

The Evolution of Japanese Themes:

A Modern & Pre-Modern Comparison

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The island nation of Japan was an interesting, if unique, written culture. This includes their history, the writing of history, the written forms adapted from China and Korea, and then the defining literature beginning in earnest during the Heian period. Isolated and yet influenced by other nations, these unique circumstances shine through both in their culture and writing. However, because of these various interactions, Japanese literature has evolved. In this essay, I would like to compare and analyze the changing themes, styles, and forms of Pre-Modern and Modern Japanese literature, as it has matured from its native ideologies to focus on addressing social issues of a wide variety by referencing the works of Sei Shonagon, Matsuo Basho, Ichiyo Higuchi, and Mori Ogai.

First off, what were the themes in pre-modern literature? Sei Shonagon, one of many court ladies during the Heian period, recorded the courtly happenings and her personal thoughts in her diary, *The Pillow Book*. The fact that this book is a diary and that she originally did not intend for anyone to read it, gives the writing an honesty and freshness of perspective of her true character and the Heian society. The collection of lists, stray notes, and short stories have a wide variety of subjects, but Sei Shonagon largely concerns herself with beauty and love in the Heian society. As Kyoko Mori notes in her article, *Through the Bamboo Blinds*, “to Sei Shonagon, natural things and artificial things are interchangeable so long as they are both beautiful” (Mori, 2012, para. 13). This illustrates just how much emphasis Sei Shonagon put on beauty; its origins did not matter, it had to only be beautiful. This attention to beauty is the most prolific subject in her journal, so much to that even the act of a lover leaving – she believes – should be beautiful. It was important to her, and other women at the time probably because of the little privacy the palace walls gave the court. Therefore, a lover ought to depart reluctantly and quietly to leave the woman “with charming recollections of those last moments” (D. Keene (Ed.), 1955, p. 138). One

should not mistake her writing as superficial, even though she was a court lady. Sei Shonagon had a way of “making the large things small and scrutinizing them until they seem large again, in a different way” (Mori, 2012, para. 17); such was the skill of her writing.

Jumping to the Tokugawa period, Matsuo Basho was a famous poet during this era and published the *Narrow Road to the Interior*, a semi-fictional prose of his travels to see famous sites, and composed a great deal of poetry along the trip. His works of poems and artful prose, though not explicit in their themes, can only support his themes of spirituality and beauty in nature. His discussion of spirituality is subtle, and permeates throughout his writings. Indeed, the *Narrow Road to the Interior* is a commentary on the spiritual path. It is not the destination that one is most interested in, but the journey itself that is the most powerful, for it is “the fundamental nature of all life all of the time” (Barnhill, 1990, p. 283) and to realize and embrace this truth is to become enlightened by it. Here in Basho’s work we find again the theme of beauty, although this time it is reflected in nature. Nature is even seen to be sacred as well, for as Basho looked “To the south loomed Mount Chokai, supporting the heavens;” no mountain can actually support the sky, but as Basho puts it, and as many ancients believed, this mountain is magnificent, therefore it was important, and since mountains are tall, reaching or even piercing the heavens, people believed that the mountains were to hold up the sky. Basho also commented on the effect of shrines that “[contained] the miraculous manifestations of the gods in such remote [natural] places” (D. Keene (Ed.), 1955, p. 367), and that Japan was so good at enshrining and respecting the spirits and spirituality that existed.

Sei Shonagon and Matsuo Basho both discussed the Japanese sense of beauty, though technically different in what each thought was beautiful, there is an overarching feeling of nostalgia and appreciation for the transient, even in court writings from the Heian period.

Surviving to Basho's time it is this common style and the strength that poetry held in their society that binds the two works closer. Still, these themes are important because they preserved a mindset from a time long past.

The styles of Japan were changing during the Meiji period, and "the world of poetry itself was in a state of disorder" (Danly, 1981, p. 87). With the influx of Western ideologies, government, and culture, Japan was at a critical point. Was it to abandon its own customs to get ahead in the modernizing world? Mori Ogai wrote about the two ideals in conflict, the Japanese Identity in the growing, Westernizing world, with his *The Dancing Girl* where the protagonist Toyotaro, a Japanese native, is overwhelmed and adopted the Western culture in Germany against his parents, friends, and government's wishes. Ogai seems to point out that the lack of strong national Japanese identity at this time was a major cause to Toyotaro's initial rebellion. However, the pressures of family, and chance for redemption and power ultimately outweigh his desires for love and personal 'freedom'; Toyotaro came to the "inevitable realization of qualities latent since his youth" (Hill, 2002, para. 8) were cultivated and molded to the Japanese model, and his true nature and identity was that of Japan, even as he called himself a coward in the face of love and happiness. The abandonment of Elise once again illustrates the old Japanese ideal of duty over love. Mori Ogai's style of writing however is an interesting change from previous Japanese prose. It is easy to tell that Western novels, and Shoyo Tsubouchi's *The Essence of the Novel* inspired his writing. The unique weaving of the story by starting at the end and having the narrator recount the events, which gives the story more visible meaning as the narrator reflects. Also the use of first person, although his is not the narrator of the story, was becoming more of a technique, but still seldom seen in Japanese writing at this time.

