The laws of nature dictate that what lives must die. Similarly, a narrative that begins must end. The significance placed on the end is key to human nature’s intrinsic desire for completeness. Novels and movies, too, subscribe to this inherent notion that what begins must end. The Soviet theorist and critic, Viktor Shklovsky, suffests that “A novel can come to an end, but has no ending, because finishing a novel would mean knowing the future, and we don’t know the future.” This begets the question, what constitutes a proper ending? Through the Alfred Hitchcock psychological thriller, *Vertigo* (1958), and Murasaki Shikibu’s Japanese masterpiece, *The Tale of Genji* (11th century AD), I will be exploring the notions and significance of premature endings, and how they shape readings of these works. The prematurity of the endings is a narrative device that Hitchcock and Shikibu exploit to make their work memorable and timeless.

*Vertigo* and *The Tale of Genji* both end in non-conventional endings that do not provide a literal end to the narratives that both representations construct. Hitchcock ends *Vertigo* with a scene in which Judy (Kim Novak) falls off the ledge of the tower of the Mission San Juan Bautista after seeing a nun. Shikibu ends *The Tale of Genji* through Ukifune’s rejection of her familial and worldly ties through her renunciation of her life by taking vows as a nun, and refusing to reply to messages sent by Kaoru. In both cases, the premature nature of the end bolsters the significance of the ending in these representations. Ukifune and Judy Barton were both young women who had long lives ahead of them, but in the culmination of the works in which they respectively feature in, both are removed from their lives at points that I would deem far too early in their life cycles. *Vertigo* and
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*The Tale of Genji* exploit premature withdrawal as end techniques, conveying the tragic nature of the end that awaits.

I contextualized the endings through the Hindu dharmic cycle of “ashram / आश्रम” that constitutes a significant part of Indian philosophical ethics. *Ashrams* refer to the stages of life set forth in Hindu ethics. These can be broken down into four periods, which are: “*brahmacharya*, the life of preparation as a student; *grihastha*, the life of the householder, with its family and other social duties; *vanaprastha*, or *aranyaka*, the life of the forest-dweller, really a transitory stage of partial renunciation and emancipation from worldly occupations, leading on to; *sanyass*, the life of the ascetic and the recluse, of complete devotion to God.”¹ *Sanyass* is the last stage that ends with death. The competition of one stage leads to another, and is at a predetermined range of ages.

In *the Tale of Genji*, it is established that Ukifune wants to end her life by throwing herself into the river after Prince Niou forces himself on her. She miraculously survives, and takes vows to become a nun. The prematurity of her renunciation is the avoidance of conventional family life. While she may not be formally married to Kaoru, she is certainly in the beginning of the *grihastha* stage of life with him. Her sudden ascension to the *sanyass asram*, if temporary, would have been justified, but as seen on the last page of the last chapter, *Yume no Ukihashi – A Floating Bridge in a Dream*, she decides on the permanence of her vows through her refusal of Kaoru by her silence. The ending is significant because while Ukifune is not dead physically, to the world outside, she is as good as

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such. The narrative that Murasaki Shikibu spins in an intricate manner, carefully taking time to establish most characters, and more importantly, their thoughts, ends in an abrupt manner.

At the end of The Tale of Genji’s Yume no Ukihashi Chapter, Shikibu writes about Kaoru, “His suspicion drove him to consider various reasons for Ukifune’s rejection of him, and as he brooded over the possibilities, he could not shake the memory of how he himself had once concealed her from the world with a careless disregard that had left her utterly isolated and forlorn.” The author alludes to the karmic cycles that were prevalent in the Buddhist religion that Kaoru was an ardent follower of. The cyclical nature of the fates is what drives narrative action and the end game for Kaoru, who is unable to come to terms with the disappearance of Ukifune. By leaving Kaoru in a state of emotional limbo, and by ending the book as is currently so, Shikibu makes a statement about the ephemerality of love and life. This could also be construed as a comment on the hypocrisy and misogyny of Japanese society, for it was acceptable for Kaoru to send Ukifune off to the isolated Uji villa, but when Ukifune wanted to live a life of isolation and contemplation, it was unacceptable. While Kaoru understands the truths of Buddha, he cannot help himself from his desire to create a voodoo doll of the older Uji Princess in Ukifune.

To contemporary readers of Shikibu’s psychological masterpiece, it is possible that this end would have been more significant and impactful, compared to the modern reader, for it resulted in a significant break from custom and tradition at the Heian court. Ukifune’s refusal to take up her

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responsibilities to Kaoru may be construed as scandalous as some, and by some as a statement of her empowerment. But through the lens of the dharmic cycle of *ashrams*, Ukifune, by initially choosing death, and later, a chance to reconcile with Kaoru through replying to his message, abandons her familial and societal duties. While I do not agree with forced conformity to social expectations, the role of women in this set of ethics was primarily to take care of the household, and to support the man of the house, which, in this case would be Kaoru. However, the agency that Ukifune exhibits in this situation contrasts strongly with customs of the lack of consent that are exhibited prominently throughout the Uji Chapters.

