughout *The Pillow Book*, Sei includes lists of closely

observed phenomena or experiences that produce specific responses in her—things and experiences that, in her view, exhibit the quality of *okashi* and encourage an *okashi* sensibility. For example, Sei makes a list of "Things that make your heart beat fast." These include "A sparrow with nestlings. Going past a place where tiny children are playing. Lighting some fine incense and then lying down alone to sleep. Looking into a Chinese mirror that's a little clouded. A fine gentleman pulls up in his carriage and sends in some request." The point of this list is not primarily to draw a connection between the different items; rather, the point is sharpening one's awareness and appreciation (or sensibility) of things or experiences that elicit an emotional response (in this case, making one's heart beat fast). Sei's list of "Refined and elegant things" is much the same: "A girl's over-robe of white on white over pale violet-grey. The eggs of the spot-billed duck. Shaved ice with a sweet syrup, served in a shiny new metal bowl. A crystal rosary. Wisteria flowers. Snow on plum blossoms. An adorable little child eating strawberries." As before, Sei doesn't elaborate on precisely what makes each of these details, in her view, "refined and elegant." Rather, cataloguing these items is a practice of both displaying and deepening one's sense of *okashi*. Simply observing and enjoying one's surroundings (rather than analyzing them) is what's valuable.

Sei's cultivation of *okashi* is not merely an expression of her individual taste, but derives from the poetic tradition in which she's immersed. When she makes a list of flowering trees, Sei notes that a certain species of orange tree is associated, according to poetic convention, with a type of bird, the *hototogisu*, whose song is revered. This suggests that Sei's focus on *okashi* isn't random, but is informed by her culture—that is, her culture (her immersion in poetry, for example) disposes her to especially value certain examples of *okashi* because of their occurrences in poetry. In fact, such poetic associations encourage Sei to seek out certain experiences of *okashi*. She reflects, "You wake during the brief nights of the rainy season and lie there waiting, determined to be the first to hear [the *hototogisu*] - then suddenly your heart is utterly transported with delight, as that dear, exquisite voice comes ringing through the darkness." In other words, one is determined to hear "that dear, exquisite voice" both because of its beauty and because of its cultural significance—two things that are interconnected in Sei's thinking.

Elsewhere, other comments show that Sei is aware of participating in a poetic tradition that conveys and reinforces an *okashi* sensibility. Again, listing non-flowering trees with special qualities, Sei remarks of camphor trees, "It's quite creepy to imagine how all that thick dark growth must feel, but when you think of the way its 'thousand branches' are used in poetry to refer to the thousand tangled feelings of a lover's heart, [...] you wonder who first counted the branches to come up with that expression." Sei recognizes that, somewhere within her cultural history, someone originated the camphor tree metaphor that has become conventional in poetry. They did so by connecting an observation of nature with an emotional experience, just as she does throughout her diary. Thus, by recording such aesthetic experiences, Sei recognizes the significance of the *okashi* tradition and engages with it herself, thereby ensuring that this important facet of Japanese culture will live on.

In fact, scholars have speculated that Sei's collection of *okashi*-inspired details was meant to serve as a sourcebook for poets—they could study her lists and anecdotes in order to have their *okashi* sensibility refreshed, and in turn to instill their own poetic compositions with that sensibility for others' enjoyment. There's not enough historical evidence to confirm this hunch, but there's plenty of evidence within *The Pillow Book* that Sei's focus on *okashi* isn't just an expression of personal delights, but a conscious participation in a tradition in which both she and her audience are meant to take delight.

ROMANCE AND OFFICIAL DUTY

Sei Shōnagon clearly enjoyed romantic adventures during her time in Empress Teishi's court, and she doesn't hesitate to disclose these in *The Pillow Book*. The book isn't a chronological diary of Sei's daily life, so it's not possible to draw many conclusions about her love life overall. Nevertheless, the reader is able to get a general glimpse of relationships between men and women in Empress Teishi's court. On one hand, there's a playful element of concealment between men and women, since official business largely kept male and female courtiers apart, and women were generally hidden behind thin screens and blinds, even in the presence of male visitors. On the other hand, Sei isn't naïve about the ways that women could be vulnerable to male deception and exploitation, especially since they simply didn't enjoy the same freedom and power as their male counterparts in court. Overall, Sei's portrayal of the relationships between men and women is a mix of lighthearted and cynical, suggesting that the interplay of official duty and romance can be mutually enjoyable, but that it also carries risks—which generally falls more heavily on women.

In the court, especially given the official separation and carefully supervised distance between men and women, romance appears to have a lighthearted, even recreational aspect. The lives of courtly men are a source of entertainment in the lives of Empress Teishi's ladies-in-waiting: "The nightly roll call of the senior courtiers is a very fine thing. [...] We ladies place ourselves at the eastern edge of Her Majesty's quarters and strain our ears to listen for the hammering footsteps of the men as they come tumbling out, and a lady will feel that familiar, sudden clutch of the heart as she hears the name of someone particularly dear to her. [...] It's fun the way we all discuss the men's voices, and pass judgement on how attractive or

otherwise each one sounds." Sei's description shows that relationships between men and women are heavily mediated by court protocol—sometimes, overheard names and voices are the closest contact between the sexes.

At the same time, Sei's observations suggest that she enjoys frequent nighttime visits from men—enough to make some humorous observations about common annoyances they bring with them. Such annoyances include a "man you've had to conceal in some unsatisfactory hiding place, who then begins to snore. Or, a man comes on a secret visit wearing a particularly tall lacquered cap, and of course as he scuttles in hastily he manages to knock it against something with a loud bump." Such anecdotes suggest that while overnight visits from lovers are officially taboo, others discovering such visits seems to be a source of humor and doesn't appear to carry heavy consequences for either party involved.

Secret trysts, in fact, are an opportunity for just the kind of delightful aesthetic experience that Sei lovingly describes throughout *The Pillow Book*: "Summer provides the most delightful setting for a secret assignation. The nights are so very short that dawn breaks before you've slept. Everything has been left open all night, and there's a lovely cool feel to the expansive view. […] As [the lovers] sit there murmuring endearments, they're startled into a sudden panicky sensation of exposure by the loud caw of a passing crow—a delightful moment." Relationships between male and female courtiers carry a pleasant element of risk that enhances rather than detracts from the fun.

Even though Sei generally treats romance as a lighthearted subject, she's also a rather cynical observer of relationships at court. Sei suggests that one must be discerning about one's romantic companions. She writes, "I must say I'm ashamed for any woman who's taken in by some man who is privately thinking, 'How depressing! She's not at all what I hoped she'd be. She's full of irritating faults', but when he's with her will fawn and flatter and convince her to trust him. […] And then there's the man who doesn't keep his criticisms to himself, but will speak his mind about one woman's faults to another woman[.]" Sei perceives that deception and flattery abound in romantic relationships, and that woman must be on their guard. Sei herself takes a cynical view of the men she meets, musing, "if ever I do come across a man who seems to feel for me at all, I immediately assume he's actually quite shallow-hearted, so I have no need to expose myself to potential embarrassment. […] And then there's the man who takes advantage of a lady at court who has no one to protect her interests, wins her over, and when she falls pregnant, repudiates the affair completely." Sei's more pessimistic observations suggest that she has witnessed—and perhaps even experienced—plenty of soured romances during her time at court. Though there's plenty of opportunity for enjoyment, then, relationships between courtiers clearly also carry the risk of public shame and exposure. Sei suggests that while mixing duty and romance can be exhilarating and enjoyable, it's also emotionally and professionally risky—with the burden of those undesirable consequences implicitly falling more heavily on the unprotected woman.

SYMBOLS

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

CLOTHING

In the court of Heian Japan, one's clothing visibly symbolized one's rank—an onlooker could determine at a glance, based on the colors and even the fabrics worn, what a person's rank would be. In that sense, clothing symbolizes not only one's status within the complex court hierarchy, but the level of respect one is thereby owed. Throughout her diary, Sei Shōnagon seldom describes other people's physical attributes, but she describes their outfits in detail and assesses the wearer's worth accordingly. For example, a young man might be an unremarkable, low-ranking courtier unworthy of notice. However, when he's promoted to Chamberlain and permitted to wear the green color associated with the emperor, the same man is suddenly looked upon as if he's an exalted being. Thus, clothing symbolizes the stratified social hierarchy among Japanese courtiers, as well as the arbitrary nature of these different statuses.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *The Pillow Book* published in 2007.

Section 20 Quotes

Her Majesty provided us with the inkstone. 'Come on, come on,' she scolded, 'don't waste time racking your brains. Just quickly jot down any ancient poem that comes to you on the spur of the moment. Even something hackneyed will do.' I've no idea why we should have felt so daunted by the task, but we all found ourselves blushing deeply, and our minds went quite blank. Despite their protestations, some of the senior gentlewomen managed to produce two or three poems on spring themes such as blossoms and so forth, and then my turn came. I wrote down the poem:

With the passing years
My years grow old upon me
yet when I see
this lovely flower of spring
I forget age and time.

but I changed 'flower of spring' to 'your face, my lady'.

Her Majesty ran her eye over the poems, remarking, 'I just wanted to discover what was in your hearts.'

Related Characters: Empress Teishi, Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

This quote describes a fairly typical day in Empress Teishi's court, particularly displaying the Heian period's high esteem for poetry and literary accomplishments. The Empress expects her ladies-in-waiting to be intimately familiar with classical Japanese poetry—even able to recall poems on the spur of the moment. In this instance, Teishi asks her ladies to recollect poems on the theme of spring, and despite her claim that something "hackneyed" is acceptable, the ladies find this spontaneous memory exercise quite nerve-wracking. Sei Shōnagon's own poem offers a clue as to why. When she offers the poem "With the passing years," she pointedly changes the wording in order to delight and flatter the Empress. This alteration displays both Sei's mastery of poetry and her loyalty to Teishi. When Teishi responds that she'd just been curious about the ladies' feelings, she seems to confirm that Sei's flattering revision is exactly what she was fishing for—and therefore that everyone's anxiety about their poems was justified. In this way, Sei illustrates how poetry is not merely a form of artistic expression or entertainment within court life—rather, it is fundamental to social relationships and a crucial way in which courtiers prove their social status and pay respect to their cultural traditions.

Sections 21–29 Quotes

There are also those times when you send someone a poem you're rather pleased with, and fail to receive one in reply. Of course there's no more to be done about it if it's to a man you care for. Even so, you do lose respect for someone who doesn't produce any response to your tasteful seasonal references. It also dampens the spirit when you're leading a heady life in the swim of things and you receive some boring little old-fashioned poem that reeks of the longueurs of the writer, whose time hangs heavy on her hands.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout *The Pillow Book*, Sei offers lists of objects or experiences she finds especially noteworthy. Poetry appears prominently on Sei's lists, suggesting that knowing, reciting, and exchanging poetry with others is a major facet of daily court life. This quote appears on her list of "dispiriting things." In particular, Sei finds it dispiriting when certain reciprocal aspects of the Heian period's poetry culture fails to measure up to her expectations. It is expected that when someone receives a poem, they will respond with a poem of their own—so the failure to reply would be felt as a personal snub. Sei's reference to "tasteful seasonal references" demonstrates the care that went into poetic composition, as well as the fact that seasonal sights and the passage of time were popular themes. Her remark about receiving a "boring little old-fashioned poem" also adds to Sei's self-portrayal as an accomplished poet who doesn't have much patience with mere "common" people or their interests (despite her own provincial upbringing).

Things that make your heart beat fast—A sparrow with nestlings. Going past a place where tiny children are playing. Lighting some fine incense and then lying down alone to sleep. Looking into a Chinese mirror that's a little clouded. A fine gentleman pulls up in his carriage and sends in some request.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is one of many such lists which appear throughout *The Pillow Book*. Scholars have never conclusively determined what the purpose of such lists are, though there are several possibilities. They might serve as a compilation of images for poets to draw upon in their compositions—elsewhere in the book, there are many scenes in which Sei or another character struggles to think of a line to suit a particular mood or occasion. A book like this could serve as a resource for those instances. Another possibility is that these lists are just an attempt to reflect the aesthetic sensibility of Empress Teishi's court. Since Empress Teishi gave Sei Shōnagon the diary as a gift, she may have intended that Sei would create a literary work that would reflect well on her court, and lists like these suggest a finely-honed sensitivity.

Often, there is no obvious connection between the items Sei lists. In this case, though, some of the things named spark intense delight—like the nestlings and tiny children—or create a sense of anticipation (the fine gentleman; going to sleep, perhaps with the expectation of being awakened by a lover). This speaks to the Japanese tradition of *okashi*, which placed importance on appreciating one's surroundings (no matter how ordinary) and finding small instances of beauty and delight in the everyday.

Sections 34–45 Quotes

❝ The *uguisu* is made out to be a wonderful bird in Chinese poetry, and both its voice and its appearance are really so enchanting that it's very unseemly of it not to sing inside the grounds of our 'nine-fold palace'. People did tell me this was so but I couldn't believe it, yet during my ten years in the palace I did indeed never once hear it. This despite the fact that the palace is near bamboo groves and there are red plums, which would make it a fine place for an *uguisu* to come and go. Yet if you go out, you'll hear one singing fit to burst in a nondescript plum tree in some lowly garden. […] In summer and right through to the end of autumn it maunders on and on in a wavery old voice, and lower sorts of people change its name to 'flycatcher', which I find quite unfortunate and ludicrous.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs in the midst of Sei's list of birds with which she is familiar. She shows particular interest in the origins of the birds' names, as well as any charming or attractive traits they exhibit. The *uguisu* is a small bird that sings beautifully in springtime, making it especially popular in poetic compositions. In summertime, the *uguisu*'s song sounds more wavery and drawn-out. In her discussion of the bird, Sei comments that, given the bird's beauty and charm, it would be fitting if the *uguisu* sang within the palace grounds (the "nine-fold palace," using the poetic reference). In fact, however, the graceful bird contents itself to sing in a "nondescript," "lowly" place. This ironic comment acknowledges that the natural world doesn't always conform to Sei's aesthetic sensibilities about what is beautiful. For that matter, neither do "lower sorts of people," whose common name for the bird Sei dismisses as laughable—another reminder of Sei's firm distinction between court culture, which is ideal, and "common" tastes, which are undesirable.

❝ *Unsuitable things*—Snow falling on the houses of the common people. Moonlight shining into such houses is also a great shame. So is meeting with a plain roofless ox cart on a moonlit night, or seeing a cart of this sort being drawn by an auburn-coloured ox.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Sei's list of "unsuitable things," like her discussion of both the cultured and common associations of the *uguisu* bird, shows the importance of context in her aesthetic sensibility. She names several things that, under other circumstances, she would typically describe as beautiful: snowfall, moonlight, and an auburn-colored ox (a color of livestock which was especially favored by the aristocracy). However, the context in which these things appear changes the way Sei sees them. When snow falls on commoners' homes instead of, say, the palace, it's no longer a beautiful sight, but rather "unsuitable." She even goes so far as to describe moonlight shining on such houses, or a commoner's ox cart appearing in such light, as shameful. This list provides a key insight into what Sei and the palace court culture as a whole consider to be beautiful—even things like snowfall and moonlight are not simply beautiful in relation to themselves, but must be considered in a delicate relationship with other

objects and with their environment. In Sei's world, "common" things are generally incapable of being beautiful, and can even detract from the beauty of other things which are normally considered beautiful.

