

JAPANESE FICTION

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MONOGATARI (Fiction)

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PART I : CLASSICAL PERIOD

Overview: The Classical Age of Japanese Culture

Japan during the Heian period (ca 800-1200) has long been heralded as a Golden Age of classical civilization. Its wide range of literary, artistic, and artisanal products are indelibly associated with courtly style, elegance, aristocratic refinement, and exquisite aesthetic sensitivity. Overall, Heian arts and culture are suffused with what may be termed a feminine aura of emotional depth, nuance, and elegant understatement. This in part reflects the fact that a number of their treasured products are the work of aristocratic women who served in the imperial court.

Aside from literary pursuits, Heian courtiers indulged themselves in a variety of creative activities— music and dance, painting, calligraphy, textile design, and so forth. Much of this work reflects the influence of Chinese prototypes and models— part of the centuries-long process of absorbing the language, political institutions, and arts of China. A key inspiration emerged from the Chinese-based Buddhist sects that took root among the Japanese elites and became widely patronized. This led to the eventual mastery of Buddhist religious arts— sculpture, painting, ritual objects, sutra copying, and of course architecture.

In short, Heian culture, in its stunning variety, would become an enduring civilizational legacy, inspiring artists, writers, and craftsmen over the centuries. A fundamental aspect of Japanese national identity, to the present day, can be said to tap into Heian classical roots. And the city of Kyoto, the site of the Heian imperial capital, continues to serve as the nation's cultural mecca.

Heian Literature and the Role of *Monogatari*

Heian literature both mirrored and celebrated the world of the court aristocracy. Courtly sensibility and bearing were highly valued, and these would be channeled chiefly through poetry and lyrical expression. Poetry in the formal *waka* style (31 syllables) became the orthodox standard, and it served as a key mode of communication. Heian courtiers also indulged themselves in a variety of personal writing— chiefly, diary (*nikki*) and essay (*zuihitsu*).

However, the pinnacle of Heian literature— *The Tale of Genji*— is a work of fiction, a *monogatari*. As with so many other cultural products, Heian fiction bore the mark of Chinese literary precursors. And as was the case with Heian prose narrative in general, poetry would figure prominently. Furthermore, these narrative works were rendered in an artful calligraphy hand and were typically accompanied by pictorial illustrations that helped enhance the reading experience.

The *monogatari* genre, which was oriented around romantic fiction but included historical and personal elements as well, developed during the ninth century, early in the Heian period. As with poetry, relatively crude early examples became increasingly sophisticated, culminating in Murasaki's crowning achievement. The first noteworthy *monogatari* romance is the anonymous *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter* (Taketorimonogatari, ca 880).

Tale of the Bamboo Cutter

This early Heian romance begins with the account of a miraculous discovery:

Once upon a time, there was an old bamboo cutter who went into the mountains and fields to cut bamboo and put the stalks to various uses. . . It came to pass that one stalk of bamboo shone at the base. Puzzled, the old man noticed that the light came from its interior. Upon closer inspections, he saw a dainty little girl, just three inches tall, sitting inside. [Based on McCullough, CJP 28-29]

Essentially an extended folk tale, the story goes on to relate how the bamboo cutter and his wife raise the tiny girl, who quickly grows into a stunningly beautiful woman named Kaguyahime. What ensues is a conventional romantic narrative recounting the vain attempts of her many suitors to woo the young beauty. Eventually, Kaguyahime assumes her true identity as a moon maiden and is escorted back to her celestial home by lunar emissaries cloaked in garments of incomparable beauty.

The heavenly beings had brought with them a box that contained a heavenly feathered robe. They dressed Kaguyahime in the robe and had her drink an elixir of immortality. She then entered the celestial carriage and soared into the heavens. [Based on CJP 36-37]

Subsequent *monogatari* would eschew such supernatural elements and center instead on the 'real' world of courtly romance. This line of development would culminate in MurasakiShikibu's masterpiece of Heian fiction.

The Tale of Genji

The 'alpha' of Japanese literature and the epitome of nearly two centuries of Heian courtly writing, *The Tale of Genji* both embodies and instantiates classical Japanese aesthetics, style, and literary virtuosity. It is arguably the first great novel of world literature. Although Lady Murasaki was influenced by earlier romantic tales, her chief inspiration was the anonymous mid-tenth century *Tales of Ise* (Isemonogatari). While 'technically' a *monogatari*, the work is in effect an anthology of *waka* by the great Heian court poet Ariwara no Narihira, distributed among 125 brief narrative episodes detailing the exploits of 'a certain man' (*aruotoko*), understood to be Narihira. The figure of this 'certain man' would emerge as the prototype for Murasaki's Prince Genji.

Commencing with the formulaic phrase *Izure no ontokinika* ('once upon a time'), *The Tale of Genji* comprises fifty-four chapters that evoke the world of Heian court society. A densely lyrical novel, *Genji* includes a thousand poems, which constitute a virtual anthology of court poetry.

How, then, to do justice to a work of such magnitude? First, the title is significant. Lady Murasaki has elevated one individual— Genji, the 'Shining Prince'— as a paragon who epitomizes the ideals of noble birth, elegant demeanor, poetic refinement, and exquisite sensitivity. And much as our view of Victorian London is filtered through the novels of Charles Dickens, Murasaki has created a convincingly realistic representation of a certain time and place.

The novel's romantic paragon is cast in a distinctly feminized matter, as the following passages make evident:

Genji. . . was leaning against an armrest, attired in an informal cloak that was draped with deliberate negligence over some soft white inner robes, its cords untied; and his beauty in the lamplight made it tempting to think of him as a woman. To see him was to sense the difficulty of choosing a woman who could be completely worthy of him, even if she were the highest of the high. . .

Everyone felt drawn to Genji, even strangers who barely caught a glimpse of him. Of those who beheld his radiant countenance, not one well-born father but longed to send him his precious daughter, not one humble man with a presentable sister but hoped to have her serve him, in whatever menial capacity. . .

Tears of deep emotion filled Genji's own eyes as he pondered the many implications of human ephemerality, but they did not mar the beauty and elegance of his appearance. . .
[McCullough, *Genji and Heike* 44, 64, 151]

With an eye to the Chinese cosmological pairing of *yang* (the assertive, active male principle) and *yin* (the yielding, passive female principle), Murasaki cast her work as a '*yin*' novel, set in private interior spaces and animated not so much by dramatic encounters and dynamic plot turns as the ebb and flow of sentiment, reflection, and a wistful awareness of the passage of time. It juxtaposes resplendent displays of beauty and style (of which Prince Genji is the standard-bearer) and a depth of feeling and poignancy of longing. What may be termed Genji's elegant passivity stands in stark contrast to the corrosive emotions of certain women— for instance, the spurned Rokujō Lady and her fits of jealous rage— that transform into supernatural agents of lethal revenge.

The novel's distinctive aura of longing centers on Genji's quest for his mother, the Kiritsubo Lady, who died when he was a young boy. And much of its plot recounts relationships with women who remind Genji of his mother and hence serve as surrogates and substitute figures. The poignancy recalls what many regard as the novel's defining quality— *mono no aware*, the capacity to be moved by the beauty and pathos of existence. This quality, which relates to the Buddhistic notion of ephemerality and a corollary aesthetics of transience, suffuses the novel from start to finish.

