

JAPANESE LITERATURE – 19th Century

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Contents

Overview

Part I : Poetry

Part II : Drama

Part III : Fiction

Part IV : Autobiography

Part V : Essay

POETRY

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 Poetry in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Poetic production in late Tokugawa Japan was impressively varied and enjoyed widespread popularity among various segments of society. (See Tokugawa Literary Genres: Poetry) Poets composed in both Japanese and Chinese, and they continued to engage in group versification, much as their Heian era and medieval forebears had done centuries earlier. Yet the conventions and styles of what was a twelve century-long lyrical tradition had lent a degree of predictability and staleness to this poetry. The

innovations achieved by figures such as Bashō and Buson had largely given way to imitation and poetic factionalism. The dominant role of natural imagery and seasonal reference remained unchallenged, as did the orthodoxy of the five- and seven- syllable poetic form— be it the *haiku* (5-7-5) or the *waka* (5-7-5-7-7).

However, with the waning of the Tokugawa regime and the advent of Japan's modern era with the Meiji Restoration, things changed. The old poetic forms and techniques were retained, but they would be imbued with a new language and spirit that reflected the Meiji Westernization agenda and the rapid growth of cities and urban modernity. New poetic forms were introduced, and a new openness to innovation freed poets from the constraints of the old conventions and regulations, while poetry itself would gradually give ground to prose fiction inspired by the work of major Russian, German, French, and British authors. Yet a strong current of lyricism and poetic sentiment, which had so long undergirded Japan's literature throughout the ages, would persist even in the face of the torrent of Western imports and influences.

Late Tokugawa Poetry

Late-Tokugawa literati (*bunjin*) remained devoted to poetry in the traditional styles, but harbingers of a new approach to self-expression can be gleaned. Among the countless poets and poetic circles, two individuals stand out— Kobayashi Issa (1763-1827) and Priest Ryōkan (1758-1831).

Issa is something of a Japanese patron saint, whose poetry speaks to a gentle, childlike innocence that has endeared him to devotees over the centuries. Among his best-known *haiku* are the following:

yasegaeru
makerunaissa
koreniari

Skinny frog—
Don't give up just yet
Issa's here!

tsuyu no yowa
tsuyu noyonagara
sarinagara

This world of dew
Is a world of dew, and yet
And yet. . .

Ryōkan, a Zen priest who never left his home in the provinces, was equally adept at Chinese verse (*kanshi*) and Japanese *waka*. His poetry has been regarded as channeling a humble spirit and an enlightened soul. Two representative poems are as follows:

yo no nakawa
naninitatoemu
yamabiko no
kotaurukoe no
munashikigagoto

Our life in this world—
To what shall I compare it?
To an echo
Resounding through the mountains
And off into the empty sky

kazewakiyoshi
tsukiwasayakeshi
izatomoni
odoriakasamu
oi no nagorini

The breeze is fresh
The moonlight bright
Let's dance together
The whole night through—
A keepsake for my old age

Based on Marcus, p 59; and Shirane, pp 952-3

Poetry of the Meiji Period

The Meiji 'mission statement' of 1868 envisioned a modern Japan that would be advanced in material terms while retaining a distinctive Japanese identity and spirit (*seishin*). The Meiji literary community can

be said to have implemented this through their poetry, which effectively grafted new, Western-inspired elements onto the native stock of form, image, and sentiment whose roots extended some thirteen centuries into the past. No longer restricted to fixed styles and conventions, Meiji poets typically composed in both the traditional and modern forms.

Late nineteenth century literary Westernization hinged on locating exemplary works, translating them, and eventually adapting them to the native language and cultural milieu. This would be a laborious process. As for poetry, the British Romantics— Wordsworth, in particular— were widely read as of the 1890s, as were the French symbolists (most notably, Baudelaire and Mallarmé). The unrestricted form of this poetry, its broad poetic diction, and the expressive voice of the poetic speaker— these crucial elements helped inspire a new, free verse genre, the *shintaiishi*.

Shintaishi free-verse poetry

The pioneering *shintaiishi* poet, Shimazaki Tôson (1872-1943), was associated with the Bungakkai coterie of young Romantics. Tôson would go on to become a leading novelist toward the end of the Meiji period, but his poetry in the new style, composed in the 1890s, helped pave the way for this Western-inspired lyrical genre. Perhaps his best-known *shintaiishi* verse is one entitled *On Traveling the Chikuma River*:

By the old castle of Komoro
Among the white clouds, a wanderer laments. . .
Ah, what does the old castle tell?
How do the waves on the riverbank reply? . . .
Alone I walk among the rocks
And bind fast my sorrows to the riverbank.

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp201-2

Echoing a mournful Wordsworthian refrain, Tôson's poetic wanderer, alone in the world, foreshadows the melancholic interiority that would become a hallmark of Japan's modern literature. Yet one senses as well the profound aesthetic and emotional quality of precisely such lyrical melancholy.

Modern poetry in traditional forms

The radical transformations of Japan's modern condition challenged poets to discover ways to pour 'new wine' into the 'old containers' of seventeen and thirty-one syllable verse. The latter, earlier referred to as *waka*, became known as *tanka* as of the Meiji era. Among the leading 'modernizers' of this traditional poetry are three individuals: Masaoka Shiki (1867-1902), Yosano Akiko (1878-1942), and Ishikawa Takuboku (1885-1912).