Sections 46–60 Quotes

❝ The nightly roll call of the senior courtiers is a very fine thing. […] We ladies place ourselves at the eastern edge of Her Majesty's quarters and strain our ears to listen for the hammering footsteps of the men as they come tumbling out, and a lady will feel that familiar, sudden clutch of the heart as she hears the name of someone particularly dear to her. But imagine what thoughts go through her head when it's the name of a man who no longer bothers even to let her know he exists. It's fun the way we all discuss the men's voices, and pass judgement on how attractive or otherwise each one sounds.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is part of a standalone section in which Sei talks about goings-on among the male courtiers. The ladies like to eavesdrop on the men, in hopes of overhearing a beloved name, discovering fresh gossip, or simply finding some entertainment amidst the monotony of enclosed palace life. In fact, this quote readily contrasts the situations of male and female courtiers in general: while the men had regular public duties, the women generally remained indoors, concealed behind fans, screens, or blinds when men were in the vicinity. They don't even see the men during the roll call, but must "strain [their] ears" to participate even in a remote sense. Although Sei doesn't comment on this distinction directly—she takes the hidden nature of feminine court life largely for granted—her descriptions of it suggest that such gendered divisions were a pervasive aspect of life in imperial Heian society. Her quote also shows that romance was a common subject of interest in court.

Sections 72–77 Quotes

❝ There was nothing in [the letter] to justify my nervousness. He had written the line from Bo Juyi, 'You are there in the flowering capital, beneath the Council Chamber's brocade curtains', and added, 'How should it end, tell me?'

'What on earth shall I do?' I wondered. 'If Her Majesty were here I'd most certainly show this to her. It would look bad to parade the fact that I know the next line by writing it in my poor Chinese characters.' […]

[S]o I seized a piece of dead charcoal from the brazier and simply wrote at the end of his letter, in Japanese script,

Who will come visiting this grass-thatched hut?

The messenger duly carried it off, but there was no response.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker), Empress Teishi, Fujiwara Tadanobu

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

This quote features a good friend and fellow courtier of Sei, Fujiwara Tadanobu, who has sent her a poem. The poem is by a Chinese poet, Bo Juyi, who was highly esteemed in Heian Japan. The particular poem is called "Alone at Night in a Grass-Thatched Hut," which Sei—who is accomplished in the study of poetry—knows well. The game Tadanobu proposes is simple enough, one that appears elsewhere in The Pillow Book: the recipient of the poem is to write down the missing lines and send the message back. Sei's difficulty is that Chinese is considered to be a language of the masculine realm, and it would look unfeminine if she were to reveal that she knows the Chinese lines perfectly well. So she ends up creating the first lines of a new poem in Japanese, turning the challenge back on Tadanobu and effectively stumping him and his friends. The anecdote shows Sei's cleverness, but it also shows just how complex the court's poetry games could be. Especially for a talented, cultured woman like Sei, more than just knowledge is required—she actually has to mask the extent of her knowledge and think creatively in order to be successful in this context.

Sections 83–87 Quotes

❝ A Chamberlain of the sixth rank. He's a quite splendid sight in those special green robes he's allowed to wear, and he can wear damask, which even a high-ranking young nobleman is forbidden. Subordinate officials in the Chamberlain's office […] look quite inconsequential at the time, but if they become Chamberlains they undergo an astonishing transformation. When they appear as bearer of an imperial pronouncement, or present the imperial gifts of sweet chestnuts and so forth at one of the great ministerial banquets, from the magnificent way they're received you'd think they were heavenly beings descended to earth!

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a section which Sei titles "Splendid things." Imperial rankings during the Heian period (when Sei's diaries entries were written) were very complex, and a courtier's rank was so important that he was often referred to by his title, not his personal name. There were nine ranks, with the first being the top and the ninth at the bottom. The sixth rank, then, was that of a middling courtier. A Chamberlain of that rank nevertheless enjoyed some important duties—namely attending the emperor, which meant he had access to the imperial Privy Chamber. This rank also included the privilege of wearing olive green—a color forbidden to other ranks because of its association with the Emperor—and often garnered special admiration from others, since a Chamberlain often performed duties like carrying messages to and from the Emperor. Here, Sei describes some of that special reverence—a man who's appointed to the position of sixth-rank Chamberlain seems to undergo "an astonishing transformation," as if from total inconsequence to godlike status. Though Sei's tone is a bit tongue-in-cheek, she effectively gets across just how complicated the world of the court can be and what an impact promotion can have on a man's social standing.

❝ [A messenger] made his way over discreetly to where the ladies were seated and apparently asked in a whisper why nothing was forthcoming. I was sitting four people away from Kohyoe, so even if I'd been able to come up with some response it would have been difficult to say it, and besides, how could you offer some merely average poem in reply to one by Sanekata, who was so famous for his poetic skills? Still, I thought, it's no good being bashful and hesitant when it comes to poetic composition. Where does that ever get you? Though your poem might not be so very wonderful, the important thing is that it must be something you come out with on the spur of the moment.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker), Sanekata, Kohyoe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In this anecdote, Sei relates something that took place during a Gosechi Festival, a major festival in court that included special dance performances and a banquet. The story involves Kohyoe, a young gentlewoman in Teishi's court, and a man named Fujiwara Sanekata, who was considered to be the finest poet of the day. Sei watches as Sanekata sends a poem to the young Kohyoe, who appears to be so shy and embarrassed that she doesn't know how to respond on the spot. This is a socially awkward moment for everyone involved, hence Sei's wish that she could intervene. In this culture, when someone sends a poem, it's considered disgraceful not to reply—as Sei explains, the point isn't to produce an exceptional poem, but to show enough cleverness to reply in some way under pressure. Of course, the fact that the poem was sent by Sanekata heightens the stakes. Sei's anecdote is another example of the role that poetry plays in the Heian court: it's an intricate means of communication with many potential pitfalls, perhaps especially for an inexperienced young gentlewoman.

Sections 88–95 Quotes

❝ 'Whenever there's an occasion when people are composing, and Your Majesty instructs me to make a poem, my only impulse is to flee. Not that I don't understand the rules of syllable count, or that I make winter poems in spring, or write about plum blossom or cherry blossom in autumn, or anything of that sort. But after all, I come from a line of people with a name for good poetry, so I'd like it to be said that my poems are a bit better than the average. When I compose something, I want people to say later, "This was a particularly impressive poem composed on that occasion - just what you'd expect, considering her forebears." It's an offence to my late father's name, to fancy myself as a poet and put myself forward to make some plausible-sounding poem, when in fact what I write has nothing special to recommend it at all.'

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker), Empress Teishi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 102

Explanation and Analysis

Just before this quote, Sei and a group of other gentlewomen have gone on an expedition to look for the *hototogisu*, a bird whose springtime song is especially loved. Such expeditions were considered to be prime opportunities for composing poetry. Various events intervened, however, and when the Empress questions Sei about her lack of poem, Sei becomes defensive. She explains the anxiety that comes over her each time the Empress poses a poetry challenge—it's not because Sei doesn't understand the technical rules of composition or writes about certain subjects during the inappropriate season. Rather, it's the fact that Sei has a reputation to uphold, since both her father and grandfather were renowned poets. Instead of making Sei overconfident, this legacy actually puts pressure on her to measure up; she doesn't want to give Her Majesty a mediocre poem (which might be considered very good by others' standards), but a poem that stands out as exceptional, befitting her upbringing. Sei's anxiety sheds light on the numerous poetry challenges that are recorded in *The Pillow Book*. Given the weight of her family history, it makes sense that such episodes would stand out to her as worthy of mention.

Sections 115–119 Quotes

❝ I must say I'm ashamed for any woman who's taken in by some man who is privately thinking, 'How depressing! She's not at all what I hoped she'd be. She's full of irritating faults', but when he's with her will fawn and flatter and convince her to trust him. […] I must say, if ever I do come across a man who seems to feel for me at all, I immediately assume he's actually quite shallow-hearted, so I have no need to expose myself to potential embarrassment.

I really do find it astonishing the way a man will fail to be in the slightest bit affected by the moving nature of a woman's deep unhappiness, when he considers abandoning her. […] And then there's the man who takes advantage of a lady at court who has no one to protect her interests, wins her over, and when she falls pregnant, repudiates the affair completely.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is sandwiched into a section which Sei titles "Embarrassing things." She finds plenty of potential for "embarrassment" in romantic relationships in the imperial court. This includes men who hypocritically flatter women behind their backs (or, more particularly, the women who fall for such flattery). Sei also mentions women who find themselves pregnant and abandoned after a man, unconcerned about her vulnerable situation, decides to move on with his life. Though Sei discusses these scenarios in terms of mere "embarrassment," more than humiliation was clearly at stake: in a context where men had more liberties, women's reputations and livelihoods could be devastated in such cases. It's also worth noting that Sei herself was married to a courtier named Norimitsu at one point, and may even have had a child with him. Though Norimitsu appears in *The Pillow Book* a couple of times, interacting with Sei more or less cordially, little detail is revealed about their earlier marriage or what contributed to its demise. In any case, Sei's words about men and romantic relationships do seem to have come from experience. At the very least, perhaps she discovered too late that Norimitsu himself was "shallow-hearted."

Sections 120–129 Quotes

❝ When I went out to meet him, he said admiringly, 'I would have expected the person who received that to respond with some half-baked poem, but your reply was brilliant. A woman who fancies herself as a poet generally leaps at the chance to compose, but I much prefer someone who doesn't behave like that. For the likes of me, a person who loves to reply with a poem comes across as actually having a much poorer sensibility than someone who doesn't.'

[…] It's very unseemly of me to boast like this, I know, but on the other hand I do think it's an entertaining story.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker), Fujiwara Yukinari

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Sei has just enjoyed a teasing exchange with her good friend, a courtier named Yukinari. Yukinari had sent Sei some cakes (*heitan*) with all the formality of official court protocol. Sei immediately plans to respond in a similar teasing fashion. She writes on beautiful stationery, making a joke: "Such handsome cakes […] but it looks most 'unhandsome' of that servant not to present them himself." "Unhandsome," *reitan*, is a pun on the word for cakes,"" *heitan*. Yukinari is delighted, telling Sei that her reply is even better than the conventional poem that might be expected in such an exchange. Yukinari suggests that while many women would have jumped at the chance to show off their skill at poetic composition, Sei's subtle play on words is a more sophisticated, thus more pleasing response. Of course, Sei actually *is* a talented poet, as Yukinari is aware, but her note shows that she's confident enough not to exhibit that talent every chance she gets. Her effort to give a farcically "official" response also suggests that she is confident in navigating the predominantly masculine world of the court.

Sections 130–135 Quotes

❝ I never intended this book to be seen by others, so I've written whatever came into my mind, without worrying about whether people would find it strange or unpleasant.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

This quote, a slightly awkward insertion, speaks to the ambiguous nature of *The Pillow Book* as a written work. It is part of a short "list" section titled "Worthless things," on which Sei includes "someone who's both ugly and unpleasant," "clothing starch that's gone bad," and fire tongs which are disposed of after a funeral. Sei adds that although many people hate such things (and therefore that her inclusion of them isn't particularly novel or interesting), that doesn't mean she shouldn't include them in her book. The odd defensiveness of Sei's tone suggests that her diary underwent some editing at a later point, after it had been discovered and read and perhaps critiqued by others. Even if it's true that Sei intended for the diary to remain private—something that can't be established on the basis of its existing contents or publication history—it's unclear why she would insert these apologetic remarks in an inconspicuous list tucked in the middle of the book. Regardless, the startling nature of this aside reminds readers of *The Pillow Book*'s unconventional literary status as both a personal diary and a published book.

❝ This is the final dance, and no doubt that's why you feel particularly bereft when it draws to a close. As the nobles and others all get up and file out after the dancers, you're filled with a frustrated longing for more, but this is assuaged in the case of the Provisional Kamo Festival by the Returning Dance. There's a most moving and marvellous atmosphere then, with the slender ribbons of smoke rising from the courtyard watchfires and the wonderful wavering pure notes of the *kagura* flute lifting high, and the voices of the singers. It's piercingly cold, the glossed silk of your robes is icy against the skin and your hand as it clutches the fan is chilled, but you notice none of this. I like the way the head dancer takes a terrific pleasure in performing the long-drawn-out call that summons the comic entertainers for the interlude.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 142

Explanation and Analysis

In this section, Sei has been talking about the Provisional

Festivals and the Rehearsal of Performance. The Provisional Festivals took place at Kyoto's major shrines and were preceded by a formal rehearsal of the festival dances, with the Emperor and imperial court as audience. Though Sei often describes the beauty and pageantry of court happenings with delight, this passage lingers on the details with special attention to her feelings as an audience member. She describes the letdown she feels as the performances draw to a close, as well as the joy of the Returning Dance, a kind of encore. Though Sei often describes events as more or less delightful depending on their natural environment, this is one case in which the chilly weather goes unnoticed, because the drama of the dance is all-consuming. The quote gives an appealing glimpse of some of the finer details of a Japanese court celebration, and it also gives a more personal look into Sei's emotions than her more detached lists and wry anecdotes usually do—her sense of *okashi* (delight) is not just a matter of observation, but of memorable participation.

Sections 160–176 Quotes

❝ Once, during the reign of the former Emperor Murakami, there was a great fall of snow. The moon was bright. His Majesty heaped snow in a bowl, stood a spray of flowering plum in it and gave it to the Lady Chamberlain, Hyoe, saying, 'See what poem you can compose on this.' Her response was to recite the words of the Chinese poem, 'At times of snow, moonlight and blossom', for which he praised her very highly. 'There's nothing unusual in producing a poem,' he said, 'but it's far more difficult to say something that is so precisely apt for the occasion.'

Related Characters: Emperor Murakami, Sei Shōnagon (speaker), Hyoe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

Sei lingers on the subject of snow, which reminds her of an anecdote that seems to have been of particular interest to her. Though Sei includes many stories of times that she impressed others with her spontaneous poetic allusions (or times that she was under pressure to produce such allusions), she also includes examples of others performing well under such pressure. In this case, the gentlewoman Hyoe recalls a work by beloved Chinese poet Bo Juyi, which includes the line quoted above. The Emperor is particularly impressed by this quote, since it is indeed a moonlit, snowy night, complete with a blossom. Sei always aspires to this level of poetic aptitude, which is likely why she preserves this story in her diary. Being able to recite a poem that is perfectly apt for the occasion shows not only one's ability to memorize classical poetry and pay it due respect, but one's sensitivity to one's environment, and the ability to combine these things at just the right moment—a notable intellectual and artistic achievement.

❝ When I first went into court service, everything seemed to overwhelm me with confusion and embarrassment, and there were times when I could barely hold back my tears. I attended Her Majesty each night, behind her low standing curtain, and she would bring out pictures and so on to show me, but I was so hopelessly nervous that I could scarcely even stretch out a hand to take them. She described what was in each picture, asked what I thought was happening and generally tried to set me at ease with her talk. [...] It was a fearfully cold time of year, and the glimpse of her hands emerging from the wonderful, glowing pale plum-pink sleeves filled me with deep awe. I remember gazing at them in astonishment, still fresh from home and new to all I saw, and thinking, 'I never knew someone so marvellous could exist!'

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker), Empress Teishi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

Though Sei usually portrays herself as an experienced, worldly, and wise courtier, she does insert a few episodes from earlier in her life, when she was a novice in Empress Teishi's service. The more mature Sei presents herself as self-possessed and quick-witted, so her admission of youthful awkwardness is striking—especially compared to scenes in which she jokes and exchanges poems with the Empress and asserts her authority over newer courtiers.

This scene also shows the tender side of Empress Teishi's personality, however—far from an aloof figure, the Empress intentionally seeks out Sei and tries to make her more comfortable in her new surroundings. This suggests that the relationship between the Empress and ladies-in-waiting was intentionally founded on trust and friendship, not on fear of the Empress's authoritative presence. Nevertheless, Sei's strongest impression from the time is Her Majesty's "marvelous" hands and sleeves, suggesting that Sei was too

shy to focus elsewhere. Given that Sei had a provincial upbringing, it's likely that her former status as a commoner made her feel inferior during her early days as a courtier. Now, in Sei's later years, she seems to have intentionally separated herself from any former associations with common life, believing it to be ugly and indecent compared to life in the imperial court.

Sections 222–247 Quotes

I particularly despise people who express themselves poorly in writing. How horrible it is to read language that rides roughshod over manners and social conventions. It's also very poor to be over-polite with people who should rightly be treated less formally. It's bad enough to receive poorly written letters oneself, and just as disgraceful when they're sent to others.

