

JAPANESE FICTION – 19th Century

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Overview: Japanese Culture in the Nineteenth Century

Japan in the nineteenth century underwent an all-but unprecedented social, political, and cultural transformation. The centuries-old Tokugawa shogunal regime, predicated upon the privileged status of the samurai class and a policy of national seclusion, went into decline in the early nineteenth century. The shogunal leaders were unable to reform their outmoded regime, and they were equally incapable of fending off the incursion of Western powers— most notably, Commodore Perry and the American 'Black Ships' (*kurofune*). But they did succeed in promoting a strong sense of native identity and a credo of Japanese uniqueness based upon the Shinto faith and the Emperor as a living god— *akami*.

Fifteen years following Perry's arrival on Japanese shores, the Tokugawa shogunate fell, in what was a relatively bloodless transition to Japan as a modern nation. The advent of the Meiji era (1868-1912) set in motion a process of modernization that eventuated in the establishment of Japan as a powerful empire that succeeded in rivaling the Western imperial powers. The shogunal center of Edo was 'reinvented' as the modern nation's new capital— Tokyo.

Japan's modernizers, though, were largely erstwhile samurai who sought to preserve and promote traditional values and a strong national identity at the same time that they embarked on a comprehensive program of nation-building, industrial development, urbanization, and Western-inspired political, educational, social, and cultural institutions. Their rallying-cry of 'Civilization and Enlightenment' (*bunmei kaika*), which trumpeted the virtues of science, technology, and modernity, was tempered by a state-sponsored embrace of duty and dedication to the Emperor and to the imperial state— *Nippon teikoku*. This seemingly incongruous embrace of tradition and modernity, epitomized in the motto of 'Japanese spirit, Western know-how' (*wakon yōsai*), marks the new age.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Japan had in place a sophisticated rail system, a powerful military, and a productive industrial economy. It had established a representative parliamentary system, political parties, and a modern Constitution. A modern educational system provided a standard Western-style curriculum to the nation's youth, and modern print and entertainment media were available to all Japanese. Japan gradually absorbed the material and intangible culture and institutions of the West. But the identity question— the contest between individualism and personal autonomy and the fact of an authoritarian regime intent upon maintaining order and discipline— remained unresolved. The death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912 marked the end of a truly unique chapter in world history.

The Place of Fiction in Nineteenth-Century Japan

By the early nineteenth century, the brilliant fictional writings of Ihara Saikaku had given way to formulaic stories that would appeal to a readership interested in entertainment and diversion— satirical, sentimental, romantic— and often painfully didactic. Of note here is the work of writers such as Jippensha Ikku, Shikitei Sanba, Tamenaga Shunsui, and Takizawa Bakin. (See Tokugawa Literary Genres: Fiction.) As a representative example of late-Tokugawa literary drollery, consider the following excerpt from Sanba's best-selling fictional work, *Floating-World Bathhouse* (1809):

People do in fact possess individual minds and private feelings, but in a public bath there are no individual minds, and absolutely nothing is private. If a bather secretly farts, the water makes sounds, and a moment later bubbles rise to the surface. When we were young, we all heard about how little Yajirō farted off in the bushes and then lied about it. But a member of the public bath community who thinks about clandestine farting must consider what the impartial water is thinking, and he will feel ashamed. . . Finally, be especially vigilant about the following: Just as you place your clothes inside your rented wardrobe container and close the latch, be careful to act in ways proper to your social class, and always keep your mind safely locked and protected from others.

Based on Haruo Shirane (ed.), *Early Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 750, 752

Having been reduced to stale rehashings of old literary formulas and comic gambits, Japanese fiction in the latter half of the nineteenth century was in need of reinvention. It was Japan's encounter with the West, beginning in the 1850s, which eventually led to an appreciation of Western literature and the gradual adaptation of Western literary influences and models. Needless to say, literary translation would figure as a crucial element in the modernization process. Many Japanese authors in fact began as translators and learned much in the process that they adapted to their own literary projects.

As of the second Meiji decade—the 1880s—it was understood that fiction ranked as the dominant Western literary genre, and a new generation of young Japanese writers sought to emulate this literature and to incorporate its key elements—most significantly, coherent plotting and in-depth characterization. Fictional characters would henceforth be constructed with a view to their psychological makeup and the often troubling quality of their social relationships. The typical protagonist was a young, naive man who struggled with his identity, and—in particular—with his feeble attempts to 'connect' with the opposite sex.