SHIKI

Masaoka Shiki can be credited with expanding the horizons of Japanese poetic imagery, which had long been tied to a fixed vocabulary of nature and seasonal image. The final years of Shiki's life, cut short by tuberculosis, were spent in his sickbed. Freed by his convalescent state to explore the horizons of his fertile imagination, Shiki crafted a rich lyrical voice, in both *haiku* and *tanka*, that centered on the close observation of his confined space and personal incapacity; and of the odd intersection of disease and immobility, on the one hand, and a passionate and replete vision of life, on the other. Several examples— a *tanka* and two *haiku*— will suggest these qualities:

<i>kamenisasu</i>	Sprays of wisteria
<i>fuji no hanabusa</i>	Arranged in a vase—
<i>hanatarete</i>	The blossoms hang down
<i>yamai no tokoni</i>	And by my sickbed
<i>harukuren to su</i>	Spring is coming to an end

kawoutte I swat mosquitoes, as
gunsho no ueni Bloodstains appear
chiwo in su On the warrior tale I read

ringokute I think I'll die
botan no maeni Eating applies
shinankana In the presence of my peonies

Based on Rimer and Gessel, pp309-10

AKIKO

The wife of a noteworthy Meiji poet, Yosano Tekkan, Yosano Akiko emerged as an even more celebrated poet and essayist. Indeed, she ranks as perhaps the preëminent modern Japanese literary woman—although one hesitates to assign her to a seemingly subordinate gender category. Equally fluent in the 'language' of *tanka* and *shintaiishi*, Yosano Akiko is best known for her proud and passionate voice, which challenged the orthodox code of female subservience. For this reason she was regarded as a 'second coming' of the great Heian poet, Ono no Komachi. (See Classical Literary Genres: Poetry)

Akiko is widely recognized—and admired—for her poetic challenge to Japan's war with Russia (1904-05), in the form of a plea to her younger brother not to die uselessly in battle. The following excerpt includes a startling indictment of none other than the Meiji emperor himself:

Ah, my brother, I weep for you.
Beloved, you must not die—
You the last born, and so cherished. . .
You must not die!
How could our great emperor. . .
Not himself do battle, but instead
Ask other to spill their blood,
To die like beasts
And think those deaths a glory?
Brother, you must not die in this war

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 302

Akiko's passionate voice in the following pair of *tanka* speaks for itself:

This hot tide of blood	Pressing my breasts
Beneath my soft skin, and you don't	I kick aside the
Even brush it with a fingertip—	Curtain of mystery—
Aren't you lonely then,	How deep the crimson
You who preach the Way?	Of the flower there!

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 313

TAKUBOKU

Ishikawa Takuboku, the son of a Zen priest in the remote northern provinces, established himself as a poet in the 'new style' (*shintaiishi*), which served to channel his left-wing political views. He would become known, too, for a private diary, written in Roman alphabet transcription, that detailed his involvement with the Tokyo poetic circles and revealed a range of anxieties and obsessions. (See: Autobiography)

Takuboku also earned acclaim for two late-Meiji collections of *tanka*— *A Handful of Sand* (1910) and *Sad Toys* (1912). As with Akiko, his *tankaverses* openly bare the speaker's self— his isolation and alienation, and his tenuous and awkward connection with others. Consider the following:

<i>akiyaniiri</i>	I once went into
<i>tabakonomitaru</i>	A vacant house
<i>kotoariki</i>	And smoked a cigarette
<i>awaretadahitori</i>	Only because I longed
<i>itakibakarini</i>	To be alone

kyôshitsu no	Escaping through the
madoyorinigete	Classroom window
tadahitori	I lay down
kanoshiro-atoni	All alone
neniyukishikana	Amidst the castle ruins

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, p 208

hatarekedo	I work and
hatarakedonao	I work and
wagakurashi	Life never gets
rakuninarazari	Any easier—
jittotewomiru	I stare at my hands

Based on Rimer and Gessel, p 308

Conclusion

Despite the rising prominence of fiction in the Meiji period, Japanese poetry in the nineteenth century maintained its enduring value, as poets demonstrated a capacity to adjust to the changing times. The 'cultural capital' of the late-Tokugawa *bunjin* literati class gradually declined during the Meiji, in line with the rise of modern media and a national readership attuned to the consumer economy and leisure activities. Nonetheless, elevated literary expression— in particular, traditional poetic cultivation and sophistication— was prized by many in the *bundan* community who sought to promote Japanese cultural exceptionalism via literary means.

The fact remained, though, that the practice and appreciation of poetry— together with many other arts— was now accessible to the broad Japanese public, irrespective of social class, gender, and locale. As for poetry, in its many forms— the print media regularly published work submitted by individuals from every corner of the nation. Their poems spanned the creative spectrum and effectively democratized what had been a cultural property of the privileged elites. That said, many purists held that the 'heartbeat' of the traditional 5-7-5 poetic cadence and the homage to the seasonal cycle and the images of nature embodied a transcendent value as part of the Japanese national identity.

In short, the domain of Japanese poetry and lyrical expression in the nineteenth century is marked by many contesting and converging forces, which yielded a rich and varied harvest.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to compare the 'new-style' poems and the traditional 17- and 31-syllable forms? What if anything do these two categories share?

What might account for the survivability of *haiku* and *tanka*— not to mention the host of other Japanese traditional arts and crafts? How does the Meiji project of creating a strong and resilient national identity figure here?

What do you find most 'relatable' about this diverse body of poetry? How does it reflect the rapidly-shifting historical context? What aspects of Japanese society and character does it fail to reveal?

How does the quality of selfhood expressed in this poetry relate to literary selfhood in the prose writings (essay, fiction, autobiography) of nineteenth-century Japan? How does it harken back to the 'golden age' of Heian and medieval poetry?