Generally speaking, even when you hear someone use language in this sort of slovenly way when talking face to face, you wince and wonder to yourself how they can say such things, and it's even more appalling when it's directed to someone eminent. Though when it's some country bumpkin who's speaking like this, it's actually funny, and therefore quite appropriate to them.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 205

Explanation and Analysis

This passage reveals some of Sei's thoughts regarding court etiquette and class differences in general. Unsurprisingly, given Sei's enthusiasm and skill for poetry, she looks down on people who don't share her deftness of expression. However, in the world of the Heian court, there is more involved in writing than simply employing skill. The way one writes (or speaks) to another person has to do with that person's rank as well as one's own. In Sei's world, it isn't respectful to treat lower-ranked people with deference—to do so is to "ride roughshod over manners" and write poorly. It's the same if one addresses oneself in a "slovenly" way to a person who *does* deserve deference. On the other hand, such language is only to be expected of a "country bumpkin," and so it's entertaining, not offensive. Besides showing how complex the rules of court etiquette were, this quote is also a reminder of Sei's disdain for all things "common" despite her own upbringing as a commoner.

One young man, who married into the household of a man at the height of his fame and fortune, was never very diligent in calling on his new wife, and ceased coming altogether after a mere month. He was roundly condemned on every front [...] Then in the New Year he was made a Chamberlain. [...] In the sixth month of that year, everyone gathered to attend the Lotus Discourses that a certain person was dedicating, and there was this son-in-law the Chamberlain, dazzlingly attired in damask skirted trousers, black *hanpi* jacket and so forth, seated so close to the carriage of his neglected wife that his jacket cord might well have snagged on the tailpiece of her carriage. All the people in the other carriages who knew the details of the situation were thinking, 'Poor thing, how must she be feeling to see him there?' [...] It does seem that men don't have much sympathy for others, or understanding of how they're feeling.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 207

Explanation and Analysis

This quote is situated in a short section in which Sei discusses various situations that can emerge with sons-in-law. This particular story—whose characters aren't named, and which could even be a fictionalized representation of a real scenario—is meant to show how unfeeling men can be. In Heian culture, a husband and wife wouldn't establish a home together right away. The young husband would come to call on his new wife, who remained at home with her parents. The fact that this young man neglects his bride would be considered a disgrace, suggesting that he primarily married her for access to the family name and fortune. When he flaunts his new court position, even appearing at public events where he knows his wife will be, he compounds the shame of the situation. Sei's inclusion of this story suggests that she finds it typical of marriages in the court—indeed, she seldom describes lasting, happy marriages in her diary, with the Emperor's and Empress's marriage being a rare exception. Her attitude about marriage reflects her wariness about men in general, which she openly expresses throughout *The Pillow Book*.

Sections 248–259 Quotes

❝ 'You see me as some upstart then?' I inquired, to which another lady responded, 'More on the level of a stable boy.' Nevertheless, it was a glorious moment, to have the honour of being permitted to watch from above. No doubt it's unseemly for me to be boasting like this, and it may well redound unforgivably on Her Majesty's reputation, by giving an opportunity to those who would set themselves up as shallow judges of worldly matters to wag their heads sagely and declare, 'To think that Her Majesty should favour such a creature!' - yet I can only write the facts as they stand, after all. I freely admit that I was of a quite unworthy station to be the recipient of Her Majesty's special attentions in this manner. [...] But these events, which seemed to us so splendid and auspicious at the time, all look very different when compared with the present, and this is why I've set it all down in detail, with heavy heart.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker), Empress Teishi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

This quote falls within a longer section in which Sei recounts some events from an early period of her service to Empress Teishi. The section is marked by a greater sense of awe, nervousness, and deference than the more confident and lighthearted anecdotes from later years. On this particular occasion, Empress Teishi is attending a special dedication ceremony, and Sei's rapt descriptions of Her Majesty's costuming and the procession to the temple reflect her youthful excitement. Out of 20 carriages filled with ladies-in-waiting, Empress Teishi kindly invites Sei to observe the day's events from the imperial viewing platform, which is quite an honor. Even another lady's teasing can't dampen the memory. When Sei apologizes for "boasting" and expresses concern for Teishi's reputation, she is probably following polite conventions of the time—it would be unseemly for her not to act in this way. However, her concluding remarks cast the whole reminiscence in yet another light—at the time of her writing, Empress Teishi would have already died in childbirth. Given this context, Sei's glowing descriptions could also perhaps be read as a tribute to the Empress she mourns.

Sections S1–S29 Quotes

❝ I set to work with this boundless pile of paper to fill it to the last sheet with all manner of odd things, so no doubt there's much in these pages that makes no sense.

Overall, I have chosen to write about the things that delight, or that people find impressive, including poems as well as things such as trees, plants, birds, insects and so forth, and for this reason people may criticize it for not living up to expectations and only going to prove the limits of my own sensibility. But after all, I merely wrote for my personal amusement things that I myself have thought and felt, and I never intended that it should be placed alongside other books and judged on a par with them. [...] Anyway, it does upset me that people have seen these pages.

Related Characters: Sei Shōnagon (speaker), Tsunefusa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

This well-known passage occurs at the very end of *The Pillow Book*, describing its supposed origin. Previously, Sei has described how Empress Teishi gifted her the bundle of paper that became her diary. Sei explains that her objective for the diary was nothing other than to fill it with odd miscellany, without concern for who might read it. This claim shouldn't be taken at face value, however. Like other similar statements throughout, her defense for why the book might not meet others' expectations would be in keeping with the superficially modest way that most writers of the time would have framed their published work. Given that Sei evokes the Japanese *okashi* sensibility throughout the book through her lists of ordinary but aesthetically beautiful observations and experiences, it may very well be that Sei's humble statement dismisses *The Pillow Book*'s merit as an important contribution to the Japanese poetic and literary tradition.

The interesting question this passage poses is whether *The Pillow Book*'s publication was truly as much of an accident as Sei claims—she goes on to describe how her friend Tsunefusa accidentally discovered and absconded with the diary, over her protests. Because Sei's claim to be "upset" over the book's publication fits literary convention, it's probably impossible to know for certain what her intentions for the book, or the exact circumstances of its publication, really were.

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.

SECTIONS 1–4

Sei Shōnagon describes the best times of day that can be observed in each of the four seasons—for example, the dawn in spring, a moonlit summer night, a windy evening in autumn, and a snowy morning in winter. Likewise, every month of the year has its own unique delights.

Sei Shōnagon opens her diary with the first of many lists—lists of things that bring her delight. Throughout the book, she will return to the idea of delight, or okashi, *a traditional Japanese emotional and aesthetic sensibility based on observations of one's surroundings.*

Sei discusses various New Year customs. On the seventh day, for example, people pick shoots of new herbs and attend a parade, with much gaiety. On the following day, those who've received promotions make the rounds of their supporters. On the day of the first full moon, gentlewomen sneak around hitting each other with gruel sticks, to much laughter. There's even more laughter when a young newlywed is hit, because everyone knows she's just had an overnight visit from her husband.

At this time (the 990s C.E.), imperial court life revolved around seasonal festivals. Here Sei describes the Festival of Young Herbs, which involved both the ritual eating of certain herbs and the awarding of promotions at court. The ritual involving gruel sticks stems from a folk belief that being struck would bring the good fortune of a male child.

In the fourth month of the year, the Festival is a special delight. Nobles and courtiers are distinguishable by the colors of their **clothes** in the procession. In the days leading up to the Festival, Sei loves watching attendants carrying "rolls of dark leaf-green or lavender fabric." She also notices the excited little girls preparing for the festival, who shift from boisterous to dignified as the procession gets underway.

The Festival in the fourth month is the Kamo Festival, a Shinto celebration with elaborate processions that draw great crowds. Different ranks and roles were distinguished by the wearing of specific colors and fabrics, thereby emphasizing the distinction between commoners and courtiers.

On a list of things that sound different even though they are the same, Sei includes men's and women's language. She also says that "Commoners always use too many words when they speak."

Sei frequently draws attention to what she perceives to be distinctions between men and women. Even more pronounced is her view of the distinction between courtier and commoner—her estimation of the latter is invariably low.

SECTIONS 5–19

Sei describes an occasion when the Empress Teishi moved into a new house. The gentlewomen, never having seen the house, assume that they will be able to exit their carriages in private, so they don't fix their hair. When it turns out that the carriages don't fit through the gate of the new place, the disheveled gentlewomen have to walk past courtiers and other men, to Sei's exasperation. Sei teases Narimasa, the senior steward, for building such inadequate gates.

Like her lists, Sei's anecdotes of court life generally don't proceed in a detectable order. In most cases, as here, her concern is to highlight a story she regards as humorous or otherwise noteworthy. Because female courtiers were typically separated from men behind screens and curtains, this exposure would have been uniquely embarrassing.

One day, the Emperor's cat is basking on the veranda, and a gentlewoman summons a dog, Okinamaro, to scare the cat away. The Emperor orders two chamberlains to beat the dog and banish it to Dog Island for this behavior. The ladies feel sorry for the poor dog. A few days later, a wretched-looking, trembling dog wanders in, but no one recognizes it. The next morning, the Empress is grieving Okinamaro's fate when the dog begins to whimper at the sound of its name. They realize the dog is Okinamaro after all, and he's pardoned and welcomed back. Sei marvels at the dog's humanlike emotions.

The rather shocking treatment of the dog by the Emperor's men suggests that the women, who relied on indoor companionship and entertainment, had a more tender regard for their pets than the men generally did. Sei, especially, often has a soft spot for creatures that show what she considers to be humanlike traits, which is consistent with her attentiveness to okashi *(aesthetic delight). "Dog Island" was probably a refuge for unwanted dogs.*

Sei lists mountains, markets, peaks, and plains. She also lists river pools and ponders the origins of their names. She lists other bodies of water, imperial tombs, ferry crossings, and well-known buildings.

Through most of this section, Sei lists places whose names she finds intriguing. Most often, the point of mentioning a place isn't to comment on the place itself, but merely to appreciate its poetic associations.

SECTION 20

In the Seiryōden (imperial palace), there is a set of sliding panels which are decorated with terrifying creatures. One day there is a large vase filled with cherry branches, beside which sits Korechika, a visiting Grand Counsellor. Everyone—the ladies and Korechika—are dressed in the cherry blossom combination. When the Empress comes outside to join him, everyone agrees that it's a scene of "sheer splendour"; Korechika even recites a poem.

The legendary creatures depicted on the panels were understood to serve as a spiritually protective device, and for Sei, they add to the overall "splendor" of the scene. The cherry blossom combination is a pale pink color which is considered suitable to the season. Korechika's recitation of a poem crowns the occasion as aesthetically pleasing to all present.

At this point, the Empress folds a piece of paper and tells the ladies that she wants each of them to write down "the first ancient poem that springs to mind." The ladies feel daunted by this task, and Sei draws a blank at first. Finally, she writes down a poem in which she replaces the phrase "flower of spring" with "your face, my lady." When the Empress looks over the poems, she tells them that she just wanted to know what was in their hearts.

Korechika's poem prompts a poetry game—the first of many to come. Such games were meant to test the ladies' knowledge of classical poetry, a hallmark of the court, and give them a chance to display that knowledge. Sei perceives that it's also a chance to praise the Empress, showing that she knows how to use such moments to her advantage.

On another occasion, the Empress read out the opening lines of various poems from the *Kokinshu* and asked her ladies to complete the poems. Even though most of the ladies have copied the *Kokinshu* many times and memorized its contents, they stumble over the answers. This prompts the Empress to tell a story of a previous Emperor who spent a whole night quizzing his consort in this way, and she never made a single mistake. During these proceedings, the consort's father even had *sutras* recited on her behalf.

The Kokinshu *was a classic compilation of Japanese poetry which members of the Heian imperial court invested much energy in studying. The ladies' nervousness suggests that they put a great deal of stock in the outcome of such poetry challenges—in this context, poetry is not merely a form of art or entertainment, but a way of proving one's competence and showing loyalty to the Empress.* Sutras *are portions of Buddhist scripture, in this case being prayerfully recited on behalf of the young woman being mercilessly quizzed.*

SECTIONS 21–29

Sei describes "women without prospect" as leading "dull earnest lives" and enjoying "petty little pseudo-pleasures." She finds such women "despicable" and believes that people of standing should allow their daughters to become exposed to society by serving in palace positions.

Sei is prejudiced against ordinary commoners, an opinion that will emerge repeatedly throughout the book. She generally believes that the only life worth knowing about is that of a courtier—possibly reflecting discontentment with her own provincial upbringing.

Sei makes a list of "dispiriting things," including a dog howling in midday, a scholar who has lots of daughters, an inhospitable host, and an undelivered letter. Others include a man whose lover fails to visit him, a failed exorcism, and a man who's failed to receive a court appointment, especially when all his former retainers have gathered at his home in anticipation of the happy news.

Most of Sei's "dispiriting things" are self-explanatory, though the scholar's daughters reflect the social structure of the time: girls were not trained to become scholars. Appointments were the chief ambition of most male courtiers, a source of much campaigning and currying of favor.

According to Sei, it's also dispiriting when one sends another person a good poem and doesn't receive anything in reply. This is especially the case when the recipient is a man for whom one has feelings. It's also dispiriting to send someone a poem and receive a boring one in reply.

Failure to reciprocate with a poem of one's own would signal rejection (especially in a romantic context). Even between friends, a mediocre poem would be received as something of a slight.


It's infuriating when an exorcist is summoned to conduct rites for someone who's fallen sick, but the exorcist is so tired from his previous call that he becomes drowsy on the job. An ordinary person "who beams inanely as she prattles on" is also infuriating. Sei feels the same way about "great men" who behave like children while drinking *saké*, or a lover one has concealed who begins to snore.

Sei's objections seem to focus on people who don't behave in accordance with their roles—including the "ordinary person," whom Sei would likely prefer to neither see nor hear. This suggests that in Japanese culture at this time (an particularly within court life), it was unacceptable for people to act outside of their prescribed social role.


"Things that make your heart beat fast" include a sparrow with nestlings, seeing tiny children at play, looking into a slightly cloudy Chinese mirror, and putting on makeup and incense-scented clothes, even if no one special will see these things. Nostalgic things include children's dolls, finding a touching old letter on a rainy day, and "last year's summer fan."

The things that "make [one's] heart beat fast" evoke a special tenderness, or a sense of dreamlike anticipation. This speaks to the Japanese tradition of okashi, *which encourages an enjoyment of everyday delights and snippets of beauty.*

Sei's list of "things that make you feel cheerful" include a well-done painting in the "female style," a carriage overflowing with ladies on their way back from an expedition, a dice-matching game with lots of matches, being rid of a curse by a Yin-Yang master, and hearing a temple monk recite one's prayer request beautifully at the altar.

The "female style" of painting refers to a softer, "Japanese" style of painting as distinguished from a bolder, "Chinese" form. Dealing with curses was normally a Shinto practice, but sometimes Chinese practitioners of Yin-Yang (a complex system of divination) would do this, too. At the same time, the temple monk would have been Buddhist, showing how various religious traditions intermingled in Japanese court life during the Heian period.

SECTIONS 30–32

According to Sei, a priest giving a sermon ought to be handsome, because his teaching hits home most effectively if one is gazing at the priest's face. If one's attention drifts because of an unattractive face, it "has the effect of making you feel quite sinful."

Members of the court often attended Buddhist sermon series, for both pious and social reasons. The sermon series were based on such popular Buddhist scriptures as the Lotus Sutras.

An ex-Chamberlain who no longer has enough to do will often turn up at many sermons, in part to be seen by others. Sometimes he'll have an abstinence tag attached to his cap, just to let everyone know that even though he's supposed to be staying at home, such rules don't apply to someone of his level of piety. Often he ends up chatting with an old friend throughout the sermon anyway.