The singular 'representative man' of the Heian court, Genji is perfectly formed, all but divine in certain respects. Yet he is deeply flawed and vulnerable. Although portrayed in many scenes as transcending the mortal realm, Genji remains exquisitely sensitive to the passage of time and is prone to a melancholy that finds expression in lyrical soliloquy and poetry. In short, Murasaki's paragon is a mortal human being. Following a curiously veiled account of his death, the novel's concluding ten chapters turn to an account of two Genji-esque courtiers— Kaoru and Niou— who reconstitute the world of the Shining Prince through their respective romantic encounters.

Little is known, though much is speculated, concerning the composition of *Genji*, the sequencing of its chapters, and the way it circulated among the Kyoto aristocracy a thousand years ago. Early on the text was rendered as an illustrated picture scroll (*emaki*), to be read aloud and enjoyed for both its pictorial and literary artistry.

It is abundantly clear that Japanese culture would thereafter become a repository for Genji-inspired variants and retellings. The work has inspired medieval Noh drama, kabuki and puppet theater adaptations, modern-day films, anime, and pop culture spin-offs of every description. Indeed, the Genji 'brand name' has helped elevate the Heian era to an iconic status, in the absence of any actual remnants of this golden age of Japanese aristocratic civilization.

Murasaki's novel, all but unreadable in the original language, has been rendered into modern Japanese by a number literary figures powerfully drawn to its fictional world— most notably Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, who produced no less than three complete renderings. And there are three complete English translations. Although quite daunting in its narrative complexity, the novel's qualities of mind, heart, and spirit have become an integral part of the Japanese cultural legacy. And if there is such a thing as a Japanese national identity, or cultural memory, Genji and his world have surely earned a place of honor.

Readings

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

Keene, Donald, *The Pleasures of Japanese Literature* (Columbia, 1988)

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Morris, Ivan, *The World of the Shining Prince: Court Life in Ancient Japan* (Knopf, 1964)

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Discussion Questions and Topics

The Tale of Genji can be read as both reflecting the unique lifestyles and practices of the Heian court, and the more universal qualities of human interaction and romantic sensibility. Give thought to how these two 'readings' intersect and interrelate.

Many have noted Prince Genji's androgynous persona and the overall 'feminine' aura of Murasaki's novel. What might account for this quality? Is Murasaki's work ultimately a 'feminist' response to what was a society dominated by male power and privilege?

How might one argue for and against claims regarding certain works of literature, such as *The Tale of Genji*, as having earned a place in a nation's 'cultural legacy.' In view of our increasingly globalized and integrated world, what significance should we give to the very notion of 'cultural legacy'?

Similarly, how might works of art and literature be considered to reflect and mold 'national identity'? Must we have actually read the work in question in order to internalize a sense of its cultural value? For that matter, does such 'traditionalist' thinking have a place in today's world?

Images



Detail from the *Genjimonogatariemaki* (picture scroll) of the mid-twelfth century. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



MurasakiShikibu as depicted in an 1880 woodblock print by Hiroshige III.
Source: Wikimedia Commons



Image taken from the 1951 film version of *The Tale of Genji* directed by Yoshimura Kôzaburô. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Part II : MEDIEVAL PERIOD

Overview: The Medieval Age of Japanese Culture (1200-1600)

The gradual decline of the Heian court in the twelfth century corresponded with the rise of the warrior (*bushi*) clans and the dawn of a centuries-long feudal history. Medieval Japan was governed by two parallel political centers— the imperial center in Kyoto and a new warrior administration, the shogunate. The period was marked by the growing power of provincial warrior chiefs (*daimyō*) and their domains (*han*), which numbered well over two hundred. The dominance of the samurai class inspired a warrior code— *bushidō*— that extolled the virtues of dedication, loyalty, and honor. Variants of this ideology would have important ramifications in Japan's subsequent history and culture.

The samurai elites emulated the cultural sophistication and artistic dedication of the Kyoto aristocracy. And their embrace of the meditative discipline inspired by Zen Buddhism would generate a distinctive artistry marked by austerity and solemnity, and a mood of evanescence and ephemerality (*mujō*). As with the Heian era, the cultural legacy of Japan's medieval period has long had a privileged place in the nation's collective memory and is well represented in its trove of literary and artistic treasures.

Medieval Literature and the Role of *Monogatari*

The Heian literary legacy was much in evidence during the medieval period. Poetry and lyrical expression remained prominent, but the preëminence of courtly styles and conventions gave way to more austere and introspective modes of expression, reflecting the new social and political order. The dominance of the samurai class gave rise to the production of warrior tales and legends, with the epic *Tale of the Heike* (early 13th century) ultimately rivaling the *Tale of Genji* as a national classic.

While *waka*-centered court poetry remained the dominant literary mode, new forms— in particular, linked verse— reflected the temper of the times. A strongly Buddhist taste for meditative reflection and solemnity developed, and it would be brilliantly evoked in the uniquely lyrical and other-worldly Noh drama. Hence, Heian and medieval literature— spanning eight centuries of Japan's cultural history— constitute a unique 'yin-yang' complementarity that reflects the complex interplay of Japan's courtly and samurai-based elites.

As for the place of *monogatari* per se in the larger medieval literary context, it both reflected the influence of Heian fiction and the radically different world of the samurai and accounts— both factual and legendary— of their exploits and intrigues.

Historically speaking, the medieval era was ushered in with the founding, in 1192, of a Shogunal center in Kamakura. It was in the middle of the twelfth century when two powerful warrior clans— the Minamoto and Taira— became embroiled in a decades-long rivalry that culminated in a series of battles ending in 1185. The Taira forces had the upper hand but were eventually vanquished by the Minamoto, led by Yoritomo and his half-brother Yoshitsune. The so-called 'Gempei Wars,' lasting some thirty years, were marked by battlefield heroics, political intrigues, and social turmoil. These events would be recounted in *The Tale of the Heike*, Japan's great warrior epic and second only to *Genji* as a certified national treasure. It was the victorious Yoritomo who essentially crowned himself, in 1192, as Shogun and established his clan as hereditary claimants to the newly-established shogunal office.

Warrior-centered *monogatari* would subsequently be a fixture of medieval fiction and, as with the *Genji*-centered Heian *monogatari*, they would inspire literary and artistic production to the present day.

Heike Monogatari and the Warrior Myth

If the *Tale of Genji* represents the *yin* pole of a feminized Japanese persona, the *Tale of the Heike* stands as its *yang* counterpart, centering on samurai masculinity and prowess. An anonymous work with a complex textual history, *Heike monogatari* recounts a series of dramatic episodes that mark the climax of the *Gempei* conflict. But despite its basis in historical actuality, the work is in effect a Buddhist parable,

whose theme resounds at the very outset: *Gionshōja no kane no koe, shogyōmujō no hibikiari*— ‘The sound of the GionShōja bell echoes the impermanence of all things.’

The central theme of *mujō*— impermanence— is then further refined: ‘The proud do not endure; they are like a dream on a spring night. The mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind.’ Thus, the tragic fate of the once-proud Taira clan is sealed at the very outset in this incantatory, almost scriptural pronouncement. And the karmic blame for the Taira’s tragic fate is laid at the feet of the clan chief, Kiyomori, whose outrageous behavior and hubris were met with divine retribution visited upon the entire clan.