Images



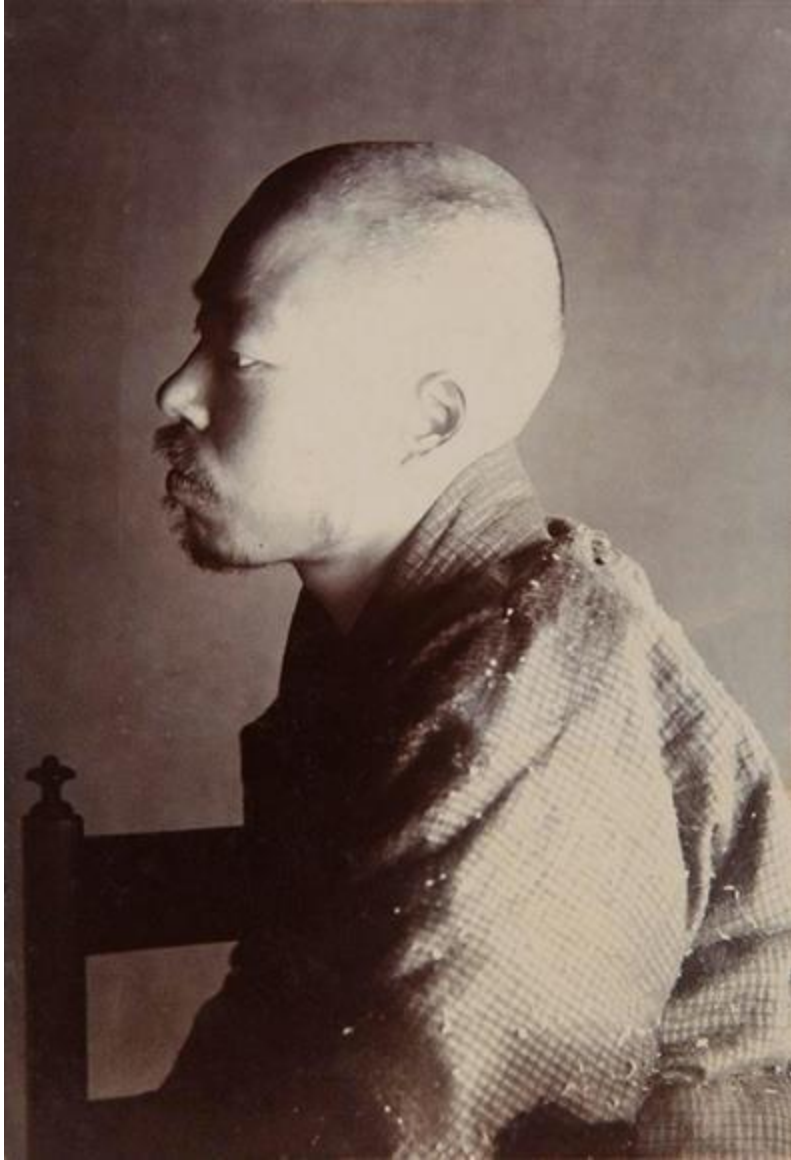
Image of the poet Kobayashi Issa, early 19th century (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Statue of Zen priest-poet Ryōkan, early 19th century (Source: olympiazencenter.org)



Shimazaki Tôson, early 20th century
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)



Masaoka Shiki: Final photograph (December 24, 1900)
Source: Terebess Asia Online



Yosano Akiko and husband, Tekkan (early 20th century)
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

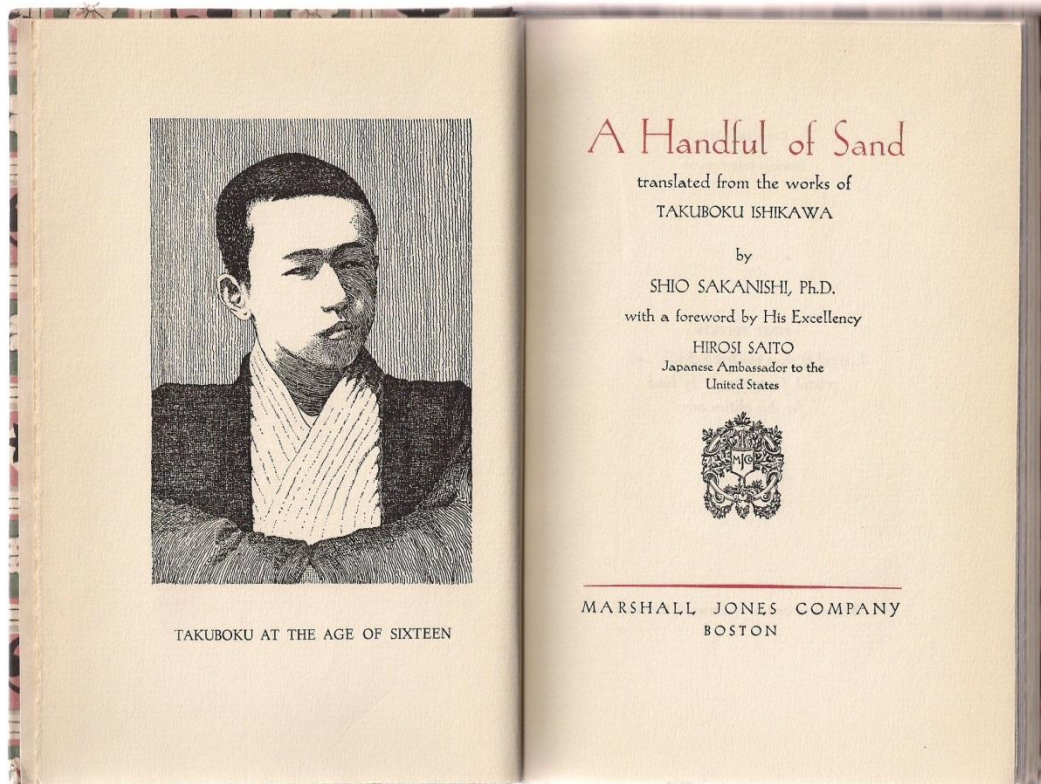


Image of Ishikawa Takuboku as frontispiece of an English translation of his 1910 *tanka* collection, *A Handful of Sand* (Ichiaku no suna)

DRAMA

The Place of Drama in Nineteenth-Century Japan

As was the case with Japanese arts and culture overall, the nineteenth century witnessed the transition from time-honored traditional drama to the introduction of modern forms and techniques that reflected the nation's radically new political and social circumstance. The austere, elegant Noh theater, with roots tracing back to the fourteenth century, thrived during the Tokugawa period, thanks to elite samurai and courtly patronage of its five performance traditions. The classical Noh repertoire— marked by unparalleled aesthetic and literary sophistication and understated, meditative performance styles— appealed almost exclusively to the elite classes.

Far more popular were kabuki and puppet theater (*bunraku, jôruri*), which featured flashy stage technique, celebrity actors and famous puppet masters, and a level of dramatic flare and flamboyance entire missing from Noh. Kabuki, in particular, became a centerpiece of Tokugawa popular culture— and a major force in the burgeoning consumer marketplace and fashion world, as well. Its dramatic actor poses and famous scenes, as depicted in countless *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints, have long been icons of the Tokugawa period— and distinctive hallmarks of 'traditional Japan' for people around the world.