While it may come across that *The Tale of Genji* is incomplete, many of the manuscripts from the early Kamakura period, more than a century after Shikibu wrote it, conclude with the words “bon ni habem eru,” which means “This seems to be the manuscript.” The possibility exists that readers, between the relatively short time that Shikibu wrote this, and beginning of the late twelfth century, misconstrued Shikibu’s ending as incomplete, leading to the addition of the above quoted line. This further reinforces the fact that readers during this period may have been shocked by the abrupt ending, and in the pursuit of narrative closure, wanted an exit point from the alternative world that Shikibu had so meticulously pieced together, chapter after chapter. The inclusion of this line possibly served to jolt the invested reader into the world he or she inhabited, and out of the world

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of Kaoru, Niou and Ukifune. The significance of the ending is accentuated through this addition of a concluding remark, a testament to the surprise and suddenness that marks the end of the novel.

While Hitchcock’s Vertigo ends in a similarly premature manner as The Tale of Genji, when Judy Barton falls from the top of the tower at the Mission San Juan Bautista after seeing a nun emerge from the shadows, this ending does not have the abruptness of The Tale of Genji. Judy's fall from the top of the tower, while not expected, is also foreshadowed in the disposal of the body of Madeline (also played by Judy Barton in the film, the actress being Kim Novak). Judy's death is premature, for she too, is in the same stage as Ukifune. Her karmic and dharmic cycle preclude her from dying so early, which makes the prematurity of her death seem shocking.

However, the expectations that audiences in 1958 had differed significantly from those in The Tale of Genji. While in the Uji Chapters of The Tale of Genji, Kaoru and Niou show a similar desire with relation to women, as Scottie shows towards Madeline and Judy in Vertigo, it is important to understand that they exist in different philosophical eras. Compared to 11th Century Japan, there was a substantial development in the role of the individual in society and collective thought. The rise of consumerism in American society is a direct result of the emphasis we place on the individual, and signals a shift in the psychology of desire.

Unlike The Tale of Genji, Vertigo’s plot structure lends itself to the construction of a rising action that results in a climax, where Scottie confronts Judy on the steps of the tower, and simultaneously overcomes his vertigo. The death of Judy, whether a suicide attempt or a genuine accident, serves
as a counterfoil and anti-climax to the events that have already taken place, leaving the viewer in a state of wonder, shock, and sorrow. The fall comes at a time when the viewer is led to believe that there is going to be a resolution between two sparring lovers, in a moment of security and peace.

Hitchcock originally envisaged an addition to the last scene, to make the ending seem more complete, in which after the death of Judy Barton, the scene changes to Midge’s living room. The radio is tuned to the news, which says that the police will have no trouble extraditing Gavin Elster for the murder of Madeline Elster. This additional scene to the end addresses the need for completion, but in the end, did not make the cut. The additional need for completion that this ending addressed did not fit in with the general mood and atmosphere of suspense that Hitchcock crafted for Vertigo, as a psychological thriller. By letting the ending stay as it was in the final cut, Hitchcock ensured that there were questions left unanswered not just about Judy’s death, but also of the potential consequences for Gavin Elster and Scottie. The prematurity of the ending is key to the psychological thriller that Hitchcock makes, because the surety that the additional scene brings deconstructs the semantic field of suspense that is carefully created throughout the scene.

One of the ways to deal with the suddenness of the death of Judy in the film is to believe that it was a suicide. This would change the way the audience perceives the end. Judy tells Scottie, “The trouble is, I’m gone now. For you. And I can’t do anything about it.”6 The frustration and desperation that Judy shows in this scene, and the direct indication of losing Judy in his attempt to make her Madeline’s voodoo doll, suggests that Judy was no longer interested in living her

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double life. She did not want to be someone she was not. Through the development of the movie, her increased frustration with Scottie (James Stewart) results in her wanting to stop living this life. She is also in love with Scottie, and does not want him to suffer for the actions she takes, which is why she chooses to jump in a context where it would be easy to justify it as a freak accident.

The use of premature endings in *Vertigo* and *The Tale of Genji* serve as important reminders to readers about the precarious nature of the human psyche, especially when the question is of a base human desire, closure. While intricate descriptions and contexts in both representations serve to immerse the viewer and the reader passionately, the readings take on a new significance. They hand control back to the people who consume these narratives voraciously, elevating *Vertigo* and *The Tale of Genji* into the Halls of Fame for the genres and types they represent best.
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