

## THE CHARACTER OF PRINCESS KAGUYA AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF EARTH IN THE TALE OF THE BAMBOO CUTTER(A STUDY OF CHARACTER TRANSFORMATION BASED ON THE DUAL WORLDVIEW OF THE MOON AND THE EARTH)

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on the characterization of Princess Kaguya in The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, the oldest monogatari in Japanese literature, and explores how her experience of living on Earth – an unfamiliar world distinct from her celestial origin – brings about internal transformation. Through analysis of Kaguya’s origins, the nature of the moon world, and the reason for her descent to Earth, the paper elucidates the emotional changes she undergoes during her time among humans. It further investigates the symbolic significance of Earth and its function within the narrative structure, aiming to re-evaluate the value of the human world and the power of emotion. By examining the Buddhist duality of the Pure Land and the impure world, as well as the theme of emotional awakening and loss, the study reveals the literary depth of The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter.

**Keywords:** Princess Kaguya, The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter, the moon world, Earth, character analysis, otherworld, transformation, Buddhist worldview, loss, symbolism

### INTRODUCTION

The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter (竹取物語, Taketori Monogatari), written in the early Heian period (794-1185), is considered the oldest narrative prose in Japanese literature. At its center is the story of a beautiful girl, Princess Kaguya (かぐや姫), discovered inside a bamboo stalk, and her interactions with those around her until her eventual return to the moon. More than a mere fantasy, the narrative draws on the contrast between two realms – the moon and the Earth – to depict complex themes such as eternity and impermanence, transcendence and emotion, and humanity and idealism.

Princess Kaguya descends from the “pure” realm of the moon to the “impure” world of Earth, where emotions and death exist. After spending several years among humans, she returns to the moon. Over the course of this journey, she transforms from a rational, otherworldly being into a person capable of deep emotional experiences such as love and sorrow. This paper examines the symbolic meanings of the moon and Earth, the significance of Kaguya’s descent, and the impact of her experiences in the human world on her character.

### SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This study references the following key sources:

1. Kasama Shoin (Ed.). Complete Annotated Text of The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter. 1990.

2. Matsuo Satoshi & Yamada Toshio (Eds.). *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*. Shinchosha Japanese Classics Collection, 1985.
3. Okada Izō. *Origins of Narrative Literature*. Iwanami Shoten, 1994.
4. Donald Keene. *A History of Japanese Literature*. Chūōkōron-sha, 1997.
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6. Sekine Ken. *The Spatial Structure of Narrative*. University of Tokyo Press, 2001.

The methodology involves close textual analysis of character dialogue and narrative voice, examining symbolic elements from structural and semantic perspectives. It also considers the relationship between the story and Buddhist cosmology, using a comparative cultural framework to interpret the contrasting depictions of Earth and the moon.

## DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

### 1. The Character of Princess Kaguya

At the beginning of the tale, Princess Kaguya is portrayed as an ideal woman with transcendent beauty and intelligence. She responds to the courtship of the emperor and nobles with composure, seemingly testing human desire and vanity through the trials she sets. However, as her time on Earth passes, signs of emotional fluctuation begin to appear, particularly in her affectionate interactions with the emperor and her foster father, the old bamboo cutter. Her tears upon returning to the moon symbolize a shift from a purely rational being to one capable of human emotions – a transformation that marks the heart of the narrative.

### 2. The Meaning of the Moon World

The moon in the tale symbolizes the Buddhist Pure Land – a realm untouched by suffering and death, where its inhabitants are not subject to emotional turmoil. When Princess Kaguya returns to the moon, celestial beings resembling Buddhist emissaries appear and welcome her with incense offerings – an image that unequivocally designates the moon as a sacred and transcendental realm. However, that realm is devoid of human emotions such as love and sorrow, and it is precisely because Princess Kaguya has come to know and internalize such feelings that she mourns her return to the moon. This reveals a fundamental paradox within the lunar world: its idealized purity is inseparably bound to an inhuman detachment.

### 3. The Significance of Earth

Meanwhile, the Earth is portrayed as a realm tainted by emotional turmoil, suffering, and death; yet it is simultaneously characterized by the beauty of the changing seasons, the warmth of human affection, and the richness of cultural expression. The familial bond with the old bamboo cutter, her interactions with the Emperor, and her life in the capital city offer Kaguya distinctly human experiences that stir her emotions. In particular, the depictions of the changing seasons and the natural world serve as visual metaphors for her inner transformation, illustrating that the Earth functions as a space of “change” and “growth.”

### 4. The Reason for Her Descent to Earth

The narrative states that Kaguya was sent to Earth “as a result of a sin,” though the precise nature of this transgression remains unspecified. Many scholars interpret this as a symbolic expression, suggesting that her very exposure to “emotion” and “love” might have constituted a transgression within the context of the moon’s ideal, emotionless world. In this view, her descent to Earth can be understood as a purposeful journey to experience emotion or to comprehend human values. Interpreted through the lens of Buddhist thought, this descent may be seen as a form of spiritual training, whereby her life on Earth serves as a process of inner awakening.

#### 5. Character Transformation through Earthly Life

Through her life on Earth, Kaguya comes to possess a “heart” – a capacity for emotion and empathy. Initially responding with rationality and composure, she gradually begins to understand human emotions, develop compassion, and even shed tears. This transformation constitutes a central element of the narrative. It is not limited to romantic affection, but is cultivated through her involvement in the complex emotional and social relationships that characterize human society, prompting a reexamination of what it means to be human. Furthermore, this transformation serves as a literary device that shifts the narrative perspective from that of an external observer to that of an internal subject, thereby deepening both character consciousness and the structural complexity of the story.

### CONCLUSION

The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter is not merely a fantastical story but a profound literary work that uses the contrasting realms of the moon and Earth to explore the meaning of emotion and human existence. While Kaguya is a being from a perfect world, it is in the imperfect human world that she gains emotional richness. Her tears express sorrow at leaving Earth and affection for the people and life she encountered. This transformation lies at the heart of the tale’s exploration of “humanity.”

Although the Earth may be regarded as a defiled realm (穢土) from a Buddhist perspective, it is imbued with the radiance of life – human warmth, love, and the beauty of the four seasons. The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter prompts a renewed appreciation for the value of this terrestrial world, while also depicting the potential of human beings to live beyond idealized perfection. As such, this work transcends the boundaries of ancient literature and possesses a universal significance that resonates with contemporary inquiries into the nature of humanity.

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