If *Genji* is marked by a pathos of longing that plays upon courtly sentiment and romantic sensibilities, *Heike* is equally marked by a tragic pathos— the decline and fall of a once-proud family. Its emblematic figures — Yoshitsune, Yoshinaka, and Atsumori, among others— are endowed with a certain ‘nobility of failure,’ to cite the title of Ivan Morris’s illuminating study of Japan’s pantheon of failed heroes.

Warrior exploits— and there are many— constitute a first order of dramatic narrative in the *Heike*. The following is a representative episode:

[Jōmyō] let fly a fast and furious barrage. . . killing twelve men instantly and wounding eleven others. . . He then moved down five enemies with his spear and was engaging a sixth when the blade snapped in the middle. He abandoned the weapon and fought with his sword. Hard-pressed by a host of adversaries, he struck out in every direction, employing zigzag, interlacing, crosswise, dragonfly reverse, and waterwheel maneuvers. He cut down eight men on the spot, and struck the helmet of the ninth such a mighty blow that the sword snapped at the hilt rivet. . . [Based on McCullough, *Genji and Heike* 311]

Contrary to one’s expectation, however, the warriors are not all men, as the following account dramatically illustrates:

Yoshinaka had brought two female attendants, Tomoe and Yamabuki, with him. . . Tomoe was the more beautiful of the two. . . She was also a remarkably strong archer, and with a sword she was a warrior equal to a thousand. . . When there was a battle to be fought, Yoshinaka sent her out to act as his first captain. . .

As she sat there, thirty horsemen came into view, led by OndaMoroshige, a man famous in Musashi Province for his prodigious strength. Tomoe galloped in among them. She rode up alongside Moroshige, seized him in a powerful grip, and pulled him down against the pommel of her saddle. Holding him motionless, she twisted off his head and threw it away. . [Based on *Genji and Heike* 378, 380]

One of the most affecting episodes in *Heike monogatari* concerns the sorry fate of Atsumori, an embattled Taira youth who finds himself no match for the great Minamoto warrior Kumagai. Although moved by the lad’s beauty and noble bearing, Kumagai is obliged to take his head as a trophy. Discovering that Atsumori had gone into battle carrying only a flute in a brocade bag, Kumagai is deeply remorseful at this sad turn of events, and he resolves to enter the priesthood and pray for the repose of Atsumori’s spirit. In other words, *Heike* is not merely a ‘warrior epic’ but presents a nuanced portrayal of character as well. And here the work can be said to pay homage to *Genji*.

As with *The Tale of Genji*, which was one of many Heian *monogatari*, *The Tale of the Heike* belongs to the medieval genre of *gunkimonogatari*— warrior accounts. Such works were based on historical conflicts and featured heavily dramatized scenes of battle. The *Heike* tales would serve as the model for subsequent works in this genre.

For instance, there is the ironically-titled *Taiheiki* (A Chronicle of the Great Peace; anonymous, late 14th century)— an epic account of the prolonged conflict that witnessed the overthrow of the Kamakura Shogunate in the mid-14th century. Interweaving gruesome battle scenes and behind-the-scenes political

intrigues, the work is anything but 'peaceful.' But the generic appeal of warrior tales, which was a fixture of medieval literature, has long attracted readers— Japanese and otherwise— with a penchant for the world of samurai exploits.

And so it was that the twin pinnacles of Japan's early *monogatari* tradition— *The Tale of Genji* and *The Tale of the Heike*— would inspire endless retelling, pictorial representation, and performative adaptations. In particular, the *Heike* work, which in effect is a sequence of dramatized accounts, gave rise to a unique tradition of balladry— *Heikyoku*— which adapted famous episodes into what would become a standard repertoire of ballads. These became the property of a guild of itinerant musicians, the *biwahōshi*— blind performers who traveled widely, disseminating *Heike* legend and lore throughout the land.

Notwithstanding the centrifugal forces that extended the reach of literary and cultural materials to the masses living on the periphery, the great works of Japanese literature remained the product of enduring courtly styles, conventions, and techniques. These in turn would be adapted to suit the distinctive medieval aesthetic of transience and ephemerality.

Readings

Keene, Donald, *Seeds in the Heart: Japanese Literature From Earliest Times to the Late Sixteenth Century* (Columbia, 1999)

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Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4th edition (Hawai'i, 2000)

Discussion Questions and Topics

As both a 'classical' work of Japanese fiction and the most famous literary evocation of its warrior class, how does *The Tale of the Heike* compare with Murasaki's *Genji*?

The influence of medieval Buddhism on the literature and arts of the period is both profound and pervasive. This raises the question of how someone lacking knowledge of the Buddhist 'subtext' can best approach— and appreciate— this literature. Give thought to parallels with examples of Western literature and art that are imbued with Judeo-Christian or Islamic 'content.'

Can Japan's meditative aesthetic, which is typically identified as 'uniquely Japanese,' be seen as having universal relevance?

In what ways has Japan's medieval literature and culture— especially the iconic samurai warrior— been deployed in the modern and contemporary media and pop-cultural context?

Images



1898 woodblock print, by Toyohara Chikanobu, depicting Tomoe taking Moroshige's head. Source: Artelino Japanese Prints.



Woodblock print (ca 1820) depicting the encounter between Kumagai and Atsumori. Source: Library of Congress.

大河ドラマ



義経

原作：宮尾登美子
『宮尾本 平家物語』『義経』

脚本：金子成人

主演：滝沢秀明

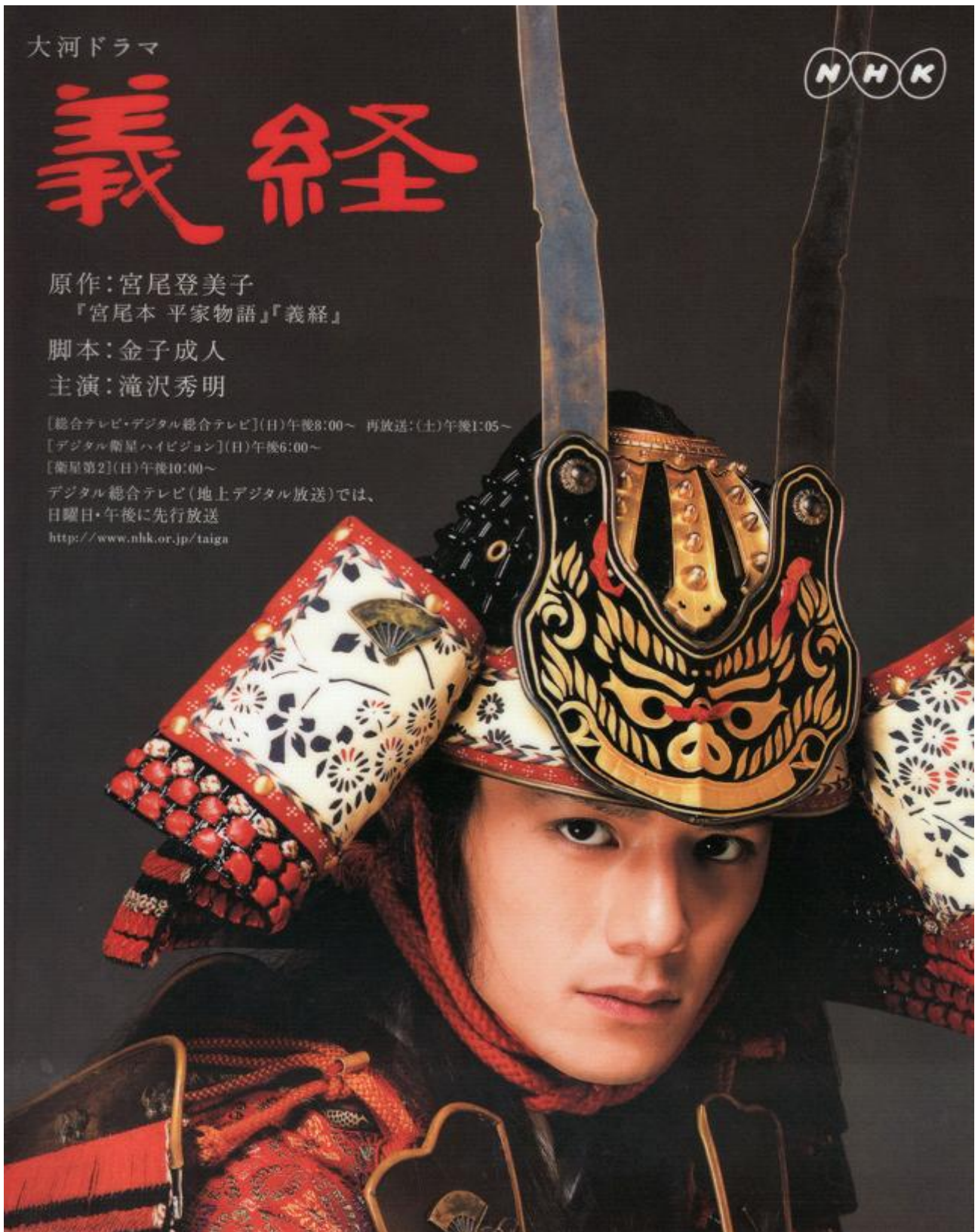
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〔デジタル衛星ハイビジョン〕(日)午後6:00～