Noh theater in the Meiji

The modernization agenda of the Meiji leaders would eventually extend to even the most enduring traditional entertainments, but the popular tastes and styles in the performing arts— kabuki in particular— likely slowed the introduction of Western-inspired drama in late-nineteenth century Japan. As for Noh theater— the decline of elite support during the early years of Meiji, coupled with the mass citizenry's unfamiliarity with the Noh repertoire, threatened the demise of this unique performance tradition.

One positive development took place in 1879, in the context of Ulysses Grant's visit to Japan. Invited to a performance of Noh, the ex-U.S. president remarked on his fascination with the performance and made a point of encouraging support for what he learned had become a sadly neglected performance art. Perhaps as an indication of a growing awareness and appreciation of Noh, the practice of *yôkyoku*— the oral recitation of the Noh libretto (minus the acting, dance, and musical accompaniment)— took hold among the educated public toward the end of the century.

Kabuki theater in the Meiji

In contrast with the challenges to the Noh theatrical tradition, kabuki held its own during the Meiji era. This was largely owing to the public's familiarity with, and enjoyment of, kabuki performance. Unlike Noh, which had a fixed repertoire that did not permit the introduction of new plays, kabuki was more adaptive— while maintaining a standard repertoire of 'classic' plays, it was open to new material that might appeal to a younger audience.

Most significant, though, was the survival of the kabuki 'star system' of actor lineages and celebrity figures, and the preservation of the standard theatrical styles and techniques. These factors helped sustain the popularity and economic viability of kabuki as Japan entered the modern era. Perennial favorites such as *Chûshingura*, the great 'forty-seven *rônin*' vendetta play of the mid-eighteenth century, were recast and adapted for late-Tokugawa and Meiji audiences. In fact, this play was produced in an early cinematic adaptation in 1907. It was twenty years earlier, in 1887, when Emperor Meiji became the first emperor to attend a performance of kabuki. This served to enhance kabuki's stature among those who considered it to be little more than cheap entertainment for the masses.

In a sense, though, Meiji kabuki was constrained by the very need to retain its traditional theatrical styles and techniques while seeking, paradoxically perhaps, to broaden its thematic range to include current trends and issues. The key figure in this transitional moment is Kawatake Mokuami (1816-93), widely regarded as the last great kabuki playwright.

Mokuami

Raised in the world of late-Tokugawa kabuki, Kawatake Mokuami was a truly prolific playwright, with some 360 plays to his credit. He achieved such popularity in the early Meiji period that he was said to have single-handedly impeded the introduction of Western drama and performance. Yet Mokuami did understand the need to introduce new trends and innovations— for instance, plays that aimed at historical accuracy as opposed to mere stage spectacle; and plays set in contemporary times, which would incorporate social realism and issues of the day. What is more, Mokuami was among the first to adapt Western literary works for the kabuki stage.

An important theme of Mokuami's plays, and one that the Meiji government promoted as part of its program of moral cultivation, is *kanzenchōaku*— the cardinal virtue of rewarding good and chastising evil. This theme underscores one of Mokuami's most famous plays, *The Thieves* (a loose translation of the elegant Japanese title, *Shima Chidori Tsuki no Shiranami*— Island plovers, white waves in the moonlight, 1881). The play, which hinges upon the exploits of two Tokyo thieves, culminates in the earnest entreaties of Shimazō, who has repented his evil ways, to have his partner in crime, Senta, do the same.

SHIMAZŌ: I once thought of you as my brother. If you will only realize that what you have done is wrong and give up being a thief, I'll help you all the rest of my life. . .

SENTA: (*Gradually looks up, and in an attitude of repentance lifts his head; he wipes away his tears and joins his hands in supplication*). Forgive me, brother. You have convinced me. I shall change my ways. . . I renounce robbery. And I will henceforth observe the anniversary of my poor parents' deaths— my dear parents, to whom I've brought so much suffering to these many years!

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 48, 49

Dripping with melodrama and sentimentalism, the play ends as the character Mochizuki, a wealthy moneylender who was to have been Shimazō's next robbery victim, overhears the man's tearful repentance and offers to make good on his burden of debts— "This is Heaven's reward for your having given up crime," Mochizuki proclaims. And so the play ends, having achieved the desired mix of entertainment and edification.

Late-Meiji innovations in drama

As noted above, kabuki was caught in a bind that required adherence to certain fixed theatrical conventions and styles, while new influences were gradually moving Japanese drama into a more modern mode. Kabuki would by no means disappear, but it would be rivaled by the modernization process, which witnessed the introduction of key Western dramatists— from Shakespeare to Ibsen, Chekhov, and Strindberg— together with a Western-inspired realist and mimetic theater.

A noteworthy figure here is Tsubouchi Shōyō (1859-1935). Best known for his advocating the adoption of Western approaches to literary characterization and plot, Shōyō was schooled in both traditional and Western drama. Here he advocated an amalgam of traditional performance styles and Western theatrical innovations. Shōyō himself was an author and producer of kabuki plays and a leading translator of Shakespeare's plays. In particular, his translation of *Hamlet* inspired a new conception of character, in terms of psychological depth and interiority.

Shimpa theater

The mid-Meiji interest in new approaches to drama crystallized around a movement known as *Shimpa*— 'new school' theater. This transitional movement, associated with the playwright Kawakami Otojirō (1864-

1911), had its heyday in the 1890s and early 1900s. Unlike the male-dominant kabuki, *shimpa* playwrights were free to use female performers. Plays could be adapted from the Western dramatic canon, and they could draw upon important events, such as the war with China. This would allow for the incorporation of appropriate patriotic sentiments, which pleased the authorities.

Shimpa attracted the work of individuals such as the above-mentioned Tsubouchi Shôyô and Mori Ôgai who also composed kabuki plays. It is worth noting the synergy between 'traditional' and 'modern' theatrical forms. This precisely parallels the 'binary' development of late-Meiji poetry and its traditional (*haiku-tanka*) and modern (*shintaiishi*) genres, which were often composed by the same poet.

