

JAPANESE ESSAY – 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— a *kami*.

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' (*bunmeikaika*), 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' (*wakonyōsai*), 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 Essay Writing in Nineteenth-Century Japan

As in other literary and cultural areas, essay writing in nineteenth-century Japan reflected the intersection of old, established traditions of personal narrative (the *zuihitsu* genre, in particular) and a new, Western-oriented concern for individuality and authenticity of expression. Still under the sway of traditional styles and conventions, late- Tokugawa writers retained their interest in rhetorical polish, virtuosity, and flair. And notwithstanding the gradual transition to a more secular, materialist society, a Confucian-centered elevation of literary pursuit and the privileging of a distinctly literary language still held sway. This was certainly the case in the great urban centers of Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto. (See Tokugawa Literary Genres: Essay)

With the Meiji period, Japan's transition to Western-inspired modernization led to fundamentally new conceptions of the individual and one's expressive capacities. Despite the persistence of older genres, the emergence of new genres of personal essay was in part the product of the rise of modern print media— mass-circulation periodicals, in particular— and a literary journalism that met a demand for personal essays by writers and other notable figures. The key criterion here was the fashioning of an authentic personal voice, expressed in a standardized literary language accessible to a broad national

readership. Such writing was widely embraced by the emerging Tokyo-based literary community, the so-called *bundan*.

There appeared a number of essay-style sub-genres on the periodical market, but the broadpersonal essay genre favored short, episodic observations and reflections. These included diary writing (*nikki*, a perennial preoccupation of Japanese writers); and sensitive, lyrical prose that featured natural imagery and poetic musings.

Japanese writers were not unfamiliar with autobiography as a genre of literary self-expression, and a number of Tokugawa and Meiji figures experimented with the genre (See the relevant article on autobiography). Yet there was a curious resistance to consigning oneself to a single, comprehensive literary package. Rather, it was the brief personal essay form that most appealed to Japanese writers in the nineteenth century.

A Sampler of Essay Writing

What follows is a roughly chronological selection of excerpts from noteworthy late-Tokugawa and Meiji essays, with brief comments on each.

1) Anonymous essay collection, *Clouds of Floating Grasses* (1843)

People who keep cats don't always know how to care for them. They put dried tuna in with their food, which adds fat, not knowing that if you give cats too much fat, they won't be able to catch mice. Rather, the thing to give cats is fried barley with miso on it. You shouldn't give them anything else. If they get used to eating meat, when you don't have any to give them, they are sure to steal from the neighbors. It's the same with raising our young people. . .

Having few things is the basis of true abundance. Storing up lots of things simply invites trouble and taxes the body. Rich people who live frugally can enjoy accumulating more things. But wearing thin robes when you are wealthy is to make sheer accumulation one's only pleasure. From the vantage point of those without many worldly desires, such people look like nothing so much as summer insects drawn to the flames.

Based on Carter, *The Columbia Anthology of Japanese Essays*, pp 355, 359

The anonymous author of the above excerpts is employing a standard late-Tokugawa essay style, which channels the orthodox Confucian moral code as he presents both practical and moral advice to the reader. Overall, the *Floating Grasses* collection is a miscellany of such observations and reflections.

Meiji Essays

The grounds for essay writing in the Meiji period would undergo a dramatic shift. What follows is a sampling of noteworthy essays spanning nearly half a century:

2) KanagakiRobun, *The Beefeater* (1871)

We really should be grateful that even people like ourselves can now eat beef, thanks to the fact that Japan is steadily becoming a civilized country. Of course there are those unenlightened boors who cling to their barbaric superstitions and claim that eating meat defiles you so much that you can no longer pray before Buddha and the gods. Such nonsense shows that they simply cannot understand natural philosophy. Such savages should be made to read Fukuzawa's enlightened article on eating beef. In the West, they're free of superstition and do everything scientifically— that's why they've come up with such glorious inventions as the steamship and steam engine.

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, p 32

Robun's is a transitional work of the early Meiji, reflecting the late-Tokugawa *gesaku* comic and ironic mode as it lampoons the fetish for Western goods and styles that had taken hold in Tokyo and elsewhere. This send-up of Japan's slavish imitation of the West would be revisited in early twentieth-century writing as well.

3) Tsubouchi Shôyô, *The Essence of the Novel* (1885)

It would seem that the time is propitious for the production of new, modern novels. But it has reached the point that our newspapers and magazines are printing rehashes of the hackneyed old novels. . . There is a staggering production of books— all of them bad. . . It has long been our practice to treat the novel as an instrument of moral education, whose chief function is the encouragement of virtue and the castigation of vice. In actual practice, though, readers have been drawn only to scenes of violence and pornography. Alas, our popular writers have become slaves to public fancy and have freely pandered to the lowest common denominator of taste. What could be more lamentable! . . . And so it is my hope that this work will be of service to authors seeking to improve our novels, with the hope that we may surpass in quality the novels of Europe, thus enabling the Japanese novel to assume a glorious place on the altar of the arts.