While Mori Ogai's character ran the gambit of denying and finding his identity in the changing era, Ichiyo Higuchi approached the changing world and styles a different way. Still firmly rooted in the traditional Japanese writing style using word association, old references, and pivot words, often used in Japanese poetry, Ichiyo was slow to develop her unique blended style of new and old, but ended up with something similar to the works of Saikaku with "comedy, or irony, of [his and her] prose" (Danly, 1981, p. 112) being some of the first characteristics of their works. Ichiyo then took that style and brought a serious tone to it with her themes of growing up in Yoshiwara during transitional Meiji period in the pleasure district of Edo. This theme was reflected on the children and women around the Yoshiwara area in her work, *Child's Play*, and how the area affected them. Specifically in the story Midori, the sister of a famous Yoshiwara courtesan, enjoys her childhood playing with the other children of the district, and because of her sister's position, is known to be quite knowledgeable in the gossip and style of the district. And yet when her "hair [is] done up in the glorious *shimada* style of a young woman" (p. 283) for the first time to signal she growth into adulthood, she only feels "awkward and unhappy" (p. 284). How does one separate these feelings from the natural new strangeness of one's rite of passage? There is no actual need to, for the her feelings of awkwardness are because of the rite of passage and specifically because of where she lives this passage has so much more meaning behind it than, say, in other parts of Edo at the time. Living near Yoshiwara colors the life there, everyone has something to do with the booming business in the pleasure quarter. So it can be inferred, from Midori's beauty and her sister's position, that she can be expected to become a courtesan as well. This, coupled with the loss of her chance at an enduring love for the ebb and flow of the men that went to Yoshiwara, seems to at least begin to illuminate how deep and important these feelings run. This story is like the growing pains of Japan itself at the time; there were "main-

street gangs” (Danly, 1981) and “side-street gangs,” which seem to resemble the conflicting public opinion at that time, as one was more readily accepted and the other seemed uncouth and therefore outdated and undesirable in the face of “such friendliness” (Danly, 1981, p. 262) and pleasantly dressed foreign ideas and people. This new style, in the story and in its form, is not a blind copying of the incoming Western influence.

The Japanese style has a long tradition of being ornate, beautiful in its references and use of nostalgia is one binding and common factors of most Japanese literature up until and through the Meiji Period, if not up to present day. While Japanese literature has taken in the Western influence, it is obvious that western gender theory still has trouble defining “Japanese woman’s writing,” (Spies, 1997, para. 3) to its standards because of the “ethical difficulties in applying western ontological and philosophical frames to Japanese texts” because there is such a different mindset and application of themes, even if there were shared similarities. Japanese and Western themes of National Identity and growing up might be similar, but the deeper you examine the Japanese themes, there are layers than the Western influence cannot contend with. What does a Westerner know about having a crisis of identity from an essentially invading country? Western nations were called First World nations for a reason; they had little to fear of losing identity. For this same reason, growing up in a Japan that was not yet considered a First World nation could not be successfully related culturally and socially to the Western audience of then. So, even as the styles and forms changed, ironically the Japanese identity and voice in literature remained uniquely Japanese, and not some pale imitation of the Western nations. This too is a recurring theme in Japanese culture, that as new influences come to Japan, be it the Chinese writing or Western styles, once in Japan they are molded to fit the needs of the Japanese esthetic and culture, which is an act beautiful in its own right.

The Westernization of Japan played an important role in Japanese literature. Through this interaction, their literature has taken a new dimension previously unexplored. It, by Western standards, 'matured' from the native forms and preoccupation with native themes of love and religion, and the Japanese idea of beauty has developed a repertoire more deep psychologically. Instead of lamenting the bad and woes of people, the modern authors commented on it through new themes and techniques. There new techniques of novelization and short stories, Oba Minako suggests, "perhaps [shows how] fiction says more than theory can ever explain" (Spies, 1997, para. 4). But what makes this process of change so remarkable is that Japanese writers, though the structure and themes have changed, and their style morphed, their unique style was not obliterate or lost in the mire of this transition and change. It remained, and still had the Japanese voice, style and cultural references. The Japanese style was refreshed with new ideas and adapted to form modern Japanese literature that is accessible to world audiences.

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