Turn of the twentieth century

In any event, the trajectory of Japanese arts and culture at the turn of the nineteenth century was distinctly modern. And here we need to appreciate the crucial significance of literary translation across the spectrum of genres. As for drama, translations of Shakespeare, Ibsen, and others helped inspire new understandings of individualism and interiority. In fact, translated drama was considered a literary genre in its own right, and plays were read and studied in the same way as novels. The works of Ibsen—most notably *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890)—proved so influential that an Ibsen Society was created as a venue for the *bundan* literary community to study the great Norwegian playwright.

The innovations brought about with the *shimpa* movement would only accelerate with the new century. The genre term *shingeki* ('new theater') would come to refer to the host of experiments in modern and avant-garde drama that would emerge.

Conclusion

Historically, nineteenth-century drama in Japan spans the spectrum of tradition and modernity, and it points the way to an even more aggressive program of modernization in the twentieth century. Yet the transition from Shogunal to Imperial rule, as of the Meiji Restoration, can be seen either as the gateway to a new, modern Japan or simply the recasting of the old authoritarian regime in modern dress. In fact, aspects of both were clearly in evidence.

As for the traditional performing arts—Noh gradually recovered from its moribund status during the early Meiji. And kabuki flourished, as both old and new plays were produced in abundance. At the same time, Western drama was studied, translated, and eventually staged, and the staging would early on entail a mixture of the old performance conventions and the realist techniques of modern dramaturgy.

Another turn-of-the-century Western import was cinema, which initially served a vehicle for the staging of kabuki and, eventually, modern productions of Japanese and Western drama and fiction. Dramatic production and cinema would continue to engage in a close and productive interaction over the course of the twentieth century.

The interplay of traditional and modern practices that marks the end of the nineteenth century in Japan would yield a rich and fascinating *mélange* of dramatic forms and style—as was the case with its poetry and fiction. But the full flowering of a modern Japanese drama would have to await the second and third decades of the new century.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

How best to understand the interface of 'tradition' and 'modernity' in the case of Japanese drama? How does this compare with the other genres? In particular, how do the key themes of individualism and interiority gain expression via dramatic performance?

How critical is it to experience the actual staging of dramatic work— be it Noh, kabuki, or a modern play? What do you feel is lost or gained insofar as we are restricted to reading dramatic works?

How did Japanese authorities exert control and supervision of stage performance? Can such constraints somehow yield creative benefits, or are they invariably negative?

What aspects of nineteenth-century Japanese drama interest you? How does this compare with the other genres during this time period?

Images



Woodblock print of a Noh performance during the Meiji period. (Source: ArtSofia)



Meiji woodblock print by Adachi Heishichi of a scene from an 1879 Western-style kabuki play by Mokuami, depicting an attack by American Indians (Source: Ukiyo-e.org)



Kawatake Mokuami, as depicted in a mid-Meiji photograph (Source: kabuki21.com)



Late-Meiji postcard depiction of the Asakusa theater district in Tokyo
(Source: oldtokyo.com)



坪内博士小照
昭和二年末最終シエークスピア講演のため早稲田大學に來校されし折

Photograph of TsubouchiShôyô, taken in 1930
(Source: oldtokyo.com)

FICTION

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 Jippenshaikku, 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 Cloud* 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 established 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 Tôson (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 Ichiyô (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, Ichiyô'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 Kafû (1879-1959) was a Tokyo writer who, like Tôson, 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, Kafû 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.

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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*)



NatsumeSôseki (1867-1916) (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The Place of Autobiography in Nineteenth-Century Japan

Overall, Japanese literature in the late-Tokugawa period was marked by the intersection of stultifying traditionalism and formalism and the gradual assimilation of new forces and influences— most significantly, a concern for the individual and an interest in new modes of self-expression. The shogunal regime remained unchallenged, as did its official embrace of samurai virtue and privilege. But the urban merchant class, the so-called *chônin*, favored a more progressive and secular orientation. With the advent of the Meiji era, these forerunners of modern urban society assumed a dominant role.

Meiji literary activity quickly came to center on Tokyo and its literary community, the so-called *bundan*. Although writers were politically marginal and avoided direct critique of the imperial regime, they explore a tacit resistance through their abiding concern for individualism and freedom of expression. Yet the *bundan* was a largely male bastion, and literary women were in the minority.

The literary journalism that served to mediate between writers and the print media— be it the periodical press or book publishers— was marked by a rising demand for personal narratives by noteworthy writers and public figures. These were identified by a confusing array of genre terms, but they were united insofar as writers were expected to hold forth on their upbringing, their literary background, and their thoughts regarding current issues and the world at large. A crucial criterion was the crafting of a convincingly genuine personal voice.

Modern autobiography— the comprehensive, extensive narrative overview of one's life and times— was introduced into Japan as part of the wide-ranging translation project of key Western works. Foremost here, in terms of their impact on young Meiji writers and intellectuals, were Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782) and the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin (1793). These were widely read and admired, and often cited as inspiration for writers grappling with the challenge of crafting personal narrative. The pioneering autobiography of the great Meiji educator and ideologue Fukuzawa Yukichi was liberally adapted from the Franklin work.

Nonetheless, the Western model of comprehensive, coherently-plotted autobiography did not take hold during the Meiji period. Instead, writers generally opted for shorter, more episodic narratives. Of note in this regard is the key role of the print media and their broad solicitation of personal narratives regarding the lives of noteworthy individuals— literary and otherwise. (See: Essays)

Of note, too, is the significance of autobiographical fiction. Here, the role of the late-Meiji Naturalist (*shizenshugi-ha*) coterie was crucial. Its writers were committed to crafting fictional protagonists whose accounts would be 'read' as faithful projections of the author himself. In short, the autobiographical burden of Japanese fiction was well established by the end of the Meiji period.