Yin-Yang divination, which originated in China, dictated that certain days should be set aside for abstinence, meaning that a person would stay at home to avoid evil influences, and would wear a tag on the hat to signify this state to others.

One day, while Sei was attending the Salvation Lotus Discourses at the temple, she received a note summoning her home. Sei wrote back, "You long for my return, / but I long only to be drenched / with Lotus dews of Truth."

The Lotus Discourses expounded central Buddhist teachings and were ceremonially delivered in the temple over a course of days. The Salvation Lotus Sutra was believed to supply merit for salvation; Sei's playful poem nevertheless suggests her piety.

Sei recalls attending a particularly important set of Salvation Lotus Discourses where everyone important, including the Regent at that time, showed up. She remembers the specific style of **clothing** everyone wore and that everyone's red fans created the effect of a field of flowers. Sanekata, the finest poet of that day, sent a message to a woman in an outlying carriage. Everyone in attendance watched the exchange of messages with bated breath, wanting to overhear the poems being exchanged. Once the sermon began, the lady's carriage quietly slipped away, and Sei never found out who it was.

Sei is always attentive to the details of people's clothes—but this is not so much indicative of superficiality on her part as of common cultural values at the time: clothing signified rank and social position. The exchange of romantic poems was also a common part of court social life.

SECTION 33

On a hot summer night, a lady is lying asleep after her lover's departure. Under her shift, the strings of her scarlet trousers are still untied, trailing beneath the hem of her clothes; her luxuriant hair is piled beside her. Nearby, a gentleman is walking home from his "escapade" that night, thinking about the "next-morning" letter he will have to send.

This is an imaginary scene which is written in the style of popular romances during the Heian period. Sei occasionally includes short, suggestive scenes like this one which were perhaps meant to be developed into longer tales. Although Sei's diary was written over 1,000 years ago, it's clear that having romantic "escapades" was a common (if not socially acceptable) aspect of Japanese society.

He stops when he notices the open shutter of the woman's room and lifts the blind to peek inside, wondering about the man who must have recently left her side. The woman wakes and sees him, and they engage in quiet banter as the sky lightens. Eventually, the man leaves to write his letter, while the woman's lover has already sent his—in fact, a messenger is hovering nearby, awkwardly waiting to deliver it. The visiting man wonders if his own lover received a similar dawn visit.

During this time, it was expected that a male lover would send a romantic letter, often containing a poem, to the woman after they spent a night together. There's a comic element to this scene, as the man and woman engage in mild flirtation instead of paying attention to the letters they're supposed to write and receive the next morning.

SECTIONS 34–45

Sei lists various flowering trees, deciding that the best blossoms are those of the red plum. Time of day, or weather conditions—early morning rain, for instance—affect the beauty of various blossoms. So do poetic associations—the orange tree, for example, is associated with the beloved *hototogisu* bird, which perches in its branches. And while the pear blossom is generally considered to be quite ugly, its prominence in Chinese poetry makes Sei think that the pear tree must have some redeeming value after all.

Sei's interest in various trees has much to do with their prominence in poetry. Thus, there is a clear connection between what Sei finds "delightful" and the poetic culture of the time. Her diary is not merely a record of her personal observations and pleasures, then, but a means of interacting with the Japanese okashi *tradition and imparting it onto future generations.*

Sei lists some ponds, paying particular attention to their names. For instance, she questions the wisdom of naming a pond Waterless, even if it dries up for part of the year. Other ponds, like Sayama and Hara, are associated with certain poems or songs.

As with other natural phenomena, Sei's listing of ponds isn't primarily about these geographic locations, but the poetic resonances of their names. As per the okashi *tradition, Sei seems to find delight in simply appreciating the aesthetic beauty of sights and sounds.*

Of the seasonal palace festivals, Sei especially loves the fifth month's, because of the blended scents of sweet flag and wormwood, which both common and courtly people spread on their houses. It's usually a cloudy day, and everything is bedecked with balls of herbs. Lower-class girls go around boasting in their decorated **outfits**. This is a day for writing and receiving elegant letters, and the *hototogisu* bird gives its "signature cry."

For Sei, the excitement of festivals is closely connected to details that stand out memorably from the natural environment—and, of course, the clothing worn and the pieces of writing exchanged. Again, writing is characterized as a way of interacting with one's culture and engaging in important social customs, while clothing is a means of expressing oneself and "boasting" one's status, even among the lower classes.

Some trees have no flowers, but some of these still have special qualities. For example, the camphor tree, with its thick growth, is "quite creepy," but its "'thousand branches' are used in poetry to refer to the thousand tangled feelings of a lover's heart." Sei wonders who first came up with that expression. She also wonders who gave the *asuwa* cypress "such a foolish promise of a name."

Metaphors from the natural world are ubiquitous in classical poetry. The Japanese name for the asuwa *cypress can be interpreted as meaning "tomorrow it will be a cypress," which explains Sei's amusement at the "foolish promise."*

Sei adds that no matter what type of natural phenomenon is being considered, "I can never be insensible to anything that [...] I have heard about and remembered because it moved or fascinated me."

Sei gives a brief explanation of her okashi *sensibility here—she cultivates a sensitivity to whatever "moves" or "fascinates" her, perhaps defending her use of abstract lists (there are over 160 of them in the book).*

Sei also lists many birds and their various qualities. She finds birds that exhibit certain human traits, like the parrot's mimic, especially touching. The mountain dove's longing for its mate and the mandarin duck's tendency to brush frost from its mate's wings are also endearingly humanlike. The *uguisu* bird is often mentioned in Chinese poetry, associated with the changing of the year.

Sei pays attention to the various humanlike qualities of birds, perhaps seeing potential in them for later poetic expression. Certain birds are fixtures in the poetic tradition, which suggests that Sei is interested in participating in that aspect of her culture.

The *hototogisu* is delightful. During the rainy season, one wakes in the night, determined to be the first to hear it. When one hears it, one's heart is "utterly transported" by its voice. Sei adds that "everything that cries in the night is wonderful," except for babies.

Some creatures are so prominent in the poetic tradition that, for example, hearing a certain bird's song shapes one's expectation and enjoyment of the season. This indicates just how important poetry and natural aesthetics are to Japanese culture, and therefore sheds light onto Sei's attention toward what her tradition deems worthy of appreciation.

Even certain insects are worthy of mention. The snap-beetle, for instance, is apparently a Buddhist, because it bows as if in prayer as it walks. Flies are infuriating, but summer insects have their charms—like when they fly above the book one is reading.

Sei's descriptions sometimes contain a whimsical note, like her claim about the snap-beetle, while others are more commonplace. This demonstrates Sei's ability to distill lightheartedness and delight even out of seemingly mundane phenomena—a crucial aspect of okashi.

Snow falling on common people's houses, or moonlight shining into such houses, are "unsuitable things." The same goes for meeting an ox cart led by an auburn-colored ox. Sei also finds it repugnant to see a pregnant woman who is visibly aging, or an old person eating, or a commoner wearing crimson skirted trousers.

Auburn-colored oxen were especially prized by the aristocracy; Sei's low opinion of such an animal leading a cart implies that she does not approve of revered or beautiful things intermingling with common life. Crimson skirted trousers would have been worn by palace servants but were thought to be inappropriate for commoners, which once again underscores Sei's disapproval of seeing beautiful or noble things incorporated in common life.

SECTIONS 46–60

One day Sei is chatting with the Secretary Controller of the Office of the Empress's Household, Yukinari. Sei and Yukinari are good friends. Sei appreciates that he's plain-spoken and doesn't flirt. Yukinari depends upon Sei to carry messages to Her Majesty. The two of them quote Chinese literature to each other—poetry and even the *Analects* of Confucius. At one point, Yukinari admits that he couldn't love an ugly woman, so Sei jokes that she's horribly ugly and must never show him her face. He takes her seriously. One day, Yukinari accidentally catches sight of Sei's face through a curtain and teases her in return, saying that he's now gazed to his heart's content.

Although women were generally cloistered within the court, that didn't preclude friendships between men and women. The friendship between Sei and Yukinari seems to have been of an especially intellectual bent (albeit lighthearted as well), suggesting that the male and female courtiers held mutual respect for each other despite their separation and differing roles.

Each night there's a roll call of the senior courtiers. The ladies cluster at the edge of the Empress's quarters to overhear as much as they can. When a lady hears the name of a man who's dear to her, she feels "that familiar, sudden clutch of the heart." Afterward the ladies discuss the men's voices and whether they sound attractive or not.

The ladies eavesdropping on the roll call underlines the fact that men's and women's lives in court were fairly strictly segregated—even to the point that they could listen, but sometimes not see, much less interact with one another.

Sei finds it "disgusting" when a young man of standing addresses a lower-ranked woman by name, making it obvious that he's been paying her visits at night. It's better for such a man to get the name wrong, or send someone else altogether. But it doesn't matter if the woman is "inconsequential."

Strict social hierarchies also governed male and female relationships at court—it was regarded as embarrassing for a man to admit to an affair with women of a certain rank. Yet if a woman was "insignificant" enough, she was regarded as unworthy of concern.

Sei wishes that when men were taking their leave from the lady they've visited at night, they wouldn't spend so much time fussily rearranging their clothes—after all, no one will mock him for walking home looking disheveled. It's better if a lover's departure is "tasteful," with lingering affection and endearments before he finally slips out the doors.

Sei doesn't reveal much about her own romantic liaisons, so it's unclear how much she's speaking from personal experience, from others' accounts, or merely according to fashionable conventions. But it's obvious that some degree of secret romance flourished behind the scenes of the imperial court.

On the other hand, there are men who leave in a great bustle when they suddenly remember that there's somebody else they need to visit. After fumbling for his possessions in the dark, he finally says, "Well, I'll be off then," and leaves.

Not all liaisons were worthy of lush, romantic tales—Sei injects a romantic note with her description of bumbling, awkward lovers. Clearly, men and woman sometimes had casual and poorly-planned encounters during this time despite strict social and moral codes.

SECTIONS 61–71

Sei lists bridges, villages, and plants of interest to her. She particularly likes plants that have sacred associations, interesting names, or charming appearances. Most "marvelous" are lotus leaves, because they symbolize the teachings of Buddhism, and their seeds can be used to make powerful rosaries.

As elsewhere, Sei's lists are sprinkled with poetic and symbolic associations, demonstrating how her delight in her surroundings is framed by the expectations of her culture and the literary canon.

Sei lists various flowering plants—those whose colors and names she likes and those which she finds less pleasant. Some plants' beauty varies with the seasons. The rusty red of plume grass, for example, gives autumn fields a special loveliness, but once winter comes, it begins to resemble "some aged crone still dreaming of her past glories."

The transience of the seasons was a recurring theme in classical Japanese poetry, hence Sei's attention to the changes one sees while observing plants throughout the year.

Sei observes that there are certain things which can't be compared—like summer and winter, night and day, old age and youth, and a man one loves and the same man once one has ceased to love him.

Sei's point seems to be not that these things literally can't be compared, but that they're so opposite that one can find nothing in common between them. Rather than trying to analyze the underlying qualities of this things, Sei seems more concerned with how they differ aesthetically and emotionally—all of her observations are filtered through a poetic lens.

Summer is the best time for a secret affair, Sei says, because the nights are so short. The windows are left open overnight, leaving things deliciously cool. When a crow caws loudly, the couple feels delightfully exposed for a brief moment. On the other hand, it's very annoying when one's lover is accompanied by an impatient attendant who keeps grumbling on the other side of the fence.

Sei highlights two sides of secret court affairs—the exhilaration of potential discovery, and the reality that a courtier probably can't conceal his affair from his staff.

"Rare things" include someone who's praised by their in-laws, lovers who remain on good terms all their lives, and copying out a tale or a volume of poems without smearing ink everywhere.

Sei's lists of everyday occurrences like this are often marked by a humorous realism, demonstrating her ability to find delight even in mundane experiences or mishaps.

SECTIONS 72–77

The ladies' apartments in the Empress's quarters are a wonderful place. Ladies can chat with their male visitors over a standing curtain that's been set up. It's also a pleasant place to watch musicians and dancers passing through the gardens on their way to a festival performance.

For Sei, the formal separation between men and women and the seclusion of the ladies' quarters are facts of life and not something to which she objects.

One morning at dawn, some of the ladies join the Empress in a moonlit walk through the garden. Then they hear some courtiers chanting a Chinese poem nearby, so they rush back inside and talk with the men from inside. Impressed that the ladies had been moon-viewing, some of the courtiers compose poems on the spot.

Encountering the male courtiers in the open would be considered indelicate, hence the ladies escaping back into the house. But this doesn't stop the men from enjoying some poetic composition on the spot, again reflecting the importance of poetry in navigating social relationships and expressing oneself among courtiers.

On the day after the Litany of Buddha Names, screens decorated with paintings of hell are taken to the Empress's quarters for a viewing. Sei is so horrified by the screens that she can't look, so she hides in a nearby room. It's raining that day, so the Empress brings some musicians to perform. When Sei eventually comes out of hiding, everyone teases her that she's afraid of hellfire, yet she can't resist such delights as music.

The others tease Sei that even though she appears to be quite pious in other respects, she's worldly overall, always drawn to whatever delights are on offer. As per Japan's okashi *tradition, Sei is always attuned to aesthetic beauty and the pure enjoyment it offers.*

At one point, Secretary Captain Tadanobu hears "certain baseless and ridiculous rumours" that are being spread about Sei, and he begins speaking ill of her. Sei laughs it off, figuring he will learn the truth eventually. Some weeks later, having ignored her all this time, Tadanobu decides to make amends and sends a letter to Sei, urging a reply. Sei finds that he has written a line from Bo Juyi, "You are there in the flowering capital, beneath the Council Chamber's brocade curtains," and has asked her to complete the poem.

Fujiwara Tadanobu was a senior courtier, skilled at poetry, with whom Sei was close. He quotes a poem by Chinese poet Bo Juyi (772–846 C.E.) who was quite popular in Japan at this time. The poem is titled "Alone at Night in a Grass-thatched Hut beneath Lu Shan Mountain." His gesture—asking Sei to complete the poem—suggests that he understands her well. It seems that poetry is a fundamental part of how these two friends communicate and engage in intellectual banter.

Sei isn't sure what to do, knowing it would look bad if she showed off the fact that she knows the next line in Chinese, but the messenger is nagging her. So she quickly scrawls in Japanese, "Who will come visiting this grass-thatched hut?" She gets no response that night.

Sei's dilemma is that, in her context, it's considered "unladylike" to exhibit knowledge of Chinese, which is considered to be a masculine language. Accordingly, she turns the second line, which she knows ("while I sit […] in my grass-thatched hut"), into the last two lines of a new poem in Japanese.

The next morning, Sei hears a captain crying, "Is 'Grass-thatched Hut' present?" As he tells her what happened last night, he looks "shamefaced." He explains that many people were gathered in Tadanobu's room after they got Sei's message. They declared her a "clever rogue" and spent the night trying to add the first three lines to the poem, but they finally had to give up. Now Sei's nickname is "Grass-thatched Hut."

Because Sei sent the concluding lines of a new poem, Tadanobu would be understood that it was his job to supply the beginning—a task that stumps him but nevertheless wins Sei new respect. This also shows Sei's adeptness at navigating the social life at court.

Just as Sei is reflecting on her "dreadful" new nickname, Norimitsu arrives. He breathlessly repeats the whole story, grateful that Sei gave such a clever response to Tadanobu, since if she'd failed, it would have reflected poorly on him as "elder brother." He admits that he has no appreciation for poetry himself, but that it's still great news for him. Sei finds out that even the Emperor is impressed with Sei's response, and her relationship with Tadanobu is on good terms again.

Tachibana Norimitsu is Assistant to Palace Repairs and is believed to have been Sei's husband before she arrived at court, though they no longer have a romantic relationship. Norimitsu's lack of poetic ability wouldn't have endeared him to Sei. In any case, he still feels entitled to bask in her reputation.