Based on Keene, pp 55, 57-58

Shôyô was an important literary editor and culture critic who sought to galvanize young Japanese writers by steering them away from outmoded Tokugawa practices and having them turn to fiction writing inspired by Western models. His essay on how to craft the modern novel was a watershed in the emergence of a modern Japanese literary voice.

4) Natsume Sôseki, *The Civilization of Modern-Day Japan* (1911)

As a result of our modern contrivances, life should be easier for us than it was for our ancestors. But this is not the case. We live with pain no less extreme than that experienced by the men of old. Our standard of living may have risen, but the pain of existence has not at all abated. . . This is the great paradox to which modern civilization has given birth. As for Japan— having been snatched up by the flying monster of Western civilization, our nation clings desperately to the monster, afraid of being dropped into oblivion. . . We can only view Japan's future with pessimism.

Based on Rimer and Gessel, *The Columbia Anthology of Modern Japanese Literature* (Vol 1), pp 315-22

5) Natsume Sôseki, *My Individualism* (1914)

There has been much talk of late concerning 'the ego' and 'self-awareness' as a justification for unrestrained self-assertion. Be on your guard against those who spout such nonsense, for while they hold their own egos in high esteem, they are indifferent to others' egos. . . There should be no such thing as power unaccompanied by obligation. In other words, unless one has attained a degree of moral integrity, there is no value in developing one's individuality. One who lacks character will inevitably present a threat to others. Individualism, in short, must be rooted in ethical conduct and conscience. Otherwise, it can only yield to a profound condition of loneliness.

Based on Rimer and Gessel, pp 327-31

The above essays by the eminent author Natsume Sôseki reflect, first, his pessimism regarding the position of Japan vis a vis a dominant— and domineering— Western civilization; and, second, the fraught quality of modern, urban existence and the lamentable rise of egocentrism, self-absorption, and a virtually debilitating sense of loneliness. This latter theme is brilliantly evoked in his best-known novel, *Kokoro*. (See: Fiction) For a selection of Sôseki's personal narratives, see: *Autobiography*.

6) Mori Ôgai, *Daydreams* (1911)

What had I been doing all my life? I'd been toiling away at my studies as if constantly driven on by something. . . But I felt that all I was really doing was appearing onstage and acting out an assigned role. . . However much I longed to take off the mask, to catch a glimpse of my true self, I kept up my performance, the director's whip at my back. . .

"How can a man come to know himself?" Goethe once wrote. "Not through reflection, but perhaps through action. Do your duty and in the end you will know your true worth. What, then, is your duty? The demands of each day." . . .

The old man in his small hut thus spends his days, neither fearing death nor awaiting it, but with the sense of a dream unfulfilled. His reminiscences occasionally reveal the traces of many years in a single moment. And at such times his eyes stare out over the distant sea and sky. This is merely an odd scrap jotted down at just such a moment.

Based on Richard Bowring, transl., in J. Thomas Rimer (ed.), *Mori Ôgai: Youth and Other Stories*, pp170, 176, 181

One of Meiji Japan's preëminent literary and intellectual figures, Ôgai reflects here upon an upbringing dominated by others' expectations and the chronic— and irreducibly modern— anxiety regarding one's identity, one's proper role in society, and the meaning of one's life. This theme is central to Ôgai's celebrated short story, *The Dancing Girl* (See: Fiction)

Conclusion

Not surprisingly, essay writing in nineteenth-century Japan reflects prevailing literary and cultural styles, together with the nation's dramatically shifting socio-political milieu. While authors tended to focus on other literary pursuits, they would turn to the essay both as a vehicle for culture criticism and as an outlet for one's personal point of view. Ultimately, the themes that emerge in essay form would be evident as well in the fiction, poetry, and drama of late-Tokugawa and Meiji Japan. Overall, though, a concern for individual expression and for sobering reflections on the modern age and its challenges and frustrations would come to predominate.

Sources

Carter, Steven (ed.), *The Columbia Anthology of Japanese Essays* (Columbia, 2014)

Keene, Donald, *Modern Japanese Diaries* (Holt, 1995)

_____, *Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology* (Grove, 1956)

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How do the above essays reflect the transformation from the insular world of Tokugawa Japan to the more open, cosmopolitan world of the Meiji era? How do they relate to, and differ from, essay writing in earlier periods?

'Individual expression' is a highly subjective matter. How do essays serve as convincing and compelling vehicles for such expression? How do we respond to didactic essays, which counsel virtue and admonish vice? Have we grown impervious to moralizing and 'preaching' in the present day?

What would you suggest as the proper criteria for an effective essay? How do we regard essay writing in comparison with diary writing, poetry, or fiction?

Images



KanagakiRobun (1829-94) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Image from *The Beefeater* (Aguranabe, 1871) (Source: manabean.wixsite.com)



TsubouchiShōyō (1859-1935) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



NatsumeSōseki (1867-1916), as depicted on 1000-yen Japanese banknote (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Mori Ōgai (1862-1922) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)