Late-Tokugawa autobiography: The escapades of KatsuKokichi

The increasingly secular orientation of late-Tokugawa Japan witnessed a break from the strongly Confucianist cast of earlier autobiography, as epitomized by Arai Hakuseki's *Told Round a Brushwood Fire*. A prime example is a work entitled *Musui's Story* (*Musuidokugen*, 1843), the personal account of a low-ranking samurai named KatsuKokichi (1802-50). (See Tokugawa genres: Autobiography). Katsu's account seems to have more in common with Jippenshaalkku's picaresque novel, *Shank's Mare* (*Hizakurige*), serialized between 1802-22. Katsu casts himself as the proverbial 'bad boy'— the very antithesis of the samurai ideal of self-restraint and steadfastness. He appears to revel in accounts of his youthful dissipation and debauchery. Yet his autobiographical escapades are recounted from the retrospective position of one who has dutifully reformed himself and renounced his profligate ways. Katsu has learned his lesson, so to speak, and managed to reestablish his good name. But what makes *Musui's Story* so compelling— and entertaining— is the vivid and unabashed exposé of one's youthful transgressions. And so one is inclined to question the seriousness of his moral exhortations and

admonitions. Is Katsu's narrator serious about his role as a penitent soul, or is there an ironic 'dig' at the pomposity and pretense of it all?

Meiji Autobiography

Given the aims of Meiji modernization, one might think that writers would happily eschew didacticism and instead favor the voice of individualism and unencumbered self-expression. But the Meiji regime essentially repurposed the Tokugawa moral code and promoted it as part of a state-sponsored national identity. This 'neo-*bushido*' ethos, famously expounded by Nitobe Inazō in his widely-read *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* (1899; written in English), would intersect with a Western-inspired embrace of individualism and social progressivism. The pioneering work of Meiji autobiography, written at the turn of the twentieth century, would position Japan's traditional— and emperor-centered— moral code against this new spirit of independence and rational inquiry.

The Autobiography of Fukuzawa Yukichi

Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), whose image graces Japan's 10,000 yen banknote, was a towering figure of the so-called 'Meiji enlightenment' (*bunmeikaika*). His role was akin to that of Franklin vis a vis the birth of our own nation, and it was Franklin's autobiography that helped mold Fukuzawa's autobiographical persona in *Fukujiden* (1899). Like Mori Ōgai, Fukuzawa was raised in a traditional samurai household. Both were challenged to reinvent themselves in accordance with the Meiji agenda of modernization, and both went on to make outstanding contributions to the nation's development, in their respective ways. Unlike Ōgai, however, Fukuzawa left a compelling autobiographical record of his rise in the world.

Focusing on his youthful rebelliousness, Fukuzawa's narrator relates key incidents in the emergence of his spirit of independence, social justice, and rational inquiry. One such incident centers on his older brother, a stern, self-righteous lad who would regularly admonish him for any infractions of propriety— for instance, defiling the image of a samurai leader or, worse yet, a Shinto deity (*kami*). Skeptical about such seemingly mindless superstition, the young Yukichi decided to put it to the test:

I stole one of the sacred Shinto charms— a piece of paper bearing the names of the *kami*— and I deliberately trampled on it when nobody was looking. Lo and behold— nothing happened! No divine punishment was visited upon me. And so I decided to go one step further. I took another sacred charm to the privy and tossed it in the filth. It did cross my mind that I might have gone too far with such a brazen deed. But again, nothing whatsoever happened! Aha, I thought. I'd indeed made a great discovery. But I had to keep it to myself.

Based on *The Autobiography of Yukichi Fukuzawa*, pp 16-17

The young man went on to devise ever more sophisticated challenges to the status quo, and in so doing he refined his intellectual acuity and independent, rational temper. By and by he turned his critical eye to the egregious inequalities of the feudal system itself, and the hegemony of samurai power and privilege. Indeed, Fukuzawa would famously emerge as an ardent exponent of egalitarianism in the early years of the Meiji.

Like other erstwhile samurai, though, Fukuzawa Yukichi did not entirely abandon the elitist qualities he had acquired through his samurai upbringing. One notes a *noblesse oblige* quality to his public career, despite (or perhaps in tandem with) his Meiji-era reinvention as a modern intellectual and a culture critic.

Uchimura Kanzō, *How I Became a Christian*

In much the same vein as Fukuzawa, but fully a generation younger, Uchimura Kanzō ranks as a leading Meiji intellectual and social activist who harbored a distrust of authoritarian institutions and advocated a an independent and questioning spirit— and spiritual life. Like Fukuzawa, he too wrote an autobiography detailing the process of his intellectual and spiritual coming of age— as a Christian. Uchimura's career as a Japanese Christian burdened with making sense of this 'foreign faith' and promoting it among his

countrymen is indeed unique, and it inspired a number of autobiographical works that trace the course of his spiritual journey. The best known of these works— *How I Became a Christian* (1895)— was written in English, and it presents a strikingly new autobiographical persona— at once recognizably ‘Japanese,’ yet untethered from the expected traits of character.

A native of Edo, Uchimura was educated in a mission school in Hokkaido, in the far north, where he was baptized in 1877. He tried his hand at various ventures before deciding to continue his education in the U.S., where he spent four years (1884-88). Uchimura’s autobiography focuses on these years, and the disillusionment he felt as he confronted an American Christendom that fell far short of his expectations. Inspired in part by the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (ca 400), arguably the first work of Western autobiography, Uchimura’s account explores the challenges of acquiring faith and maintaining it in the face of temptation, societal opposition, and self-doubt. Its having been written in English can be said to have opened up avenues of narrative soul-searching not easily accessible in his native language.

Together with his other autobiographical writings of the 1890s, Uchimura succeeded in crafting a comprehensive and deeply moving spiritual autobiography. He would go on to become an ardent proponent of pacifism, in the face of Japan’s impending war with Russia, and the founder of *Mukyōkai*— a ‘non-church’ Christian movement that sought to minimize the excessively regimented quality of the established churches and to underscore the individual’s responsibility to construct and maintain a faith-based life.

What follows is a late-Meiji autobiographical subject who was cut from a very different cloth.