SECTIONS 78–82

The following year, Empress Teishi moves to another part of the palace complex. Sei temporarily stays behind in the old quarters. After receiving several messages from Tadanobu, she meets with him, feeling sorry that despite the beautiful scene—Tadanobu is dressed magnificently, and the plum trees are in bloom—Sei is merely an "aging woman well past her prime," dressed in drab mourning **clothes**.

Though not explicitly stated in The Pillow Book, *based on historical context the reader can infer that Empress Teishi's father, Michitaka, had just died—hence Sei's mourning clothes. Incidentally, Teishi's father's death accounts for her move, as she would now be out of favor at court.*

That night, Sei goes to attend Empress Teishi. The other ladies are arguing, weighing the relative merits of various fictional heroes and eager for Sei to weigh in. Their conversation shifts to curiosity about Sei's encounter with Tadanobu—everyone wants to hear the details. They tease Sei about the fact that only she would notice "the very threads and stitches" of Tadanobu's **outfit**.

The other ladies clearly hold Sei in high regard, soliciting her opinion and admiring her attention to detail when it comes to subjects of continual interest like clothing.

When someone returns home on a visit, there's often gossip and criticism. Sei isn't usually bothered by this, since she's "not exactly renowned for [her] modesty and prudence." One day, Norimitsu comes visiting and says that the Captain Consultant has been demanding to know Sei's whereabouts, but that Norimitsu refrained from telling him by stuffing seaweed in his mouth. Days later, Sei receives a desperate note from Norimitsu, who's still under pressure to reveal Sei's whereabouts and wants to know what he should do. Sei sends back a piece of seaweed. Later, Norimitsu comes back, not having understood the message. In disgust, Sei writes a poem explaining it, which Norimitsu refuses to read. At this point, their friendly relationship begins to sour.

Sei is self-aware when it comes to her reputation, and she's confident in herself—meaning that she has less patience with those who aren't as clever as she is. She's especially frustrated with Norimitsu's failure to keep up with her poetic references—perhaps a clue as to why their earlier marriage unraveled.

One day, during a Continuous Sutra Reading, Sei hears a strange voice asking if there are offerings available. When she goes to look, she sees an aging nun in dirty clothes. The nun has a surprisingly elegant voice. Sei pities the woman's reduced circumstances, yet dislikes her apparent pretension. She puts together a bundle of rice cakes and snacks for the nun, at which point the nun becomes cheerful and chatty.

Buddhist nuns would often beg for meals and alms around the palace. Ever alert to class distinctions, Sei perceives from the nun's voice that she probably came from an upper-class background, and Sei both pities and resents the nun for appearing in the otherwise elegant festival environment.

A group of gentlewomen sits around and questions the nun, who replies with jokes and suggestive songs. The Empress finds the nun off-putting, so the ladies shoo the poor woman away with a new gown. But from now on, the nun begins frequenting the palace grounds, still wearing her old, filthy gown. Around the same time, a "more refined beggar nun" appears at the palace, who abases herself respectfully and weeps with gratitude when given gifts. The other nun stops showing up so often.

The new nun behaves in a way that Sei deems more appropriate for a beggar nun. In contrast, the other nun makes everyone uncomfortable by pushing the boundaries of pious behavior.

That winter, there is a huge snowfall. The ladies order the servants and groundsmen to create a massive snow mountain in the garden. After it's completed, the Empress has everyone guess how long the snow mountain will last. Most guess that it won't last for more than a week or two, but Sei guesses that it will remain until the middle of the following month, and she stubbornly stands by this. She even prays fervently to the Kannon of White Mountain that the snow won't melt.

White Mountain is a sacred mountain known for its perpetual snow, and on its summit is a shrine to Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Mercy. Even in this trivial game, Sei wants to please the Empress and also achieve the satisfaction of winning with an enduring snow mountain.

The snow mountain lingers into the following month, but to Sei's disappointment, the Empress retires to the imperial palace, so the household won't be around to see what becomes of it. Before they leave, Sei bribes a gardener with food and promises of gifts, charging him to watch over the snow mountain in their absence. While away, Sei continues to obsess over the snow mountain's survival. It lasts until the day before mid-month, and Sei eagerly anticipates composing a celebratory poem for Her Majesty. But when she sends a servant to gather a box of snow from the mountain, she learns that it has been demolished on the Empress's orders. The Empress nevertheless thinks Sei is very clever and asks to hear the poem she's been composing, but Sei sulkily refuses.

Sei turns the snow mountain context into a pretext for a poetic composition, as most things in the court setting can be, and plans to present her victory in an aesthetically pleasing way. The destruction of the mountain is a disappointment to her primarily for this reason, not simply because it means she loses the game.


SECTIONS 83–87

"Splendid things" include ornamental swords, Buddhist religious images, and wisteria blossoms. Another is a chamberlain of the sixth rank, who is allowed to wear special green robes and damask material. When a former member of a lower rank becomes a chamberlain, it's as if he's gone from total inconsequence to "heavenly" status.

The chamberlain's exclusive costume and the new reception he gets upon promotion is an example of the heavily hierarchical world of the court and the way that clothing reflected one's status.


When such a chamberlain brings a message to the Empress's household, the gentlewoman who receives it will even take care with the presentation of her sleeve as she slips her arm through the blind. And instead of abasing himself before the gentlemen of the household, he's now their equal. He even enjoys personal contact with the Emperor and dreads the loss of this at the end of his term of service.

The elegant presentation of one's sleeve (through the blind, it's all the chamberlain might see) is an important element of female courtiers' dress, because of the ritualized separation between men and women in the court.


"Things of elegant beauty" include a pretty girl dressed casually, a book on fine paper, a charming cat walking on the veranda, the chamberlains who distribute balls of herbs for the Sweet Flag Festival, and "a knotted letter of violet paper."

The Sweet Flag Festival marked the change of seasons, which was always considered to be an ominous day—hence the distribution of herb balls for protection against evil spirits. Again, Sei's recognition of elegance in everyday things (beautiful paper, a cat on the veranda) speaks to the importance of okashi *(delight) in the Japanese literary tradition.*

Empress Teishi sends 12 ladies to serve as Gosechi dancers and arranges especially charming outfits for the young girls. One night near the end of the festival, one of the ladies, named Kohyoe, asks for help retying the cord of her festival robe. Sanekata rather suggestively helps her and also recites a flirtatious poem. The girl doesn't respond, and the other ladies don't help. Finally, Sei can no longer stand it and sends a punning poem in reply.

The Gosechi festival was a popular court event in which young girls performed dances, culminating in the Dance of the Heavenly Maidens during the First Fruits Festival. Sleeves were a courting device, because they were often a man's first glimpse of a woman. According to court etiquette, the appropriate response to Sanekata's poem is for the girl to send a prompt spur-of-the-moment poem in reply. She seems too embarrassed to do so, however, so Sei comes to her aid.

Somehow the palace becomes especially delightful at the time of the Gosechi Festival—there's special **clothing**, groups of senior courtiers singing and laughing, and the sight of a dozing dancer's face in the glow of lamplight.

The Gosechi Festival was quite exhausting for the youngest of the dancers, and Sei finds the sight of the sleeping girls part of the aesthetic charm of the day.

SECTIONS 88–95

On one occasion, Empress Teishi is inadvertently lit by a lamp while sitting near open shutters, listening to a musical performance; she lifts her *biwa* to shield herself from view. The sight of her lovely gowns, and the contrast between her white forehead and the black instrument, are thrilling to Sei. Sei makes a reference to a poem about a "maiden who 'half hides her face.'"

A biwa *is a stringed instrument similar to a lute. Sei's reference is to a poem called "The Song of the* Pipa*" by Bo Juyi, which mentions a girl who shields her face with a* biwa*. From this, it's clear that Sei's writings aren't merely limited to her own observations and experiences—she is also engaging with Japan's poetic tradition.*

Sei names "infuriating things," such as discovering, after a hasty sewing job, that one has failed to knot the thread to start with. This reminds her of an occasion in the Empress's residence, when the ladies were tasked with an urgent sewing job. A certain nurse rushes through her work and realizes she's stitched a sleeve the wrong way around, then petulantly makes the other ladies fix it for her. It's also infuriating when groundsmen suddenly start uprooting a plant one has been admiring.

Tasks such as minor sewing jobs would have been part of the gentlewomen's service to their lady (on the eve of a festival, for instance, when costume changes were a big event). This responsibility, given the time constraint, would provide plenty of opportunity for frustration and argument among the ladies—the life of a courtier, it seems, was not always glamorous.

It's frustrating and embarrassing to overhear a confidential conversation one is powerless to ignore, or when one's lover gets drunk and starts spouting secrets. It's also frustrating when someone starts gushing about a horrible child, or when an uneducated person drops famous names, or having to listen to someone recite a bad poem they've written.

Sei finds particular embarrassment in situations where she's forced to hear something awkward or unseemly. It seems that, given Sei's deep appreciation for beauty and poetry, anything that stands out against her aesthetic sensibility is a source of annoyance or even distress.

It's "startling and disconcerting" to snap a hair comb, or see an overturned ox cart, or wait up all night for someone who never comes. Spilling something is also startling and disconcerting. It's "regrettable" when it rains instead of snows during certain festivals, or a festival is disrupted by an imperial abstinence, or when a group of ladies drape their beautiful sleeves out the carriage window during an outing, but then doesn't meet anyone who can admire them.

An imperial abstinence would have been a period of court-wide seclusion because of a risk of exposure to evil spirits, according to Yin-Yang divination. A significant aspect of court ladies' recreation involves outings which give them the chance to be seen and admired in public.

One day, Sei suggests an expedition to hear the *hototogisu*. A group of ladies, without the Empress, duly sets out into the country by carriage. They do hear the bird, and they also stop for a country meal at the home of a lord. On the way home, instead of working on poems, they decorate the carriage with sprays of white blossoms. When they get back, Empress Teishi is disappointed with them for being too distracted to have composed their *hototogisu* poems in advance.

The hototogisu bird was especially loved for its springtime call. Because the bird was associated with the poetic tradition, people would go on outings to hear the bird for the express purpose of composing their own poems on the subject.

Two days later, Empress Teishi teases Sei about her *hototogisu* poem, and Sei becomes defensive. She complains that when Her Majesty tells her to write a poem, her "only impulse is to flee," since she comes from a long line of accomplished poets. The Empress promises to stop pressuring Sei about this, exempting her from a poetry contest later that night.

As the daughter and granddaughter of poets, Sei is self-conscious about her own compositions. As seen elsewhere in the book, she particularly hates being forced to compose poetry on the spot, which the Empress seems to sympathize with here.

SECTIONS 96–99

One moonlit night at the Empress Teishi's quarters, everyone is listening to one of the ladies playing the *biwa* under a nearly full moon. Sei is silent while the other ladies chatter. When the Empress asks Sei why she's so quiet, Sei replies that she's "immersing [herself] in the spirit of the moonlight." The Empress deems this remark "beautifully put."

Sei's statement might be referring to Bo Juyi's "Song of the Pipa," *which mentions listeners "left silent, simply gazing / into the river and the whiteness of the autumn moon." Again, it's clear that Sei's observations and experiences are influenced by Japanese poetic tradition.*

One day, Empress Teishi passes Sei a note which asks, "How would it be if you were not loved above others?" Sei had earlier declared that she'd rather be loathed than to be other than first in someone's heart. Other ladies had jokingly called her "Lady *Lotus Sutra*" for this remark. So Sei writes back, "Of the nine paths to Paradise, I would happily take even the lowest."

The Lotus Sutra, *an influential Buddhist text, includes the claim that there is only "one vehicle of the Law"—hence the other ladies' joke about Sei's all-or-nothing attitude. Sei's reply also refers to Buddhist doctrine, which divides Paradise into nine ranks. Sei cleverly backtracks on her earlier statement by claiming, with appropriate flattery, that she would accept the lowest rank in Her Majesty's heart, as long as she is loved by her.*

When Empress Teishi's younger sister, the Shigeisa (Genshi), comes to court, there is a great celebration. There's a flurry of preparation, and all the ladies are quite excited. While Sei is fixing the Empress's hair the morning after the Shigeisa's arrival, the Empress encourages Sei to peek at her sister from behind the screen, because she's lovely to look at. When Sei gets the much-awaited opportunity, she is delighted by the young woman's rich gowns and the way she sits shielding her face with her fan—she resembles a "glorious picture," in contrast to Her Majesty's relaxed demeanor. Sei delights in the scene as little girls carry in water for the ceremonial hand-washings—a sight she considers "delightfully Chinese in its effect."

Genshi has become the consort of the Crown Prince, making this the first official visit between her and her empress sister. The hand-washing would have been part of the women's usual morning ablutions (washing up for the day). Sei is thrilled by the potential for beauty and delight promised by the Shigeisa's visit. Calling the hand-washing scene "delightfully Chinese" refers to the strong Chinese influence in Heian Japanese culture.

Now it's time for the morning meal, and as Lady Chamberlains enter with food, the screen is moved away, prompting Sei to move between a blind and curtain so she can continue to watch unobserved. However, her sleeves and train are trailing visibly, and the Regent asks who it might be. He then jests that it's embarrassing to know that Sei is peeping at his "terrible daughters." The Regent continues joking with his daughters and playing with a grandson throughout the day. At one point during the day's proceedings, he mentions that the Empress might try to pass the Shigeisa's son off as her own occasionally—an uncomfortable remark.

The otherwise jovial Regent's remark to his daughter is awkward because it's a reminder to everyone that the Empress hasn't yet produced a son—something that would be seen as a primary duty for her.

His Majesty the Emperor arrives, and he and the Empress withdraw for much of the day while his courtiers are supplied with enough *saké* to get them drunk. After His Majesty emerges, his new robes are so beautiful that "awe halts [Sei's] hand." Later that evening, when messages summon both the Empress's and the Shigeisa's presences at the Emperor's and Crown Prince's residences, there's another flurry of preparations and a discussion over who should depart first.

The presence of a second imperial daughter in court creates awkward situations, like figuring out who will take precedence when leaving the residence. Sei finds special delight in memories of the imperial family's doings, perhaps treasuring these because of the family's downfall (some of her entries were authored after this occurred).

SECTIONS 100–114

One day Sei receives a bare plum branch with the note, "What do you make of this?" She writes back, "The flowers have already scattered." Soon she hears a group of senior courtiers chanting the poem from which her reply derives. Empress Teishi praises Sei's answer.

Sei's line is from the Japanese version of a Chinese poem. The courtiers' question and subsequent approval show that they expected nothing less from Sei. The fact that she responded in Japanese (avoiding putting her Chinese knowledge on display) is probably also significant, since Chinese was considered a masculine language and Sei is aware of the importance of appearing ladylike.

During a windy, snowy day, Sei receives a letter from Consultant Kinto: "There is about this day / some tiny touch of spring." Sei is mortified to learn that Kinto, himself a great poet, is gathered with other accomplished poets, and Empress Teishi is unavailable to help. Sei knows that taking too long makes "a bad poem even worse," so at least she sends a trembling reply, likening the snow to "tumbling petals." Later, to her relief, she hears that one of the courtiers has suggested that she ought to be promoted to "High Gentlewoman" for this response.

Fujiwara Kinto was considered one of the day's finest poets, thus Sei's heightened anxiety over this sudden request. Part of the success of a poem involved not just its beauty, but the quickness with which it was produced.

Sei discusses Masahiro, "a great laughing-stock." Sei pities his parents and the attendants in his service. He is from a household where beautiful **clothes** are worn, and people always sigh that such clothes belong on somebody besides Masahiro. He has a habit of garbling phrases in his attempts to sound educated, and once he stepped on a sticky oilcloth and caused a standing lamp to topple. Once he was also caught sneakily eating some beans before higher-ranking chamberlains were served, causing everyone to laugh at him.

Masahiro is a chamberlain with a tendency to make a fool of himself. The fact that he becomes a laughing-stock while wearing beautiful clothes is a particular shame, because he behaves in a way that's considered unworthy of his rank—a big deal in the Heian court.