〔衛星第2〕(日)午後10:00～

デジタル総合テレビ(地上デジタル放送)では、
日曜日・午後に先行放送

<http://www.nhk.or.jp/taiga>



The figure of Yoshitsune in a publicity piece for NHK's year-long (2005) weekly TV drama featuring the exploits of the great Minamoto warrior. Source: NHK



Heikyoku performance in Tokyo, 2000. Source: Kokugakuin University.

PART III : EARLY MODERN PERIOD

Overview: Japanese Culture in the Tokugawa Period (1600-1868)

Japan's medieval era was marked by complex feudal divisions and an increasingly weak central control, with neither Emperor nor Shogun capable of ruling the fractious nation. It was the sixteenth century that witnessed a gradual process of national reunification. A succession of three powerful warlords— Oda Nobunaga, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, and Tokugawa Ieyasu— managed to consolidate power and pave the way for the creation of a stable, productive, and culturally-vibrant nation— albeit one that was subject to strict authoritarian control. The sixteenth century also witnessed Japan's first encounter with the West, in the form of Christian missionaries and emissaries from Western nations in pursuit of colonial and commercial interests in addition to spreading the gospel.

The Tokugawa period can be traced to the victory of its clan chief Ieyasu over his rivals in 1600. This eventuated in his establishing a new Shogunal regime in the town of Edo— modern-day Tokyo. A brilliant political strategist, Ieyasu oversaw a comprehensive program of central authority, regulation, and social order. The samurai class sat atop a fixed, Confucian-style hierarchy, and a policy of 'national seclusion' (*sakoku*) led to the expulsion of Westerners and a cordoning-off of the country that lasted for centuries. An important exception was the Dutch trading mission in far-off Nagasaki— Japan's sole window onto the West until the late-nineteenth century.

Despite the repressive samurai rule and the nation's centuries-long isolation, Tokugawa Japan witnessed a burgeoning domestic economy centered in the rapidly-growing cities— most notably, Edo and Osaka— and the rise of a new class of merchants and townsmen, the so-called *chônin*. The material and secular interests of these affluent city dwellers led to the emergence of a remarkable culture of entertainment, whose locus was the urban pleasure quarters, with its geisha houses, theaters, and assorted fleshly delights. The centerpiece was the Yoshiwara in Edo, an entertainment mecca accessible to anyone with money to burn. It became the setting for all manner of literary and pictorial representation and stood in sharp contrast to the samurai elites and their code of self-restraint and austerity.

Tokugawa Culture and the Place of Fiction

Fiction writing in Japan had been in decline since the towering achievement of Heian writers, epitomized by Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*. Poetry, in its various formal modes, ranked as the dominant genre during the medieval period. Prose narrative constituted a grab-bag of accounts, written in a popular idiom and referred to as *setsuwa*, that featured historical and legendary figures. Such narratives became popular during the early Tokugawa period, under the new heading of *kanazôshi*— printed booklets aimed at a broad readership that was increasingly centered in cities such as Edo and Osaka. These booklets were a mix of fanciful tales, parodies, and popular guides and handbooks.

It was the end of the 17th century— the so-called *Genroku* years (ca 1680-1720)— that marked the renaissance of Japanese arts and culture across a broad spectrum. A taste for fiction was re-established, and its chief exponent was a virtuoso writer named Ihara Saikaku (1642-93), whose works would set a high standard for fiction-writing. Yet it was the very popularity of the 'Saikaku style' that would contribute to its gradual decline in the 19th century. What emerged was a widespread taste for light literary entertainments— *gesaku*— fostered by publishers and booksellers that now dominated the marketplace.

Fictions of Passion and Style

Tokugawa culture has long been known for its celebration of style and fashion, a reflection of the materialist proclivities of the merchant class, the *chônin*. Being 'in the know' was essential and the new culture hero was the so-called *tsûjin*, the savvy connoisseur and arbiter of taste. The 'rule of style' is most evident in the visual and decorative arts, but its literary corollary can be found in the work of *chônin*-oriented writers. The key figure here is Saikaku, the great prose stylist of the age, whose best-known fiction focuses on the sordid affairs of those who fall prey to the weaknesses of the flesh and the allurements of money. Flouting the official codes of propriety and self-restraint, Saikaku's 'floating-world

tales' of passion and desire provide a stunning parody of contemporary society through the comic pratfalls and foibles of ordinary folk.

Itself a parody of a well-known scene from *Genji*, the following passage from *Five Women Who Loved Love* (Kôshokugoninonna, 1686) concerns several young rakes who are engaged in evaluating the female passers-by:

Next they spied a lady who appeared to be in her mid-thirties, with a gracefully long neck and intelligent-looking eyes, above which could be seen a natural hairline of rare beauty. True, her nose stood a little high, but that could easily be tolerated. Underneath she wore white satin; over that, light blue satin; and outside, reddish-yellow satin. Each garment was luxuriously lined with the same material. On her left sleeve was a hand-painted likeness of the Yoshida monk, in a beautifully-wrought pose that conjured the famous passage, "sitting alone and reading old books under the lamp light." This was most assuredly a woman of exquisite taste! . . .

"What a prize for some lucky fellow!" one of the young bucks exclaimed. But his words were hardly uttered when the lady, stopping to speak with an attendant, opened her mouth, and revealed a missing lower tooth— to the complete disillusionment of her admirers.

Saikaku's slavishly-descriptive tales, which presume familiarity with contemporary fashion and taste, all but cry out for illustration. In fact, Tokugawa literary works were routinely accompanied by pictorial depiction of important scenes, and the texts themselves were rendered in a matching calligraphic style. In other words, the artfully presented 'surface' meant as much as the 'content' of the tale. The distinction we make between 'art' and 'literature' had little validity, given that narrative and pictorial elements were virtually indistinguishable.