Ishikawa Takuboku, *Romaji Diary*

Primarily known as a pioneering Meiji poet, Ishikawa Takuboku kept a sporadic record of his thoughts and moods over a three-month period (April to June) in 1909, from his Tokyo apartment. He employed a Roman alphabet transcription of his remarks, for reasons not entirely clear, and proceeded to hide the manuscript away. It was discussed in the 1950s, entirely by accident, and published posthumously, under the title *Rōmajinikki* (A Diary written in the Roman alphabet).

Takuboku’s work is neither diary nor autobiography, strictly speaking. Rather, it is a disjointed series of tormented and twisted observations, thoughts, and fantasies, which points to the influence of the then-dominant Naturalist movement, which espoused an unvarnished, unfiltered self-exposure, which would maximally reveal one’s quirks, anxieties, and obsessions. And it also is consistent with the *bundan* preference for episodic, fragmentary glimpses of character— in this case, a character straddling the border of sanity and madness.

I am unhappy. I am a weakling, a weakling with a marvelous sword inferior to none. . . I want to live like a farmer, ignorant of everything. I envy people who go crazy. I’m too healthy in body and mind. . . I can’t obtain any satisfaction from people, and yet it’s impossible for me to go off by myself. . .

I am worn out. I am seeking peace of mind. Where can anyone find this thing called peace of mind? I want to be sick. . . Sickness is the only way we have to obtain peace of mind. . .

Why am I loved? Why can’t I hate anyone? To be loved is an insufferable insult. I am tired. I am a weakling. God, do me a favor and damage my body. I won’t mind the pain. Or make me sick. Just make me sick.

Based on Keene, *Modern Japanese Literature*, pp 218, 220-21

Natsume Sōseki and *shōhin* reminiscence

Sickness— physical, for the most part, but psychological as well— would figure prominently in the life and personal writings of Japan’s most esteemed novelist, Natsume Sōseki. Sōseki turned to autobiographical

sketches and reflections in between the serial publication of his widely-read novels in the *Asahi* newspaper, from 1907 until his death in 1916. Referred to as *shôhin*— literary miniatures— these hundreds of personal narratives can collectively be regarded as Sôseki's autobiography.

The author, writing from the solitary confines of his study, touches on a range of themes and concerns— his upbringing in early-Meiji Tokyo, and how the city had changed virtually beyond recognition; his childhood friends and schoolmates; his parents— a mother recalled fondly but only imperfectly, and a rather indifferent and remote father. Sôseki remarks at length about his ill health— a chronic stomach disorder would prove fatal at age forty-nine. Often hospitalized, he was prone to reflect upon his own mortality and to lament his inability to comprehend the world in which he lives.

Natsume Sôseki candidly remarks upon himself as an imperfect family man. There is the fraught relationship with his wife Kyôko, and his ambivalence as a father to a large brood of children. He expresses his strong distaste for being hounded by journalists and others seeking some favor. He writes of the family pets and his sorry neglect of their needs.

A curmudgeon by nature, Sôseki fully acknowledges his shortcomings— and his occasional moments of tranquility and repose. One such moment comes at the conclusion of his final *shôhin* collection, *Inside My Glass Doors* (Garasudo no uchi, 1915):

I'd brought my desk out onto the veranda on this Sunday afternoon in spring, and leaned up against the railing. I just sat there, lost in thought. . . I reflected upon these little episodes I'd written and how pointless they seemed. . . But I managed to look down upon myself and enjoy laughing at my own folly. Cosseted by my self-mockery, all the while I am little more than a child asleep in his cradle. . .

Looking out upon the great expanse of humanity, I can only smile. And as I cast the same gaze upon myself, the author of these trifling accounts, it's a thought someone else had written them all. And I can only smile. . .

The house is still and hushed, as is my spirit. And so I open wide the glass doors, and bathed in the quiet light of spring, I bring this work to a close. And when it's done, I will lie down here on the veranda.

Based on Marcus, *Reflections*, pp 153-54

Conclusion

The nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic shift in the way that writers conceived of themselves as individuals and members of society. Late-Tokugawa writers generally steered away from a focus on self and self-exposure, instead conforming to established codes and practices. Poetry remained the dominant genre, and prose writing tended toward droll tales, romances, and popular fare.

The interest in *jiga*— modern selfhood— and its narrative representation became a concern of Meiji writers drawn to Western models of individualism and literary subjectivity. Romanticism proved influential, as did political liberalism and the Christian concern for confession and soul searching.

As noted above, the classics of Western autobiography were read and appreciated, but there was a preference for personal narratives that were episodic and fragmentary. Also, autobiographical fiction emerged as a prominent vehicle of self-expression, especially of the confessional variety. It is perhaps ironic that the fictional works of the Naturalist coterie came to be regarded as authentically autobiographical.

Finally, one notes that the backdrop for this literary quest for individuality and self-expression is the Japanese imperial state, whose authoritarian agenda was entirely at odds with that of the *bundan* community.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What do you regard as the proper criteria of 'autobiographical writing'? How to determine the border of 'essay' and 'autobiography'? Of the various genres noted above, which are easiest for you to relate to and appreciate?