Sei lists some things that are "distressing to see," such as a woman greeting a special visitor with a child slung on her back, or a Buddhist priest conducting a Yin-Yang purification ceremony, or a "slovenly" woman lounging around with a "scrawny" man. She lists the names of some barrier gates, forests, and plains.

Sei seems to find the appearance of certain people—like the woman carrying a child—as distressingly common and unfitting to a special occasion. Similarly, the blend of Buddhism and Yin-Yang is an awkward mixing in her eyes.

Sei then lists some things "that lose by being painted" (cherry blossom, or splendidly-described characters in tales), those that gain (pine trees, mountain villages), and "moving things." Some of these include a child dressed in mourning for a parent, or a young man preparing to undergo the Mitake austerities. Others include dew in the garden in late autumn, or the wind rustling the bamboo when one first wakes up, or a couple in love who are prevented from being together.

For some beautiful things, being painted is a detraction from reality or imagination, while others gain in elegance. The Mitake austerities were religious devotions practiced under the guidance of mountain ascetics.

SECTIONS 115–119

Sei discusses a pilgrimage to the temple at Kiyomizu over the New Year. One is always intrigued by the sight of monks navigating the steep temple stairs while wearing high clogs. On the other hand, it's always unpleasant to have to pass in front of a crowd of kneeling pilgrims on the way to one's room, even as one enjoys the feeling of "freshly kindled faith." The sight of the sacred image in the glow of fiercely glittering lamps gives one a reverential feeling. There's a drone of voices as priests present worshippers' prayers before the altar.

Those at court would have participated in religious pilgrimages. Sei's descriptions show that such experiences have an aesthetic appeal and sightseeing feel as well. The religious image she describes would have been the Kannon bodhisattva, or Goddess of Mercy.

Sei describes having a chat with a priest, who informs her that her petitions have been presented to Kannon. She finds it comforting to hear the bell ringing for the *sutra* recitation, knowing it's being rung on her behalf, too. It's also moving to hear a man in an adjacent room, praying and prostrating himself through the night, and occasionally pausing to tearfully blow his nose. Sometimes she overhears a dedication being announced, like "For the safe delivery of her child," and Sei instinctively worries about the woman who's being prayed for.

Sei finds genuine comfort in the religious rituals of requesting special prayer at the temple (the prayers of priests at the altar would be understood to have a particular potency), and she feels compassion for the needs of her fellow pilgrims. Again, Sei seems to have the ability to draw pleasure and aesthetic appreciation from a variety of situations.

At New Year, though, the temple is far more hectic—there's no hope of paying attention to one's own prayers amidst the uproar. Monks run around carrying screens to set up temporary rooms. Refined ladies in rustling silks arrive. There's "a great clamour of *sutra* chanting" all night long, preventing sleep. Sei has fun trying to guess the identities of various pilgrims. Young men linger near the ladies' quarters, showing no interest in visiting the sacred image.

At festival times, the tourist aspect of temple life can easily overwhelm the religious side. From Sei's description, it seems that courtiers and other officials were more concerned with dressing up, preparing the palace, and flirting amongst themselves than with praying.

Another good time for a temple pilgrimage is when the spring blossoms are at their peak, when people's **clothes** are in the most attractive colors. It's always best to go on pilgrimage with peers with whom one can discuss everything one is experiencing.

Sei recognizes that the natural environment has an impact on the beauty and delight one derives from an experience, as does the company and the festival atmosphere of courtiers' clothes.

Sei finds it "deeply irritating" to see a man setting off alone for an event such as the Kamo Festival, as though oblivious that someone else might have liked to go with him. It's also irritating when there's rain on the day one is supposed to set out on a pilgrimage. "Miserable things" include someone traveling by ox cart on a hot day, an aged beggar, or a dingy wooden shack. This leads to other things which look "stiflingly hot," like certain costumes or uniforms, or a priest performing incantations at midday in summer.

Sei considers it selfish for a courtier to attend an event without generously bringing others along. This leads her to thoughts on other irritations of travel, and then to thoughts of the unpleasantness of heat in general—a typical stream of consciousness found in her diary. In this way, Sei is able to connect otherwise disparate observations and experiences by distilling them down to the emotions and aesthetic qualities they have in common.

Sei has a lot of opinions about "embarrassing things." They include "the heart of a man" and a night-priest who is a light sleeper. In fact, she finds night-priests embarrassing in general, because she thinks they enjoy listening to gentlewomen's gossip.

This category seems to focus on things that are embarrassing because they expose what's hidden. For instance, Sei suggests that the a man's heart is embarrassing because of its ability to see into a woman's heart.

Sei is also embarrassed for any woman who's taken in by a man who flatters her, but who is privately disdainful of her faults. There are also men who openly discuss a woman's faults with other women, and the other women never suspect that *they're* being slandered in the same way. Sei assumes that any man who has feelings for her is probably shallow-hearted—that way she won't open herself up to embarrassment. There are also men who take advantage of unprotected women at court, then reject them if they become pregnant.

Sei is aware of the many pitfalls of romantic relationships in court, as well as the joys. She tries to guard herself against humiliation and blames other women who aren't similarly vigilant. Women have to take such special care for their reputation because in many ways, they're more vulnerable than men within court culture.

SECTIONS 120–129

Sei thinks that it's very awkward and embarrassing when one runs out to greet a visitor, only to discover that the person has come to see someone else. It's also embarrassing to say something rude about someone, only to have a child repeat one's words in front of that person. Additionally, Sei thinks it's embarrassing when someone tells a sad story, but try as one might, one is unable to cry.

Sei finds embarrassment in moments when expectations are disappointed, when one's private thoughts are unexpectedly disclosed, or when one can't live up to the emotions expected at the moment. In this way, it seems that maintaining her refined appearance as a gentlewoman is of the utmost importance to Sei.

This reminds Sei of a time when the Emperor's carriage stopped in front of the Dowager Empress's viewing stand during an imperial procession, and his greeting was so moving that Sei cried until her makeup came off. The whole thing made her want to "jump with delight" as she imagined the Dowager Empress's feelings about her son.

Courtiers' lives revolved around the imperial family, and seeing their loving interactions was deeply moving and delightful even for someone like Sei, who sometimes comes across as detached and cynical about relationships.

Sei thinks it's beautiful when water drops hang on garden plants and the morning sun shines on them, or when rain clings to spiderwebs. She also loves it when a branch of the bush clover suddenly springs free of its weight of morning dew. "I also find it fascinating," she adds, "that things like this can utterly fail to delight others."

Sei finds the quality of okashi, *or delight, so self-evident that it's surprising and even "fascinating" when others don't share her finely-developed appreciation for small instances of beauty.*

One day Sei receives a wrapped gift, by way of a groundsman, from Secretary Controller Yukinari. It contains two *heitan* cakes and a formal letter of presentation. The letter jokingly addresses Sei as though she were a Junior Counsellor. Sei consults with an official in charge of court ceremonies about the proper protocol for her response. She ends up sending a punning reply back (playing on *heitan*, which is similar to *reitan*, the word for "rude"), whereupon Yukinari appears and praises Sei's cleverness—she didn't send a "half-baked poem" or show off, but she actually took the time to send a brilliant reply.

Yukinari is a senior courtier with whom Sei enjoys a warm and flirtatious friendship. Heitan *are filled rice cakes which were presented to nobles and courtiers on special occasions. Sei shows concern about protocol because she wants to prolong the joke—replying as if she's really a Junior Counselor. Her pun ends up delighting Yukinari even more than a hasty poem would have.*

One night, the court ladies idly discuss and debate the odd names of various ceremonial items and articles of **clothing**. Finally Sei tells them to knock it off and go to sleep, when suddenly a nearby night-priest startles them by interjecting, "No [...] Do keep talking all night, ladies."

Perhaps Sei recorded this moment because it confirms her earlier wry hunch about night-priests—namely, that they enjoy eavesdropping on women's conversations.

After the Regent's death, the Empress has religious services performed on behalf of his soul every month. Great crowds attend, and the preacher, Seihan, draws tears even from the young people with his sermons. Afterward, Tadanobu recites an especially moving Chinese poem. Tadanobu often teases Sei about their relationship—why can't they become closer? Sei teases back that if they became lovers, she could no longer praise him in public—she hates it when people do that.

Tadanobu is especially skilled at poetry recitation, and his friendship with Sei is based on their shared love of the art. Sei's point about their relationship seems to be that if they became lovers, she would be expected to maintain a certain modesty about it in public, whereas now they can tease each other openly.

One evening, Secretary Controller Yukinari visits and stays talking until nearly dawn. The next morning he sends Sei a regretful note about having had to leave at the cock's crow. Sei responds that perhaps he heard "the false cock of Lord Mengchang." They exchange poems about guards and barrier gates, and although Sei is finally stumped about how to respond, Yukinari praises her perceptive nature to everyone—she's not shallow and frivolous like many women.

According to a legend, Lord Mengchang arrived at a barrier gate one night while trying to evade capture by an enemy. He had one of his followers imitate a cock's crow, signaling that the gates should be opened and thus allowing him to escape.

SECTIONS 130–135

One moonless night, there's a commotion outside, and when Sei investigates, a bamboo branch is extended through the blind. She says, "So it's 'this gentleman,' is it?" Several chamberlains emerge, saying that they must immediately take this story back to the Privy Chamber. Secretary Controller Yukinari stays behind, explaining that they'd had the idea of composing poems on the subject of the bamboo and decided to invite the ladies to join. He wonders how in the world Sei was able to give such an apt reply on the spot.

Sei's reference to "this gentleman" comes from a Chinese poem about bamboo, in which a bamboo plant is referred to in that way. Her quickness catches the male courtiers by surprise, and they are clearly impressed by her cleverness and poetic knowledge.

After a little while, one of the courtiers returns and chants another line from the poem Sei has referenced. He explains that the Privy Chamber and even the Emperor were delighted by Sei's response. The men chant the poem, and everyone lingers in conversation until dawn. The next day, Empress Teishi is delighted to hear how Sei has been praised.

Sei has gained a reputation even throughout the imperial household for her cleverness with poetry. In this way, it's clear that poetry isn't merely an artform for Sei and the other courtiers—it's a tool with which one can form relationships and improve one's social standing.

After the conclusion of the mourning period for Retired Emperor Enyu, everyone stops wearing their mourning clothes. A gentlewoman named Tosanmi receives a formal letter from a priest, containing a poem. The poem contains an implied rebuke of the woman's adherence to court mourning practices. She is disturbed and wonders who could have sent this. When she speaks to the Emperor about it the following day, she learns that the whole thing has been an elaborate joke involving the Emperor, Empress, and some of the ladies-in-waiting. She is flustered but delighted.

Tosanmi is the Emperor's nurse, which explains why she's able to approach the Emperor and his household on such familiar terms. The fact that the Emperor and Empress would play a joke on her further highlights their intimacy and would have been a point of pride for her.

"Occasions when the time drags by" include abstinence days, visiting the home of someone who's just failed to get a promotion, and a day of heavy rain. Things that relieve such dragging occasions include board games, tales, chattering children, and snacks.

Abstinence days would have been a particular burden even within the secluded world of the court, since the ladies couldn't receive any visitors. Although Sei relishes in her upper-class role as a gentlewoman, it seems that even the life of a courtier has its mundane moments.

Sei lists a few "worthless things," including ugly, unpleasant people and **clothing** starch that's gone bad. Then she notes that, although most people would agree with these items, she's still going to include them. After all, she never intended that this book should be seen by others.

Sei's disgust for ugly people and clothing once again emphasizes the importance she places on appearances—in her estimation, common people and things are unworthy. Meanwhile, Sei's curious remark suggests that her diary is private and that she's recorded her thoughts regardless of what anyone else thinks about them. However, the fact that she makes this comment at all suggests that she does, in fact, anticipate judgment from an audience.

"Truly splendid" things include the two Provisional Festivals and the Rehearsal of Performance. This rehearsal takes place on a glorious spring day, and Sei finds it entertaining to watch men and women, musicians, dancers, and chamberlains, all mixing in the presence of the Emperor. Sei waits "with bated breath" for the dances to begin and nearly "[bursts] with delight" as the opening notes of the music are heard. As the dances get underway, she wishes they'd never stop, and she feels "bereft" as they come to an end.

The Rehearsal of Performance is a chance for the imperial household to enjoy special dances, and Sei finds the experience to be so immersive and beautiful that she is emotionally overwhelmed.

SECTIONS 136–139

After the Regent's death, Sei writes, "certain events were set in train in the world." After much upheaval, the Empress leaves the palace and moves into the Konijo mansion. During this difficult period, Sei moves back home, but she can't stop worrying about Her Majesty in the meantime.

Empress Teishi was forced to leave the palace in 996, after her father died and her brothers were exiled. Michinaga, a brother of the recently deceased Regent, had seized power. Sei was rumored to have been sympathetic to Michinaga, which might be why she was avoiding the Empress's household.

Captain Tsunefusa visits Sei and encourages her to consider coming back to the Empress's household. Sei replies that she "wasn't liked, and I didn't like it." Truthfully, however, it's not the Empress who dislikes Sei, but the other ladies—she feels that they spread rumors about her and talk to each other behind her back. But the longer Sei stays away, the more depressed she becomes. One day, another lady brings a message from the Empress. With a pounding heart, Sei opens it to discover a single kerria petal, with the words, "and never rises into words," written on it.

The kerria petal is associated in poetry with unspoken thoughts. The poem to which the Empress refers suggests that unspoken thoughts, deep in the heart, are strongest of all.

Sei is overjoyed by this message to such a degree that she can't recall the beginning lines of the famous poem the Empress has quoted. She has to be prompted by her own serving-girl. Not long after sending this reply, she returns to the Empress's household, though she's a bit nervous about it. Gradually, Empress Teishi puts Sei at ease—just like old times, she teases Sei about struggling with the poem. She's also reminded of a story of a famous riddle competition in which a man lost because he sarcastically claimed he couldn't solve an obvious riddle.

Riddle competitions were a favorite pastime at court. Even though the situations aren't identical, the Empress's point with this story is that when someone says they don't know something, the truth might be otherwise—they might simply have forgotten it, or, as in the riddle story, they might be mocking. The Empress knows Sei's sense of humor and how to help her feel at home in court again.

Sei describes a winter scene: sunlight is flashing through dark clouds. Beside a humble house, there's a barren field, which contains a healthy young peach tree. One side of the tree has green leaves, and the other side has shining, rust-red leaves. A youth is climbing the tree while little children gather below, shouting up requests for sticks. When the youth refuses, someone shakes the tree in a dangerous fashion, leaving the boy clinging like a monkey—"a charming scene."

This is one of several elegant scenes Sei includes in her diary, and the vividness of visual detail suggests that she's composing stories of the kind that court ladies would exchange for entertainment.

SECTIONS 140–153

Anxiety-producing things include a horse-race, a hair-binding cord, or an ailing parent when there's been a rumor of plague. One's heart also lurches upon hearing a lover's voice in an unexpected place, or when a hated person shows up for a visit. "Indeed," remarks Sei, "the heart is a creature amazingly prone to lurching."

The "anxiety" of the hair-binding cord is that it might snap at any moment, much as someone might die suddenly, or appear when someone isn't expecting them. Whereas these anxiety-producing things Sei lists might seem unrelated, the fact that she is able to draw a comparison among them speaks to her attunement to the underlying aesthetic qualities of different experiences.

"Endearingly lovely things" include a sparrow returning to a nest full of cheeping babies, a toddler showing adults a worthless object he finds precious, a tiny lotus leaf, or, in fact, "absolutely anything that's tiny." Likewise endearing are small children in long robes, children reading aloud, and baby chicks running around. Sei lists some "things with terrifying names," and then muses that "robbery is terrifying in every way," as are violent monks, spirit possession, and certain plants which are named after snakes or demons.