Saikaku's portrayals of human eccentricity and self-deception possess a distinctly comic tone. The author has us look beyond the façade of elegance to discover the inevitable wart, the telling flaw. His parodies of parvenu *chônin* and wayward samurai constitute a typology of cads, misers, star-crossed lovers, and scoundrels that recalls the comic genius of the great French playwright Molière.

One such character is Fuji-ichi, an East-Asian forerunner of the archetypal literary miser, Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge.

The millionaire Fuji-ichi lived in a rented house no more than four yards wide. He was a clever man, and his fortune was amassed in his own lifetime. . . Fuji-ichi never passed up anything which might be of use. Even if he happened to stumble, he would use the opportunity to pick up stones for fire-lighters and tuck them in his sleeve. One must pay attention to a thousand such things.

Yet Fuji-ichi was not a miser by nature. It was merely his ambition to serve as a model for others in the management of everyday affairs. . . Nothing delighted him more than watching over his daughter. When the young girl grew into womanhood he had a marriage screen constructed for her. . . Thinking that illustrations of *The Tale of Genji* or *Tales of Ise* might engender frivolous thoughts, he had the screen painted with busy scenes of the silver and copper mines at Tada. He composed instructional verses on the subject of economy and made his daughter recite them aloud.

As noted above, Saikaku's mastery of stylish and witty fictional narrative influenced subsequent generations of writers, who sought to emulate the 'Saikaku style.' But there were other noteworthy developments on the fictional scene. For instance, the Osaka-based writer Ueda Akinari (1734-1809) revived the old *setsuwa* genre with the publication of *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (Ugetsumonogatari, 1776). The work comprises nine tales of the supernatural, drawn from Japanese and Chinese legends, which convey a memorably eerie, macabre quality. The work enjoyed great popularity, and its 1953 film adaptation by Mizoguchi Kenji is considered one of the masterworks of world cinema.

Late Tokugawa Fiction

The comic spirit of Saikaku marks the work of late-Tokugawa writers, for whom stylishness and a deft comic touch were literary virtues. For instance, Santô Kyôden (1761-1816) produced many works in the so-called *sharebon* genre— 'books of style.' These centered on the pleasure quarters, the lively domain of the alluring geisha and the savvy *tsûjin*. A genre of explicitly comic fiction— *kokkeibon*— is epitomized in the work of two popular writers. Shikitei Sanba (1776-1822) is best known for his *Bathhouse of the Floating World* (Ukiyoburo, 1809-13). Here, the comings and goings of those who frequent the local bathhouse (*ofuro*) represent a cross-section of society and provide a vehicle for a rousing parody of human foibles. For his part, the writer Jippensha Kûku (1765-1831) produced, over a twenty-year period, a much-admired account of two buddies who ply the great Tôkaidô road spanning Edo and Osaka. This sprawling work, entitled *Shank's Mare* (Hizakurige, 1802-22), comprises hundreds of episodes featuring the comic pair, Yaji and Kita, whose picaresque adventures amount to an encyclopedia of mischief and comic pratfalls. Again, all of these works were accompanied by copious woodblock illustrations, which enhanced the readers' enjoyment.

One final figure deserves mention— Takizawa Bakin (1767-1848). Arguably the final major fiction writer of the Tokugawa period, Bakin produced what may be the longest novel ever written. Bearing the improbable name of *Hakkenden* (The Biography of Eight Dogs, 1814-42), this 106-volume epic traces, through an intricately interwoven series of romantic intrigues and heroic exploits, the eventual restoration of a proud family's good name. A mix of dramatic narrative and samurai virtue, Bakin's ponderous masterwork has been repurposed in the form of recent manga and anime versions that have been widely admired.

Conclusion

Tokugawa fiction, as with other literary and arts genres, can be said to reflect Japan's centuries-long *sakoku* policy of isolation and insularity. The creative stasis that marks mid-19th century culture in effect awaited the sort of catalyst that would come into play following the nation's opening up to the Western world.

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Question and issues:

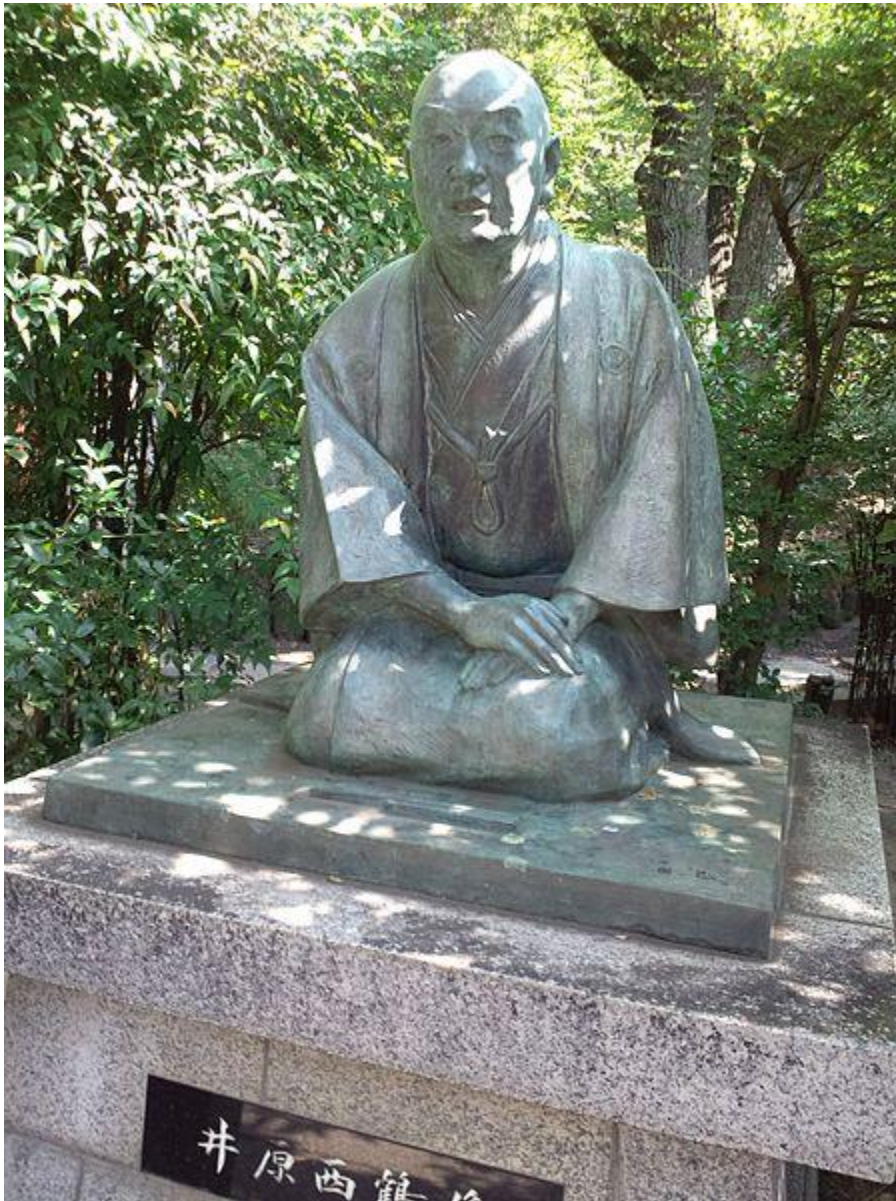
Tokugawa fiction is notably superficial, in its preference for stylish display and comic 'lightness.' What are the positive and negative aspects of such 'superficiality'? What can be said in favor of Saikaku's tales focusing on the pursuit of sexual gratification and wealth— and the inevitable pitfalls of such pursuits?