Yet the first generation of modern Japanese writers largely embraced the 'mission mentality' of the Meiji state, which promoted learning as the essential basis for nation-building and the molding of a strong national character. From the political perspective, literature was to embody appropriate virtues and values, and writers were expected to view literary pursuit—be it in the realm of fiction, poetry, or theater—as a higher calling. But in reality the situation was far more complex, and writers found ways to challenge the prerogatives of the nation's authoritarian leaders. Literary activity came to center upon the Tokyo-based community of writers, editors, and publishers—the so-called *bundan*. Avoiding overt political engagement, *bundan* writers focused on the troubled private lives of their characters, many of whom were autobiographical projections of the authors. Indeed, an important literary movement of the late-Meiji period—the Naturalist coterie—promoted a genre of confessional fiction meant to authentically convey the innermost qualities of the author himself. The debate concerning literary 'authenticity' has been a long-standing concern of both writers and critics.

As for the pioneers of Meiji fiction, three authors stand out: Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909), Mori Ōgai (1862-1922), and Natsume Sōseki (1867-1916).

Futabatei

Futabatei Shimei is something of a curiosity. A native of Edo with a penchant for foreign languages, Futabatei was among the first Japanese to master Russian, as a student at Tokyo's Foreign Language Institute in the 1880s. And he pioneered the translation of 19th-century Russian fiction from original texts. These translations were recognized as major literary achievements in their own right. Curiously ambivalent about pursuing a literary career, the young writer chose an elegant-sounding penname that is a variant of a Meiji vulgarism roughly translatable as "drop dead!"

Futabatei is best known as the author of what has long been regarded as Japan's first modern novel—*Drifting Cloud* (*Ukigumo*, 1887-89). Inspired in part by the noted literary manifesto of his mentor Tsubouchi Shōyō (*The Essence of the Novel*), Futabatei crafted a protagonist, Utsumi Bunzō, who became the prototypical 'superfluous hero'—ambivalent, ineffectual, and chronically introverted. Largely drawn from Russian literary models, Bunzō is a decent, high-minded young man who finds himself beset by the crass materialism of the modern era and its debased values. Strongly attracted to his vivacious cousin, Osei, he is easily outsmarted by the crafty Noboru, his rival for the girl's affections.

Bunzō was mortified. With enormous effort he held his burning fury within him until he felt his very heart would burst. How horribly he'd been insulted, and by a dog like Noboru. . . And to make matters worse, it all happened in front of Osei and her mother. . . They'd seen him made a fool of by that disgusting, vile creature. "I'll get even with you, Noboru!" he vowed to himself, gnashing his teeth, clenching his fists, and glaring wildly about.

Much of *Drifting Clouds* centers on Bunzō's pained interiority— an often seething emotional drama at odds with the passive, stoic persona that he presents to those around him. The novel concludes with the protagonist still irresolute, still a prisoner of his roiling emotions and unrelenting ineffectuality:

In the end, Bunzō was forced to admit that he lacked the strength to carry out his resolutions. Weeks of worry had left him nearly mad, but he had done nothing to help the situation. . . Restlessly he wandered about the house. Eventually he reached a decision. He would talk to Osei when she returned home. He would gamble everything on her response. If she would not listen, he would leave once and for all. And so he went back upstairs to wait.

Based on Marleigh Ryan (transl.), *Japan's First Modern Novel*, pp 286-88, 354, 356

In crafting a novel centering on the private emotional world of its very ordinary protagonist, Futabatei had set the compass for a mainstream of modern Japanese fiction that would explore the labyrinth of human subjectivity and self-absorption, and our failed negotiations with a confusing and alienating world.

Ôgai

Mori Ôgai ranks as one of the towering intellectual and literary figures of modern Japan. His accomplishments as writer, intellectual, critic— and, simultaneously, Japan's leading medical officer— are all but unparalleled. Ôgai's pioneering contribution to modern fiction is a trilogy of stories set in Germany, where he had spent four years (1884-88) as a medical officer. The first of these stories, *The Dancing Girl* (1890), draws upon his personal experiences. It begins as follows:

It is customary to while away one's time at sea in the company of others, but I've chosen to shut myself up in my cabin, tormented as I am by a hidden remorse. . . How can I ever rid myself of such a torment? . . . Well then, since it will be some time before the cabin boy comes to turn off the light, I will attempt to record my story here.

Based on Richard Bowring (transl.), in J. Thomas Rimer (ed.), *Mori Ôgai: Youth and Other Stories*, pp 8-9

Ôgai proceeds to tell the tale of a young Japanese— Ôta Toyotarô— who had lived in Berlin and won over a beautiful but impoverished German dancing girl. For a while living out this improbable romantic fantasy, Ôta eventually gives in to the call of duty and abandons his lover— pregnant, and on the verge of a mental breakdown— in order to return to Japan. Ôgai's moving confessional tale, which recounts the protagonist's searing sense of guilt as he reflects upon his romantic misadventure on board the Japan-bound ship, helped establish the short story as a privileged format for modern Japanese fiction, and personal confession as a powerful medium of self-expression.

Sôseki

More so than any other writer, it was Natsume Sôseki who can be credited with having brought modern Japanese fiction to its highest level. An erstwhile professor of English literature who turned to creative writing as a professional career, Sôseki is generally regarded as Japan's 'novelist laureate.'