Though there's no discernible order to many of Sei's diary sections, sometimes it appears to be a matter of simple contrast—like that between adorably endearing things and violent, frightening things. In this way, Sei's writings are more emotional and sensorial in quality than prosaic, which hearkens to the Japanese okashi *tradition of conveying aesthetics through poetry and art.*

Things which appear ordinary "but become extraordinary when written" include strawberries, the dew plant, and chestnuts.

Sei singles out these items because of the meanings of the Japanese characters used to write them. For example, these three items, respectively, are written using the characters for "overturned tray child," "sole of duck's foot grass," and "barbarian peach." In other words, she finds an additional level of beauty and whimsy in the characters, besides the objects themselves.

"Enviable people" include those who can memorize *sutras* seemingly effortlessly, while one keep stumbling over one's words. Others include people who are cheerfully going about their lives while one is sick, and people who pass by on their pilgrimage while one is still making one's way laboriously up the mountain. This prompts Sei to recall an occasion when she tried climbing the mountain on an oppressively hot day. As she sat down to rest, another woman walked by who appeared to be past 40, remarking to a companion that currently she's on the fourth of seven pilgrimages, and that it's all been quite easy. Sei longed to be that woman.

Sei refers especially to a pilgrimage to the Inari Shrine, which was a mountaintop shrine just outside of Kyoto and only accessible after a rigorous hike. Although Sei usually portrays herself as a gentlewoman with a great deal of poise and pride, it seems that even she is subject to self-doubt and envy, seen here as she longs to climb the mountain with the same ease as the older women.

"Occasions for anxious waiting" include expecting the birth of a child once the due date is past, opening the seal on a letter from a distant admirer, or trying to thread a needle for an urgent sewing job while it's dark (especially if a flustered friend is trying to do this on one's behalf). Another is trying to make a quick response to somebody's poem.

Poetry is often associated with anxiety for Sei because of the pressure to produce something acceptable on a moment's notice—rather like trying to thread a needle in the dark.

SECTIONS 154–159

Once, when Empress Teishi was required to leave the palace during the Great Purification, she moved into the Aitadokoro, since the Office of the Empress's Household was in a forbidden direction. Her household spent a cramped and anxious night there. This old building was home to biting centipedes which dropped from the ceiling, as well as huge wasps' nests.

Sei's thoughts about anxiety transition into a specific memory of an uncomfortable stay in an unfamiliar palace, complete with menacing insects. In this way, she is able to perceive a specific emotion in a variety of different situations—even those she has not directly experienced herself.

One day, Consultant Captain Tadanobu came for a visit, along with Captain Nobukata and Junior Counsellor Michikata. Sei is impressed by Tadanobu's obscure reference to a poem he had chanted months earlier, since Sei thinks that men often don't recall such things as readily as women do. On that occasion, Tadanobu made a gaffe with his recitation, so Sei has been watching for an opportunity to teasingly prompt him ever since—giving him a chance to rectify his mistake. She adds, "I do enjoy people who remember things that have happened."

Sei continues to enjoy teasing Tadanobu on the basis of their shared adeptness with poetry. She also appreciates him because, like her, he enjoys specific whimsical memories.

After Tadanobu is promoted, Sei misses him. Nobukata tries to convince her that *he's* just as good at reciting poetry, and when Sei longingly remembers Tadanobu's elegant recitation of "He had not yet reached the time of his thirties," Nobukata tries to recite it just as well. He is bitter when Sei doesn't agree that he's better. He ends up going to Tadanobu's office and asking the latter to coach him on this poem. He later recites it outside Sei's apartment and is delighted when she isn't sure which man is speaking.

The poem named was a Chinese poem by Minamoto Fusaakira. The poem laments one's advancing age by comparing the speaker with younger men who are more accomplished. Nobukata longs for the status that's granted by skill at poetry recitation.

On another occasion, everyone has been teasing Captain Nobukata about courting a lady named Sakyo. Sakyo is the daughter of a lady nicknamed "Lie-down." When Nobukata remarks that he wishes he had an office to use during night-watch duty, Sei replies, "People do like to have somewhere they can relax and lie down," as Nobukata apparently does often. Nobukata is furious at Sei for accepting the rumors about him and Sakyo at face value. Their friendship breaks down after this.

Sakyo's mother apparently had this nickname because she was a shrine priestess who always prostrated herself while speaking. Sei's comment is a play on this nickname and suggests that Nobukata and Sakyo have a sexual relationship. Sei's sharp sense of humor sometimes alienates her from others, as seen here by Nobukata's angry reaction and the dissolution of their friendship.

Some things which are "near yet far" include relationships between estranged siblings, "the winding path up to Kurama Temple," and anticipating the first day of the new year on the last day of the old. Things that are "far yet near" include Paradise and relationships between men and women.

"Near yet far" refers to things which are logically close to one another, yet farther apart then one would first imagine. Kurama Temple is located not very far up a mountain, yet it's accessible only by a zigzagging trail. By likening things that are metaphorically far apart (like certain relationships) to things that are literally far apart (like the temple), Sei is able to convey the emotional commonalities among otherwise very different experiences.

SECTIONS 160–176

Sei looks down on the rank of Acting Provincial Governor or other fifth-ranking titles, finding the respectable, tidy lives of such men "depressingly staid and unambitious." A lady living alone in a dilapidated house with an overgrown garden is likewise "forlorn." On the other hand, it's "boringly unromantic" when a lady cleans up her property and keeps it running "in punctilious fashion."

Here, Sei's prejudice against people who lead boring, ordinary lives comes through again. In her estimation, living a common life is terribly sad, boring, and hopeless.

Sei tells a story of a charming gentleman paying a visit to Lady Someone. It's a misty dawn, and the man is going to great lengths to leave the woman with a glowing impression, murmuring the lines, "though there in the dawn sky / the moon hangs bright." As the woman leans forward, the moonlight gleams on her head. The man slips away in astonishment at this sight. Sei concludes, "This was a tale that someone told."

Sei relates an old-fashioned romantic story, like those that court ladies might exchange. The quoted poem is from a seventh-century Japanese poet. However, scholars have suggested that the final passage might mean that the woman's wig slips off, revealing her shiny, bare head. If that's true, then the story turns into a spoof of its genre.

Recollections of snow lead Sei to recall a story set during the reign of the former Emperor Murakami. After a great snowfall, the Emperor collected a bowl of snow with a spray of flowering plum in it and presented it to Lady Chamberlain Hyoe, asking her to compose a poem about it. She comes up with "At times of snow, moonlight and blossom," and the Emperor praises the aptness of her choice.

The lines are from a poem by Bo Juyi. Sei seems to aspire to Hyoe's level of poetic recall, since her choice of poem so perfectly captures the circumstances of the moment—exactly what was prized by the court culture.

Sei recalls that when she first entered Empress Teishi's service, she was frequently overwhelmed with confusion and embarrassment, even to the point of tears. Empress Teishi began taking out pictures to show and discuss with Sei, trying to set her at ease. The head of Sei's room scolds her for being so shy, pointing out that the Empress has been showing her special favor. She watches and envies the nonchalance of the other ladies in the Empress's presence.

Sei jumps backward in time to recollections of her earliest days as a gentlewoman. The "head" of Sei's room would have been the lady in the shared living quarters who had been in the Empress's service the longest, so her disapproval indicates that Sei was not such a confident, quick-witted gentlewoman in her early days at court.

At one point, Sei is watching Grand Counsellor Korechika visiting with the Empress and her ladies, all of them conversing freely. Sei is mortified when the Grand Counsellor becomes curious about the figure behind the curtain and draws close to speak to her. Even though Sei is sweating over her "shameful impudence [...] in daring to presume I could serve at court," he continues chatting with Sei and fidgeting with her fan. The Empress tries to distract the Grand Counsellor with a calligraphy book, but he persists in trying to draw Sei into the conversation, to her distress. Later, Sei comes to realize that none of these people are angelic beings, and that all gentlewomen felt much as Sei did when they first began service.

Compared to Sei's portrayal of herself as a poetry-reciting, punning, and teasing gentlewoman throughout much of The Pillow Book, *this shy, retiring Sei is almost unrecognizable. Her account shows how otherworldly the members of the imperial household would seem to a young woman newly arrived on the palace grounds.*

Once, Empress Teishi asks Sei if she's fond of her. Sei asserts that she is, but someone immediately sneezes. The Empress says, "Oh alas, I see you've lied to me!" Ashamed and indignant, Sei returns to her room and sends the Empress a poem which says that while we can judge a flower by the strength of its hue, "that red nose bloomed false / And so my flowering heart withers alone / to find itself in misjudged misery."

According to superstition, a sneeze indicated that something bad was happening—hence the Empress's response to Sei's indignant poem selection.

SECTIONS 177–186

"People who feel smug" include the one who's first to sneeze at the new year—though Sei specifies that only commoners follow this superstition, not "people of quality." Others include new appointees to enviable government posts, or a son-in-law who's been selected from among many suitors.

The thought of an untimely sneeze prompts Sei to think of the one time (the new year) when a sneeze is considered good luck—though she hastens to classify this as a "common" belief. Again, Sei is ashamed at the possibility of being associated with commoners and their superstitions.

Sei considers the splendor of high rank. In general, men who advance in the imperial ranks are most impressive. A High Gentlewoman might be prominent, but by the time she attains that title, she is past her prime. And anyway, it's more impressive when a girl from an average family becomes the wife of a court noble, or even an Empress. Priests generally aren't very impressive, though bishops or archbishops are treated like "the Buddha himself."

Men generally enjoy greater mobility among the court ranks them women do, and Sei apparently esteems women's attainments through marriage more highly than those earned—like the High Gentlewoman's—through their own efforts.

The husband of an imperial nurse is an "awe-inspiring thing." He puts on airs and acts as through the imperial child were his very own, especially if it's a boy. This role comes with other problems, too—like the fact that a nurse's husband often demands that she sleep with him at night instead of next to the imperial child, forcing her to hurry into her clothes and rush to the child's aid at night.

It's not clear exactly what Sei means by "awe-inspiring" in this instance, though she seems to indicate that the husband's pretensions fit the description. From this anecdote, it's clear that in some ways, courtly women bear more responsibility than men, as the imperial nurse must balance her husband's demands with her obligation to care for the imperial child.

Sei thinks it's delightful to watch a "ladies' man," exhausted from multiple love affairs, painstakingly writing a next-morning letter to a certain lady. He entrusts the letter to a favorite retainer and then lingers, lost in thought. When he tries to fix his mind on reciting the *Lotus Sutra*, he's soon distracted by the arrival of his lover's reply, "surely […] courting karmic retribution by this lapse!"

This is another one of the short scenes Sei scatters throughout the book, not a description of a specific event. Sei seems to be going for a certain comic effect by describing the lover as distracted from religious reflections—even courtiers, it seems, are sometimes distracted from their official duties by romance.

On a moonlit night, it's "enchanting" to overhear someone passing by carriage or on horseback and reciting, "The wanderer sojourns on beneath a waning moon." On the other hand, it's "most annoying" to hear someone riding past and to discover, when one puts down one's things to check, "some perfectly boring person."

The quoted line is from a poem attributed to Chia Sung, "The lovely lady has finished adorning herself." Again, Sei's poetic references demonstrate that her diary entries are not merely personal musings—they are a way for her to interact with and contribute to the poetic tradition of her country.

It's disillusioning when someone uses vulgar words. It's not so bad when it's done intentionally, but when an older person "who should know better" takes on this "rustic" way of speaking, it's embarrassing to watch. It's also embarrassing when a person, or even the author of a tale, uses expressions like "I'm gonna" do this or that.

Sei finds common, vulgar language unbefitting people of higher ranks. Despite coming from a provincial background herself, Sei seems to think that behaving like a commoner is just as shameful as being *a commoner.*

SECTIONS 187–221

Sei talks about the thrill produced by various winds, especially storm winds. The day after a typhoon, the garden is in disarray, with leaves lodged in the lattices—a surprisingly delicate effect. When an elegant lady emerges after a storm-disrupted night, wearing her autumn colors, it's a particularly "splendid" sight—she gazes at the disheveled garden and recites the poem, "I see why the word 'storm.'"

The quoted poem is from the Kokinshu *and it continues, "becomes in writing 'mountain wind' / for autumn's trees and plants / all bend and wither in the force / of this wind from the mountain tops." This poem is somewhat meta, since it describes the surrounding scenery while referencing the writing process itself.*

It's "elegantly intriguing" to overhear things at night—a meal being served, game-pieces or fire tongs being moved at a distance, a hushed conversation, or the distinct rustlings of different people's **clothes**. The delicate blend of incense is also elegantly intriguing. Captain Tadanobu's subtle blend of incense would linger long after he visited.

Many of these scenes hint at events whose details can only be guessed at, which demonstrates Sei's intimate familiarity with the life of the court. Given this, it seems that she assumes either no one will read her diary entries or that those who do will also be acquainted with courtly proceedings.

Sei makes lists of islands, beaches, woods, temples, *sutras*, manifestations of Buddhas, and well-known tales, as well as games, dances, and musical instruments, both stringed and wind instruments. The various kinds of wind instruments bring to mind festivals, such as the Provisional Kamo Festival. It's delightfully overcast and snowy, the indigo cloaks and artificial flowers standing out brightly. Even better is the imperial progress—amidst the pageantry, "you lost all sense of the fact that you spend your everyday life" in the Emperor's proximity.

As elsewhere, many of the places and types of objects Sei chooses to list have poetic associations, or notably poetic names. The thought of a certain type of instrument prompts specific memories of the delights of a festival, which speaks to the tendency for emotional and sensorial memories to evoke an experience. Sei's emphasis on events and festivals particularly highlights the splendor of the imperial family.

The Return of the Kamo High Priestess is also delightful. It's hot at this time of year, and everyone is sweating, but the thrilling call of the *hototogisu* is heard. Once the procession is past, everyone pushes and shoves to leave, but one avoids the fray by taking a route through a mountain village, attaching sprays from a deutzia hedge to one's carriage.

This festival, particularly a procession, revolved around the return of the Shinto high priestess to her sacred residence after the Kamo Festival, a festival surrounding a Shinto shrine.

On the way to the Kamo Shrine, working women are singing in the rice fields. At first the sight is fascinating, but soon one is dismayed to make out their song, which is "something very rude about the dear *hototogisu*."

Even when Sei finds some beauty and interest among the common people, it's quickly dampened when she finds the content of their song objectionable.

When one is on one's way somewhere, and one sees a "fine-looking fellow" carrying an official-looking letter, ones wonder what business he's conducting. Or if one sees a pleasant-looking girl, her clogs caked with mud, carrying a package or some books somewhere, one wishes one could ask her about what she's carrying. On the other hand, if one meets a rude servant, one can easily guess the character of her employers.

Sei's thoughts of processions and journeys lead her to consider people encountered on the road who spark one's curiosity. She sees common people, like servants, as reflections of those whom they serve.

Sei finds it "irritating" to see a poorly-dressed person going somewhere in a "miserable carriage." It's one thing if she's attending a sermon, but if she's going to the Kamo Festival or another event were one takes care with one's very sleeves, one wonders why she even shows up.

Appearance is so important in the public life of the court that Sei can't understand why a person would venture out in public unless their clothes and accessories match their surroundings.

One day, a man with an umbrella is seen on the palace grounds, and rumors circulate that he's there for Sei. Later, by way of inquiry, the Empress sends Sei the beginning lines of a poem, prompting Sei to think "how marvelous [the Empress] is," even in trivial matters. Sei replies with a note saying, "That umbrella has left me 'in wet clothes.'"

The poem was probably "Umbrella Mountain," and Sei's reply puns on an idiom which means "to be the butt of false rumors." Once again, poetry serves as a means by which Sei navigates court life and builds rapport with Empress Teishi.

SECTIONS 222–247

Once, while Sei was away on a retreat, the Empress sent her a letter written on "red-tinted Chinese paper." The enclosed poem relates that the peals of a temple bell toll "the loving thoughts [of you] that fill my heart." Sei doesn't have any suitable paper, so she sends her reply on a violet lotus petal. Sei follows this anecdote with lists of both posting stations and shrines.