What can be learned about Tokugawa society from its fictional portrayals? Overall, what do we stand to gain from reading fiction?

Compare Ueda Akinari's *Tales of Moonlight and Rain* (available in a fine English translation) with the classic film adaptation by Mizoguchi Kenji. What conclusions can you draw from such a comparison?

As one of the three pillars of Genroku literature, how does Saikaku compare with Bashō and Chikamatsu?

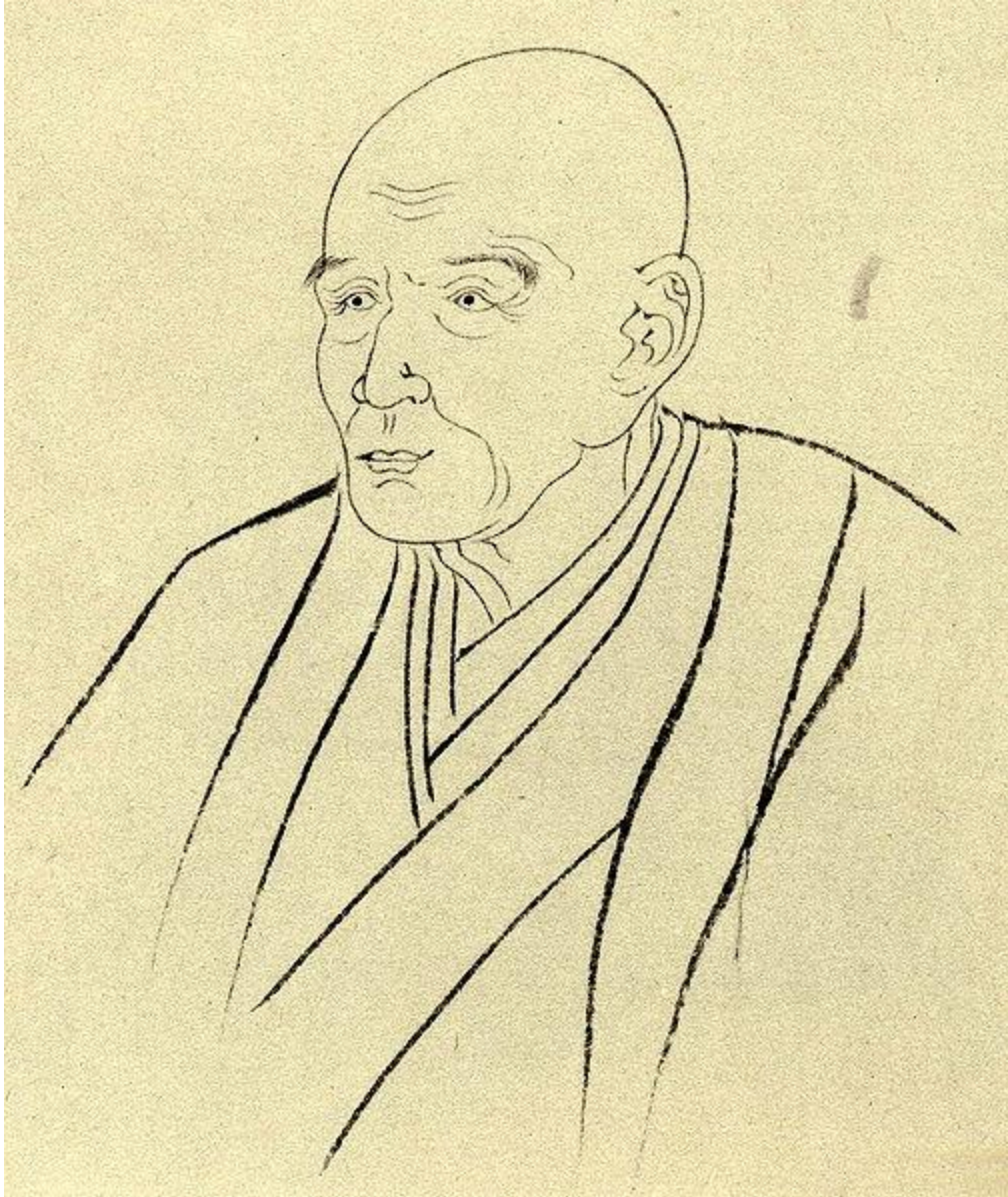
Images



Statue of Ihara Saikaku, in Osaka



Title page (right) and introduction (left) to Ueda Akinari's *Ugetsumonogatari* Tales of Moonlight and Rain, 1776)



Portrait of Takizawa Bakin by Kunisada, ca 1840



2005 *manga* adaptation of Bakin's monumental novel, *Hakkenden*

Note: Source for above images is [Wikimedia Commons](#)

PART IV : 19TH CENTURY

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.

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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)

PART V : 20TH CENTURY

Overview: Japanese Society and Culture in the Twentieth Century

Japan in the twentieth century experienced a degree of dramatic— and traumatic— change virtually unparalleled in world history. Ushering in the century as a newly-minted imperial power under the aegis of a 'divine' Emperor Meiji, Japan ending the century as an established post-imperial, post-industrial power. But the nation's modernization agenda, forged during the Meiji period (1868-1912) took a dramatic turn in mid-century, in the form of an imperial expansionism that ended in war and cataclysmic defeat. Yet this very defeat eventuated in an extraordinary postwar reconstruction and renaissance that was set in motion by the American victors, under the aegis of their Occupation regime (1945-52).

In other words, twentieth-century Japanese history is conveniently reducible to a pre-war, imperialist component; a postwar, 'de-imperialized' component; and the intervening war, which began in China and ended with the nation's unconditional surrender in August 1945, in the wake of two atomic bombings. Prior to the militarist regime of the 1930s, however, Japanese society and culture were surprisingly open and vibrant. This was especially true during the Taishō period (1912-26), which was marked by unfettered creativity in the arts and a free and open society. 'Tokyo chic' was all the rage, as evidenced by the thriving popular media (including film and radio) and consumer marketplace. Notwithstanding the official rhetoric of imperial divinity and Japanese exceptionalism, Japan was a seemingly 'normal' nation, with a secure place in the global order.

The war put an end to all of this. And so it was that nearly a century following Japan's first encounter with the United States— and Commodore Perry's ultimatum to the Shogunal regime— Japan found itself subject to the Occupation authority of General Douglas MacArthur. Its cities had been destroyed, its economic and social infrastructure was in ruins, and its fate hung in the balance. In order to ensure the end of a virulent Japanese militarism, a new Constitution was put in place in 1947, which sought to establish an egalitarian and peaceful society— women were accorded equal rights, under a modern political and social order, and the nation renounced the use of military force. No longer a Shinto divinity, Emperor Hirohito was 'repurposed' as Japan's patriarchal figurehead and the imperial system was allowed to remain.