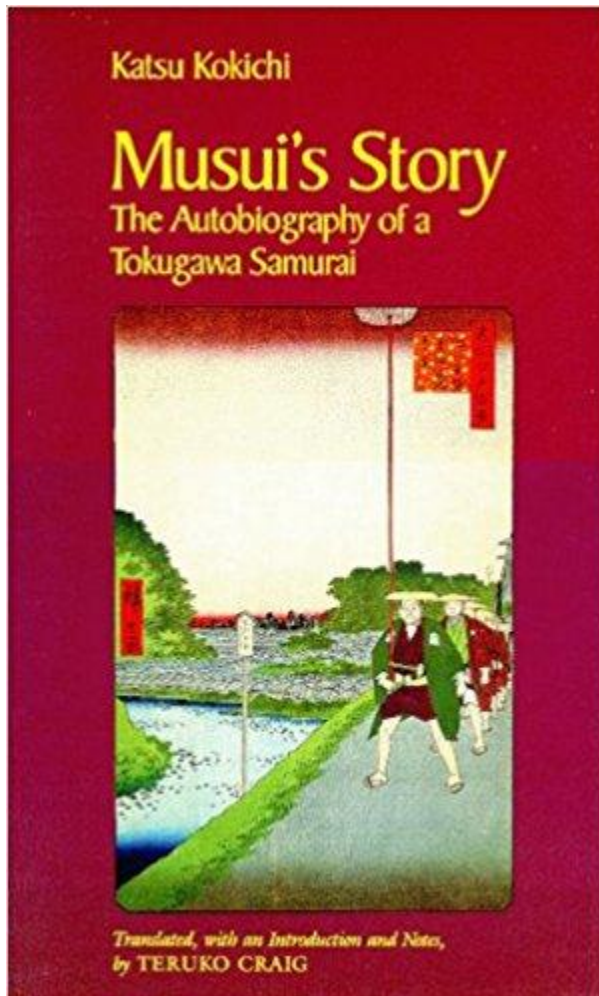
Ultimately, is it possible to judge the 'authenticity' of any form of personal narrative?

Compare Fukuzawa's autobiography with its 'source work,' the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin. How does Fukuzawa 'Japanify' the Franklin persona?

Compare Fukuzawa's work to Nitobe's *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* and Uchimura's *How I Became a Christian*. How might the fact of these latter two works having been written in English affect the 'self' being constructed?

How can fiction serve as an effective vehicle for autobiography? What examples come to mind?

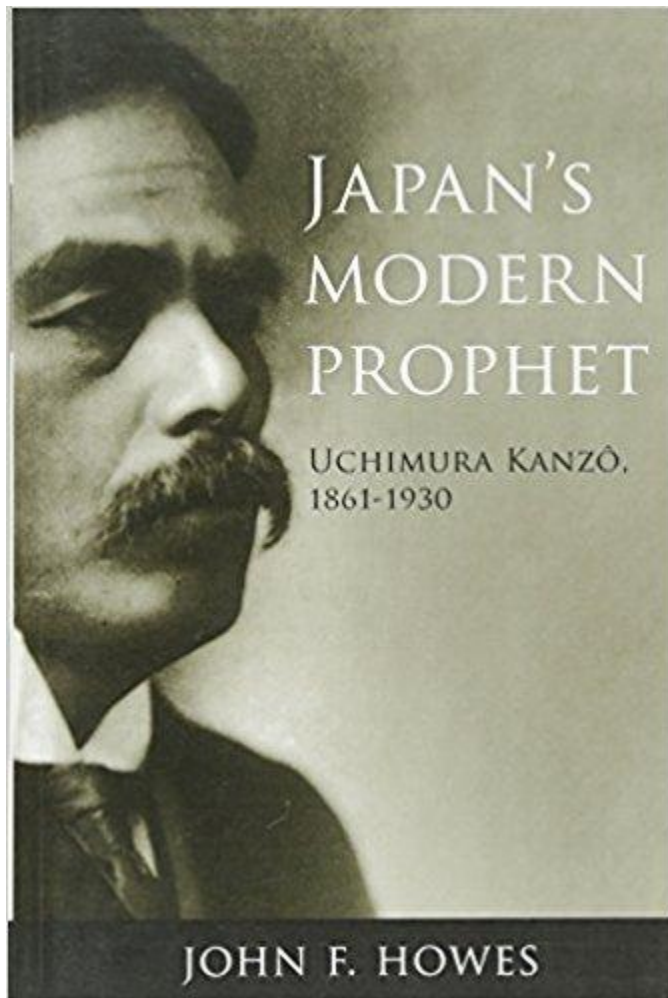
Images



English translation of KatsuKokichi's autobiography
(Source: Amazon.com)



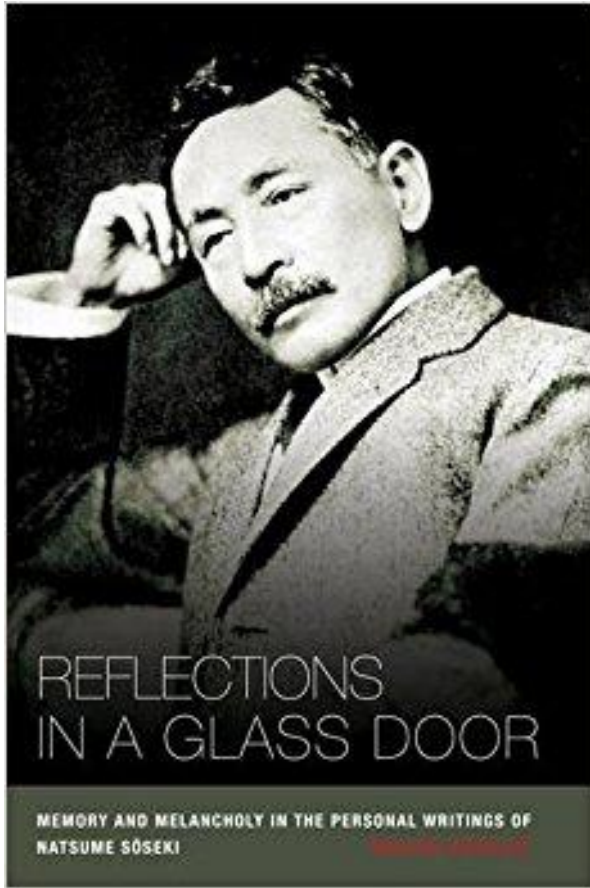
Fukuzawa Yukichi, as pictured on the Japanese 10,000 yen banknote
(Source: Wikimedia commons)



UchimuraKanzô, as pictured on the cover of John Howes' biography. (Source: Amazon.com)



Ishikawa Takuboku's *Romaji Diary* and his 1912 *tanka* collection, In English translation (Source: Amazon.com)



Natsume Sôseki, as pictured on the cover of Marcus's study of the *shôhin* writings (Source: Amazon.com)

ESSAY

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 broad personal 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 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) TsubouchiShōyō, *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

Shōyō 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) NatsumeSōseki, *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*, pp 170, 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

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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)