Sôseki's abiding concern for the corrosive effects of the modern age is best expressed in a work regarded by many as the great Japanese novel— *Kokoro* (1914). This deeply moving work, seen as capturing the essential spirit of the Meiji era, centers on the relationship between a young man and an older acquaintance, *Sensei*, to whom he is strongly— and strangely— attracted. The novel begins as follows:

I always called him 'Sensei.' I shall therefore refer to him simply as 'Sensei,' and not by his real name. . . Whenever the memory of him comes back to me now, I find that I think of him as 'Sensei' still. I simply cannot bring myself to write of him in any other way.

Kokoro goes on to tell of the young narrator's attempts to fathom what lies behind Sensei's reticence and melancholy fatalism.

“Don’t put too much trust in me. You will learn to regret it if you do,” Sensei said. “The memory that you once sat at my feet will begin to haunt you. . . I bear with my loneliness now, in order to avoid greater loneliness in the years ahead. You see, loneliness is the price we pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves.”

Notwithstanding this ominous pronouncement, Sensei becomes something of an obsession for the narrator, even displacing his own father. He will end up abandoning the father, on his deathbed in the family home in the provinces, in order to return to Tokyo to be with Sensei, who has evidently taken his own life. Sensei finally reveals himself to the narrator in the form of a long letter, comprising the second half of the novel, which tells of his sorry past and the tragic circumstances that led to his suicide.

Now, as I am about to cut open my own heart and drench your face with my blood, I shall be satisfied if, when my heart stops beating, a new life lodges itself in your breast.

Above excerpts based on Edwin McClellan, transl., *Kokoro*, pp 1, 30, 129

Sensei’s confession— a fully-fashioned autobiography in its own right— recounts how he had betrayed his best friend over their rivalry for the same young woman, resulting in the friend’s suicide. Sensei eventually marries the young woman but is consumed by remorse and an all-consuming and desperate loneliness. The fate of the young narrator, who has himself betrayed his dying father for the sake of the suicidal Sensei, remains unknown. These deaths are in turn related to the demise of the Meiji Emperor (1912) and the end of an epochal era in Japan’s history.

Conclusion

In addition to these pioneering fiction writers, three others deserve mention. Shimazaki Tōson (1872-1943) was a leading romantic poet in the 1890s who turned to fiction. His 1906 novel, *Broken Commandment*, tells of the ‘coming out’ of Ushimatsu, a member of the outcaste *burakumin* minority, who defies his father’s dying wish that he conceal his true identity and gains a new lease on life through his confessional unburdening at the novel’s climax.

Higuchi Ichiyō (1872-96) was a brilliant woman writer who succeeded against all odds in establishing herself in the male-dominant literary establishment. Notwithstanding her death at a very early age, Ichiyō’s stories— most notably, *Growing Up* (1896)— movingly evoke the world of women and young people living in the vicinity of Tokyo’s entertainment district. And Nagai Kafū (1879-1959) was a Tokyo writer who, like Tōson, was trained as a poet but turned to fiction. Drawn to the working-class *shitamachi* working-class district and its back streets and common folk, Kafū is known for stories such as *The River Sumida* (1909)— a nostalgic portrayal of Tokyo and its tapestry of locale neighborhoods before its transformation into a Western-style metropolis.

In sum, the transition from the fiction of the late Tokugawa to a fully-fledged modern fiction in the late-Meiji reflects the interplay of traditional themes and tastes and a host of adaptations and assimilations of Western literature and culture. Three elements stand out here: the privileging of psychological interiority and personal isolation; the complex engagement of individuals with family and social relationships— especially regarding gender issues ; and the centrality of Tokyo itself— its neighborhoods, streets, and byways, together with the river that runs through it. Indeed, much Meiji fiction treats the Tokyo city-scape as a character in its own right.

Sources

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Discussion Questions and Topics

Give thought to the curious fact of a male centered literary establishment, which appeared to favor a literature of male ineffectuality and anxiety— and women as self-possessed and capable. In other words, how are we to 'read' the accounts of male angst and emotional instability?

The apolitical status of most nineteenth-century Japanese fiction reflects the marginal circumstance of writers, vis a vis the authoritarian regime— be it shogunal or imperial. How are we to assess the socio-political milieu within which writers functioned?

Meiji fiction presents an interesting juxtaposition of externality— the spaces and locales that characters inhabit and move through— and the interiority and self-absorption of these same characters. Consider the interplay of these seemingly antithetical elements.

Images



Shikitei Sanba (1776-1822) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Futabatei Shimei (1864-1909) (Source: *Yomiuri Shinbun*)



Mori Ôgai (1862-1922) (Source: *Japan Times*)



Natsume Sôseki (1867-1916) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)