Japan's economic resurgence, as of the 1960s, is well known, as is its dominance on the world economic stage in the 1980s— the 'Japan as Number One' era. There was a corresponding resurgence on the cultural level, with an outpouring of literature, art, and film that has earned international recognition since the 1950s. And Japanese pop culture products have long been at the center of the global marketplace.

Japan's exuberant national pride, though, has diminished in the interim, with a relatively stagnant economy as of the 1990s and looming problems that offer no easy solution— for instance, the demographic 'time-bomb' that forecasts steady population decline and raises the question of the nation's viability. Then there is Japan's role in East Asia— the fraught relationship with China, for instance, and the existential threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea.

What, then, of Japan in the twenty-first century? What of the perennial identity question, and the paradoxical status of Japan as both perpetrator and victim of the Pacific War? Then there is the nuclear question— and the specter of Hiroshima and Nagasaki recently revisited in the wake of the 2001 Fukushima catastrophe. One thing is certain: We can look to Japan's writers, artists, and performers to grapple with these questions in their respective ways.

The Rise of Fiction in Late-Meiji Japan

A key literary development of the late Meiji period was the emergence of prose fiction (*shōsetsu*) as the preëminent literary genre, essentially displacing poetry. Initially emulating exemplary Western models— notably the fiction of Britain, France, Germany, and Russia— writers developed a new, standardized literary language that enabled their work to reach a broad audience. A first generation of modern Japanese fiction writers— spearheaded by pioneering figures such as Mori Ōgai, Natsume Sōseki, and Shimazaki Tōson— produced works that centered on plot, character development, and the challenges of

modern urban life and social interaction. The protagonists were typically ineffectual men whose pained interiority and confusion came to dominate the narrative. Other more popular genres of fiction emerged as well—romances, mysteries, even science fiction—and in the process a number of distinct readerships developed. Overall, writers published initially in serialized periodical form, which meant that the rapidly-expanding print media made it possible for their work to gain a broad national readership.

The Taishō Era and Pre-war Fiction

Taishō (1912-26) fiction would be built upon the accomplishments of Meiji authors. A so-called 'pure literature' centering on fiction with clear autobiographical elements and a strong confessional voice appealed to some readers, but an expanding array of literary options would be available as well. A younger generation of fiction writers would give voice to Japan's increasingly urban society—with Tokyo as its virtually obligatory site—and to the burgeoning consumer economy and a new spirit of freedom and self-indulgence that marked the Taishō social scene. A Hollywood-inspired youth culture, symbolized by fashionable *moga* and *mobo*—stylish 'modern girls' and 'modern boys.'—provided a strong contrast to the draconian state-sponsored moralism and political correctness. Leisure pursuits, hedonism, and erotic display figured prominently in the fiction of the day. Themes such as desire, madness, and the irreducible subjectivity of human experience loomed large in the work of writers such as Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965) and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927). The latter is known as author of *Rashōmon*, the story that inspired the award-winning film by Kurosawa. Overall, Taishō readers were challenged with having to figure out the credibility of unreliable narrators, competing claims to truth, and nettling questions about our capacity to comprehend the world, those around us, and—most pointedly—our own selves.

For his part, the writer Nagai Kafū (1879-1959), a native of Tokyo who lamented the city's transformation into an ersatz Western-style capital, sought to counter the dystopian fiction that told of urban alienation and melancholy. Kafū produced a fictional world that nostalgically evoked early-Meiji Tokyo—its geisha, artisans, and ordinary folk, together with the city's labyrinth of quaint side streets and byways. A noteworthy example is *The River Sumida* (1909), a bittersweet tale of personal longing and familial responsibility set in the neighborhoods of 'old Tokyo,' adjacent to the river that runs through it.

An elite literary group, the White Birch Society (*Shirakaba-ha*), fostered fiction that promoted a socially-progressive humanist agenda. Its leading figure, Shiga Naoya (1883-1971), is known for fiction—short stories, chiefly—seen as expressing the author's deepest interiority, with a minimum of artifice. Stories such as 'At Kinosaki' (*Kinosaki nite*, 1917) have been praised for their lyrical and spiritual depth—prose haiku, in effect. This distinctive category of personal fiction became known as 'I-novel' (*shishōsetsu*). It has remained a prominent—if somewhat nebulous—Japanese literary genre.

Japan's liberal political climate of the Twenties gave rise to a so-called proletarian literary movement, which espoused a range of Marxist and socialist fiction that reflected the Russian and Soviet political scene. With the 1930s, though, a new militarist regime would curtail leftist expression and impose strict censorship in the lead-up to hostilities on the Asian mainland. Japan's leaders resurrected the nationalist discourse of uniqueness and cultural superiority, known as *kokutai*, and silenced the more 'individualist' and politically-subversive writers and intellectuals. This would be the finale of Japan's imperialist venture.

Postwar Fiction and Japan's Literary Renaissance

The Pacific War and the cataclysmic end to Japan's imperial adventure yielded a rich literary harvest in the postwar period, notwithstanding the vast destruction and dislocation that marked the outset of the American Occupation (1945-52). A genre of war literature (*sensō bungaku*) centering on fiction that reflected upon the horrors of war and the burden of defeat and survival. The work of Ōoka Shōhei (1909-88) is especially noteworthy—in particular, his moving novel, *Fires on the Plain* (1951). A subgenre of 'atomic literature' (*genbaku bungaku*) would seek to make sense of the unimaginable. Here, the novel *Black Rain* (1966) by Ibuse Masuji (1898-1984) deserves mention. The film adaptations of these two works are widely admired.

Postwar writers, with their newfound freedom of expression facilitated by the Occupation authorities, produced a broad range of fiction set in the late Forties and early Fifties. Reflecting the dislocation and privation of the postwar years, this work evokes both the desperate circumstances of ordinary people and the renewed hope of a better life that was enshrined in the nation's new constitution, promulgated in 1947. In particular, the novels and stories of Dazai Osamu (1909-48), Yasuoka Shōtarō (1920-2013), and Kojima Nobuo (1915-2006) are representative of this transitional period. Their work is marked by the distinctive personal signature associated with the 'I-novel' (*shishōsetsu*) genre. Representative of the darkly comic treatment of postwar privation and the struggle to survive is Yasuoka's *Prized Possessions* (1952). The story tells of a father's obsession to raise rabbits for the fur market, and his gradual transformation into a pathetic human rabbit.

Postwar Literary Landmarks

Following the Occupation, Japan went on to achieve a stable political and economic footing. With the Fifties and Sixties, the postwar climate of freedom and individualism helped inspire a renaissance of the arts, visual media, and culture. In the realm of fiction, Abe Kōbō (1924-93) wrote brilliantly of Japan's rootless, alienating urban jungle in a number of novels, the best-known being *Woman in the Dunes* (1962). The 1964 film adaptation by Teshigahara is a classic of Japanese cinema. Shōno Junzō (1921-2009) wrote of the troubling undercurrents of postwar domesticity that marked the urban middle-class nuclear family. Tanizaki, among modern Japan's greatest fiction writers, re-emerged on the postwar scene and produced some of his most memorable work— *The Makioka Sisters* (1948), *The Bridge of Dreams* (1959), and *The Diary of a Mad Old Man* (1961), among others.