The Empress's stationery is paper of the highest quality, which is why Sei can't use just any paper for her reply. The "lotus petal" is probably from an artificial flower. Sei's thought processes can be traced by the way she moves from a specific piece of mail she received on a retreat to making lists of post offices and religious shrines.

Sei describes a legend that's associated with the Aritoshi Shrine: there was once an Emperor who only liked young people and therefore killed anyone over age 40. Most older people fled, but a certain Captain, whose filial piety forbade him from separating from his parents, hid them in a secret room under his house. One day, the Emperor of China, who was constantly trying to get the better of the Japanese Emperor, sent him a riddle he couldn't solve. Well-meaning, the Captain asked his old father for the answer. When the Captain passed his father's answer along to the Emperor, it turned out to be correct. This happened several more times. Eventually, the Emperor sought to reward the Captain, who asked only that his parents be allowed to live freely in the capital. The Emperor granted this. The Captain's father seems to have become the god of the Aritoshi shrine.

Sei moves from discussing shrines in general to relating the legend of a particular shrine. The legend contains culturally familiar themes of loyalty to family, rivalry between Japan and China, and the love of cleverness and riddles.

Sei notes that a gentlewoman who shows what it must be like to be reborn as a heavenly being is the ordinary gentlewoman who becomes an imperial wet-nurse. She gets to sleep in the Empress's bedroom, summon the other ladies to send messages for her, and enjoy other privileges.

A wet nurse would breastfeed the imperial baby, hence her newly privileged status and intimate access to the family.

Sei lists the names of hills, things that fall (snow, hail, sleet, and snow), the best kinds of sun and moon, stars, and kinds of clouds. "Things that create a disturbance" include crows on a rooftop eating a portion of a monk's morning meal. "Slovenly-looking things" include working women with their hair up, and the behavior of holy men. "People who are smug and cocky" include three-year-olds, healing women who gossip even while administering healing rituals, and fools who presume to instruct others.

A monk would set aside a portion of his morning meal as an offering to all sentient beings. With "holy men," Sei is probably referring to eccentrics and hermits rather than everyday monks like those who would be seen in the capital.


Sei despises people who express themselves poorly in writing or speech. It's not so bad when a "country bumpkin" uses "slovenly" language, but when anyone else does this, it causes her to cringe. It's wrong to speak over-politely, but at the same time, senior courtiers and other officials should not be addressed by their names, but by their titles.

Sei expects no better from common people than to use what she terms "slovenly" language, but it's unbecoming for higher-ranked people to speak in this way. The etiquette of court speech is intricate and dependent on the relative ranks of the people involved.

Sei mentions a young man who married into a prosperous household, yet stopped calling on his new wife within a month, to wide condemnation. At the New Year he received a promotion to Chamberlain and boldly attended the Lotus Discourses in his dazzling uniform, even though his wife's carriage was nearby, and everyone was astonished at his behavior. "It does seem," Sei reflects, "that men don't have much sympathy for others."

Early in marriage, a young man would pay overnight visits to his wife rather than establishing a new home with her immediately. To stop paying visits would be a source of great insult to the young woman. Sei finds the insensitivity of this young man to reflect the character of men in general.

SECTIONS 248–259

Men have "most peculiar and unlikely feelings." It's astonishing when a man abandons a lovely woman in order to pursue an "unpleasant" one. Sometimes a man becomes obsessed with a girl on the basis of rumor alone, even if he's never seen her. And it's "outrageous" when a charming, sensitive girl, clearly heartbroken, sends a beautiful poem, only to be held at a distance by the man, who appears undisturbed.

Sei muses further on the inscrutable character of men, which she finds lacking in general. Though Sei is reticent regarding her own romantic life, at the very least her observations of other courtiers' love lives likely inform her opinions.

Sei doesn't understand why gossip is considered to be wrong—"how can you not discuss other people?" Is there anything more appealing? Naturally, if the gossip concerns someone one is close to, one might refrain—but if it's not, "you'd no doubt go ahead and say it, and have a laugh at their expense."

Sei's rather amusing asides on gossip suggest that "discussing others" occupies a significant part of the entertainment among the ladies at court. They also reinforce the impression that Sei isn't always sensitive to the feelings of those outside her immediate circle.

Things that give Sei pleasure include reading the first volume of a tale one hasn't read before, and then finding the other volume; successfully piecing together a letter that's been torn up; discovering that a puzzling dream doesn't portend anything harmful; or having one's poem talked about. It's also pleasing when one hears people talking about a poem or story one doesn't know, and then one comes across it later in one's reading. Additionally, it's satisfying to get the better of an overconfident person, especially a man.

Sei moves from the pleasures of gossip to more harmless sources of enjoyment, many of which involve literary delights. The fact that Sei is able to draw a connection among these different experiences speaks to her ability to notice the common emotional and aesthetic threads among otherwise disparate things.

One day Sei tells Empress Teishi that when Sei is depressed, she is cheered by discovering things like beautiful, fresh paper, or beautifully woven green matting. Her Majesty replies, "The simplest trifles console you, don't they." Some time later, Sei is feeling distraught during a visit home, and then she receives a gift of "twenty bundles of magnificent paper," throwing her into "delighted confusion." She sends back a message which puns on *kami*, the word for both "god" and "paper." Sei is excited to create a bound book from this paper.

Scholars have identified this bundle of paper as one possible origin of The Pillow Book, although an episode near the end of the book is a more likely candidate. This occasion shows the Empress's esteem for Sei and her understanding of what pleases her, and Sei's response is characteristically clever.

Early in Sei's court service, Empress Teishi moved into another palace during a dedication ceremony. The surroundings are beautiful, with an artificial cherry tree "blooming" at the foot of the stairs. The artificial tree begins to look more dismal after nights of dew and rain. The morning after the rain, a group of servants is sent to dismantle the tree quietly before anyone notices. When the Regent, Michitaka, comes later that morning, Sei murmurs a line from a poem to signal to him that she had witnessed the dismantling of the tree, which was done at his orders. He pretends to be upset that Sei saw this, while being delighted at her poetic allusions.

Sei returns to some memories from earlier in her life at court. At this point, Sei appears to have gained greater confidence in her new surroundings, given her subtle teasing of the Regent (the Empress's father).

On the night that Empress Teishi moved into this palace, everyone scrambled frantically to get into the carriages, to Sei's disgust. She and a friend wait for a quieter opportunity, until an officer scolds them for lingering. When they finally arrive at the new palace, the Empress, too, scolds them for taking so long and for causing her to worry. When the Empress figures out that many of the ladies pushed and shoved to arrive more quickly, she is cross, but Sei intervenes in their defense, suggesting that the other ladies had rushed out of eagerness to enter Her Majesty's presence.

Still referring to events relatively early in her life of service, Sei remembers an occasion when she found other gentlewomen's behavior unseemly (perhaps highlighting the fact that Sei was in her twenties, while many would have still been in their teens), but nevertheless stands up for them—showing that she's diplomatic when she has to be.

Sei describes the great preparations and elaborate ceremony surrounding Empress Teishi's attendance at the *Sutra* Ceremonies. Twenty carriages full of ladies arrive first and wait for Her Majesty's arrival—a moment which "overawes" Sei "at actually being in her service." When the Empress's palanquin pulls up to the temple, the "outburst" of music and dances makes Sei feel faint, wondering if she's "arrived in the Buddha's heavenly realms." The Empress invites Sei to join her in the imperial viewing area—a simple fact, and not something she means to boast about. Sei savors her proximity to the imperial household and the pageantry of the processions, *sutra* reading, sermon, and dancing. The day is glorious but exhausting. However, at the time of writing, Sei looks back on all these events "with heavy heart."

Both Teishi and her father were dead by the time Sei recorded the memory of these events; power had shifted to the new Regent, Michinaga. This is perhaps why Sei recalls these particular Ceremonies with notable passion and detail—they represent Teishi's court at its height of splendor. Sei's melancholy tone reflects how rapidly political fortunes could shift and suggests that such turmoil was always churning beneath the surface of court life, though Sei seldom alludes to it from her sheltered position as a gentlewoman.

SECTIONS 260–297

Sei lists various types of **clothing**: gathered trousers, hunting costumes, shifts, formal robes, and accessories such as fans. She also names various deities. She then moves into a reminiscence of Captain Narinobu, a handsome and delightful courtier. However, she loses respect for Narinobu when he turns up at the palace on a rainy night to visit her. Sei sees Narinobu's visit as calculated—an attempt to convince her that he really cares for her, despite long neglect. She thinks it's always better for a man to come calling on a moonlit night, even if there's been a long lapse in his visits. After all, there is nothing "to match a moonlit night for sending your thoughts winging to distant places [...] and recalling past moments."

Sei's evaluation of Narinobu's behavior reinforces her outlook on men—she sees his visit not as a romantic gesture, but a cynical ploy to manipulate her. So her preference for a "moonlit night" isn't merely romantic, but a desire for a man to show her what she considers to be adequate respect.

By contrast, Sei finds rain totally "unpoetic" and an occasion for despair, so she can't imagine why anyone would "feel thrilled to have some sodden fellow turn up feeling sorry for himself." On the other hand, visits on windy and snowy nights are welcome. She remembers an occasion when a lady received a message from a lover—it contained an allusion to a poem about looking at the same moon. "That's not a scene you could have if it was raining, is it?" Sei concludes.

Sei continues to expand on her musings (which are slightly tongue-in-cheek) regarding the circumstances under which a man should come calling. On one hand, there's a desire for the most "poetic" setting possible, but "poetry" for Sei means more than that—it should reflect the right attitudes in a man, too.

Sei imagines having a lover who always sends a "next-morning poem," but neglects to do so after a quarrel. But after a day of heavy rain, one receives a message—a single poetic allusion, "the rising floods of rain," and one is delighted. Or maybe one is disconsolate on a snowy day, but then watches as a lady receives a letter on beautiful paper which elicits a slight smile, and one wonders what it contains. It's also charming when a lady receives a letter in a dark room and is too impatient to light a lamp, so she reads by the glow of a piece of coal.

From her discussion of gentleman visitors, Sei moves into some specific, albeit fictional, romantic scenarios, featuring a general "you." Each of these reflects the way that the weather or other conditions can effect the delight of an event such as receiving a letter from a lover—adding to the quality of okashi.

One day, when the snow is piled high, Empress Teishi asks Sei, "Shōnagon, what do you make of the snow of Koro Peak?" Sei responds by ordering that the blinds be lifted, which delights Her Majesty. Another lady remarks that she would never have thought of that line, and that Sei "[epitomizes] the sort of person who belongs in this court."

The Empress's reference is to a poem by Bo Juyi, in which the poet lifts the blind to gaze on Koro Peak. Sei remembers the poem and makes an appropriate reference in reply, showing that she's ideal material for Teishi's court.

Sei discusses the peril of boat crossings, which can begin so charmingly and quickly descend into terror as the water suddenly grows choppy. Men who routinely travel by boat are "awe-inspiring" in their nonchalance. And fisher girls who dive for shells must face far greater fears—at least the men stay above, cheerfully rowing the boat, while the women dangle in the water, attached only by a thin rope. The contrast is astonishing between the lazy men and the gasping women being hauled aboard between dives.

Sei discusses the comparatively hard lot of the fisher girls compared to the boatmen on whom they're dependent—a scenario that could be read as a metaphor for the position of women relative to men in general within Heian society.

One day, Grand Counsellor Korechika is giving a talk to the Emperor on Chinese poetry. The talk continues until very late at night, and the Emperor falls asleep. Everyone is startled awake when a serving girl brings in a hen, which is noisily chased by a dog. Korechika quotes a line from a poem about a wise king being awakened, and everyone is delighted by the aptness of the quotation.

The line is from a poem by Miyako no Yoshika, "The cock-watchman announces the dawn; / that sound awakens the wise king from sleep." Korechika's quote perfectly suits the moment, once again demonstrating the importance of poetry in navigating court life.

On another occasion, Sei is sitting on the veranda with another courtier, when a woebegone man approaches with the tale of his house burning down. He tells the story in a comically elaborate manner, prompting Sei's companion to burst out laughing. Sei writes down a poem, which is passed to the man with instructions to open it at home. He thinks the paper is a promissory note for damages, and the women leave, laughing, without correcting him. Sei follows this anecdote with some other poems she sent or recited on occasions she deemed especially fitting.

This episode is rather difficult to explain, since it seems so startlingly rude on Sei's part. Since she thinks people's style of speech should fit with their station, perhaps her mocking objection to the man (who may be a commoner) stems from his ornate language. Still, her intentional misleading of the grieving man seems unaccountably cruel.

SECTIONS S1–S29

Sei includes several more lists, such as "things that are better at night," "things that look worse by firelight," "things whose Chinese characters make no sense," and "things that look lovely but are horrible inside." She also recounts a scene in which a handsome priest is chanting mantras on behalf of a lady who's suffering from spirit possession. A young girl is serving as medium, and she soon falls into a trance, "the awesome power of the Buddha then [revealing] itself." The medium's writhing is a pitiable sight. After she recovers, tea is brought to her. The spirit begs for forgiveness and is dismissed.

The following sections are marked as "supplementary" in certain manuscripts of The Pillow Book, *not appearing in all of them, though they are in much the same style as the main part of the book. Here Sei describes the practice of exorcism. Spirits were believed to cause illness, so a Buddhist priest would draw the spirit into a medium in order to relieve the suffering individual.*

Once, during a pilgrimage, Sei is offended to encounter a row of "rough commoners." The roaring of the river and the long climb to the temple also shake her "pious resolution." When she and her companions finally reach the Kannon, Sei is still annoyed by the "scruffy commoners, looking like ragged bagworms," who fill the worship hall—"I wanted to simply shove them over!"

By now, Sei's attitudes toward commoners are no great surprise, though her forceful disdain in a religious setting is rather striking—she seems to regard the commoners' very presence as an unsavory disruption of her piety.

Sei says that she has "written in this book things I have seen and thought," at idle moments, without expecting anyone else to read them. She'd tried to keep the book private, but it's become public knowledge despite her best intentions.

In this concluding section, Sei offers a defense of the Pillow Book, claiming that she never intended it to be publicly read—though this could also be a gesture of modesty.

One day, Korechika presents the Empress with a bundle of paper. Her Majesty asks Sei what she might do with the paper—over at the Emperor's court, they're copying *Records of the Historian*. Sei suggests that this paper ought to be a "pillow." "Very well, it's yours," the Empress replies, giving Sei the bundle.

Korechika's gift of paper was probably given sometime between 994 and 996, during the years that he served as Palace Minister. The Empress hopes that Sei might produce something to rival the men's efforts, suggesting that a publishable work was *the goal. With the word "pillow," Sei might be making a pun of some sort, though the precise reference is unclear.*

Sei began filling the paper with various things, knowing that much of it would make no sense to anyone else. She's mostly chosen to write about "the things that delight, or that people find impressive," as well as poems. People might say that the book only "[proves] the limits of my own sensibility," but Sei argues that she was writing primarily for her own amusement and not for others' judgment.

Sei defends her okashi *emphasis throughout the book, arguing that although she has written about things that she believes are delightful in general, she cannot account for the sensibility of others.*

Sei is upset that people have seen her pillow book. Once, when Tsunefusa was serving as a provincial governor, and he visited Sei at home, her book happened to be sitting on the mat that had been placed out for him. She tried to grab her book, but too late—Tsunefusa took it with him, and Sei didn't get it back for a long time. "That seems to have been the moment when this book first became known—or so it is written."

Tsunefusa's visit would have been between 995 and 997, according to his term of office. The final sentence is written as though by someone else, which was a convention in Japanese literature when The Pillow Book *was written. Again, it's impossible to know for sure if the book's discovery occurred as Sei reports it, or if her embarrassment over its publication is an attempt to appear modest, in keeping with the values of her time.*

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