Kawabata and Mishima

Arguably the two most prominent postwar novelists are Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) and Mishima Yukio (1925-70). Kawabata's 'traditionalist' novels— *Snow Country* (1947) and *Sound of the Mountain* (1954), among others— constitute a lyrical elegy for a lost Japan. His brilliant evocation of Japan's 'beauty and sadness' earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1968— the first for a Japanese author. For his part, Mishima earned a reputation for striking works of fiction that mixed nihilism, Buddhism, and a critique of the vacuity of postwar Japan. Novels such as *Confessions of a Mask* and *Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, which achieved an international readership, established Mishima as Japan's best-known writer. Yet he would become better known as a political reactionary and leader of a cultish paramilitary organization. Decrying the emptiness of 'post-imperial' Japan, and positioning himself as a latter-day samurai savior of a troubled nation, Mishima ended his life in an astonishing ritual suicide in November, 1970.

Historical Fiction

Historical fiction (*rekishi shōsetsu*) looms large as a genre that explores Japan's modern circumstance from the perspective of its legendary and historical past. Here the fiction of Inoue Yasushi (1907-91), Endō Shūsaku (1923-96), and Shiba Ryōtarō (1923-96)— inspired by the pioneering work of Ōgai, Akutagawa, and Tanizaki— stands out. Inoue's work is noteworthy for its focus on the broad sweep of Asian history— the Silk Road, in particular, and Japan's embrace of Buddhism, which was painstakingly introduced from China and Korea. His acclaimed novel *The Roof Tile of Tempyō* (1975) brilliantly captures this key development in Japan's early history. Endō is best known for his fictional exploration of Japan's century-long encounter with Christianity in the 16th and 17th century. Himself a Christian, Endō questioned— through masterful novels such as *Silence* (1966)— the quality of faith of Japan's Christian converts and the horrendous martyrdom that many experienced at the hands of samurai overlords. Shiba, among modern Japan's most prolific— and enduringly popular— authors, was especially fascinated with the transition from Tokugawa feudalism to the Meiji era and Japan's emergence as a modern nation. His monumental, multi-volume *Clouds Above the Hill* (1972) is the finest literary depiction of Japan's war with Russia (1904-05).

In contrast with these more 'serious' writers, there emerged in the prewar period a popular genre of period fiction (*jidai shōsetsu*) that featured, among others, the exploits of legendary samurai warriors. Here the

best-selling novels of Yoshikawa Eiji (1892-1962)— for instance, *Miyamoto Musashi* (1935), based on the legendary accounts of Japan's iconic swordsman— deserve mention. The market for such accounts of legendary figures has expanded dramatically, owing to adaptations for *manga*, *anime*, and other popular media.

The Sixties and Beyond

With the Sixties, which witnessed the dawn of Japan's social and economic renaissance, a group of women writers emerged on the literary stage. This in part reflected— and in turn reinforced— a new discourse of women's rights and the advent of women's participation on the political and cultural scene. Of particular note are ground-breaking authors such as Enchi Fumiko (1905-86) and Kôno Taeko. Through moving novels such as *The Waiting Years* (1957) and *Masks* (1958), Enchi probed the circumstance of women subjected to male power and privilege. Kôno is known for her unsettling depiction of female sexuality and psychological complexity in stories such as *Toddler Hunting* (1961). Overall, the challenge posed by the growing cohort of *joryû sakka*— women authors— to traditional gender roles and norms did much to transform the long-accepted male dominance in the literary realm. Henceforth women would assume a prominent place in Japanese literature and the arts.

Japanese Literature in the Late 20th Century

Japan's 'miraculous' economic expansionism of the 1970s coincided with the emergence of fictional and other writing that had arguably lost its distinctive 'Japanese' qualities of subtlety, sensitivity, and lyrical depth. Indeed, the language itself and the themes that inspired writers had undergone changes that brought writers in line with their counterparts in the developed world. In short, a globalization trend— more obvious in the domain of popular culture and mass media— was set in motion, and it has dramatically accelerated in recent years.

One author concerned about Japan's insular identity in the late 20th century is Ôe Kenzaburô (1935-). Ôe emerged on the literary scene in the Sixties as spokesperson for a new generation of postwar Japanese youth, through his groundbreaking novel, *A Personal Matter* (1964). He would go on to explore the qualities of Japanese national character and its mythic roots while spearheading Japan's anti-nuclear movement. Ôe's deeply principled and morally-centered fiction earned for him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1994— Japan's second awardee.

The late-20th century literary scene was notably diverse. Women writers such as Tsushima Yûko (1947-2016) and Yoshimoto Banana (1964-) have been at the vanguard of Japanese fiction, and they were no longer demeaningly categorized as 'woman writers.' Yoshimoto's best-selling novel, *Kitchen* (1988), explores the complexity of 'non-traditional' families and the journey of self-discovery. Younger writers such as Kanehara Hitomi (1983-) have ventured into the once-taboo zone of drug use, body modification, and deviant youth subculture; her 2003 novel *Snakes and Earrings* is representative of this new wave.

The Murakami Phenomenon

Arguably the best-known and most widely-admired Japanese writer is Murakami Haruki (1949-), whose work has been translated into some fifty languages. Murakami's novels— most notably, *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997), and *Kafka on the Shore* (2005)— have become part and parcel of 'world literature,' and the author's extraordinary capacity to merge reality and fantasy, dream and drudgery, past and present has been widely discussed and studied.

Murakami's work is typically branded as 'postmodern'— a curiously elusive term that conjures up the 'whatever-ness' of life and the fluid, happenstance quality of our existence. But the fact remains that the man is a brilliant storyteller, and the casual and candid voice of his first-person *boku* protagonist resonates powerfully with his readers. Murakami is all but guaranteed to be awarded a Nobel Prize, and many of his fans are indignant about the delay. His day shall come.

Conclusion

Given Japan's modern history, its literature— fiction and otherwise— understandably reduces to a pre-war versus post-war binary divide. This of course belies the complex trajectory of the nation's 20th-century history, which began with vestiges of the Tokugawa past and ended with the pervasive and globalized media-scape with which we are all familiar.

The concerns of writers, the themes that inspired them, the very language at their disposal— these have shifted dramatically. One index of this change is the steadily increasing prominence of Japan's women writers, who are now at the very pinnacle of the nation's literary edifice.

One cannot overstate the influence of the visual and graphic media— television, film, the internet, and the image- and consumer-centered popular culture. Japanese literature in the 21st century has a 'local' audience, to be sure, but its ties to global entertainment and marketing are most evident.

What is more, social networking, blogging, texting, and tweeting have opened up literary expression to new avenues, centering on a powerful graphic element. How, then, to conceive of 'fiction' in such a context? The demise of the 'literary novel' has been widely noted by critics and pundits in the West. How Japanese writers choose to express themselves through fictional narrative is an open question, subject to diverse points of view. One can hardly imagine what the shape of this literature will be when the 21st century draws to a close.

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Discussion Questions and Topics

What is 'traditional' about 20th-century Japanese fiction? How to distinguish this from the modernization that has presumably encroached upon the 'bastion' of traditionalism? In what sense can 'traditionalism' be seen as a strategy of combatting the forces of modernity— isolation, insulation, and anxiety?

What can be said in favor of— and against— the pre-war (imperial) and post-war binary of 20th-century Japanese fiction? Can Japan's modern fiction be read without regard to its contexts and instead be appreciated entirely on its own?

How are we to assess the impact of new media and social networking on fiction writing— in Japan and elsewhere? Would you favor the work of 'serious' writers as a bulwark against what can be seen as the adulterating impact of the new media?

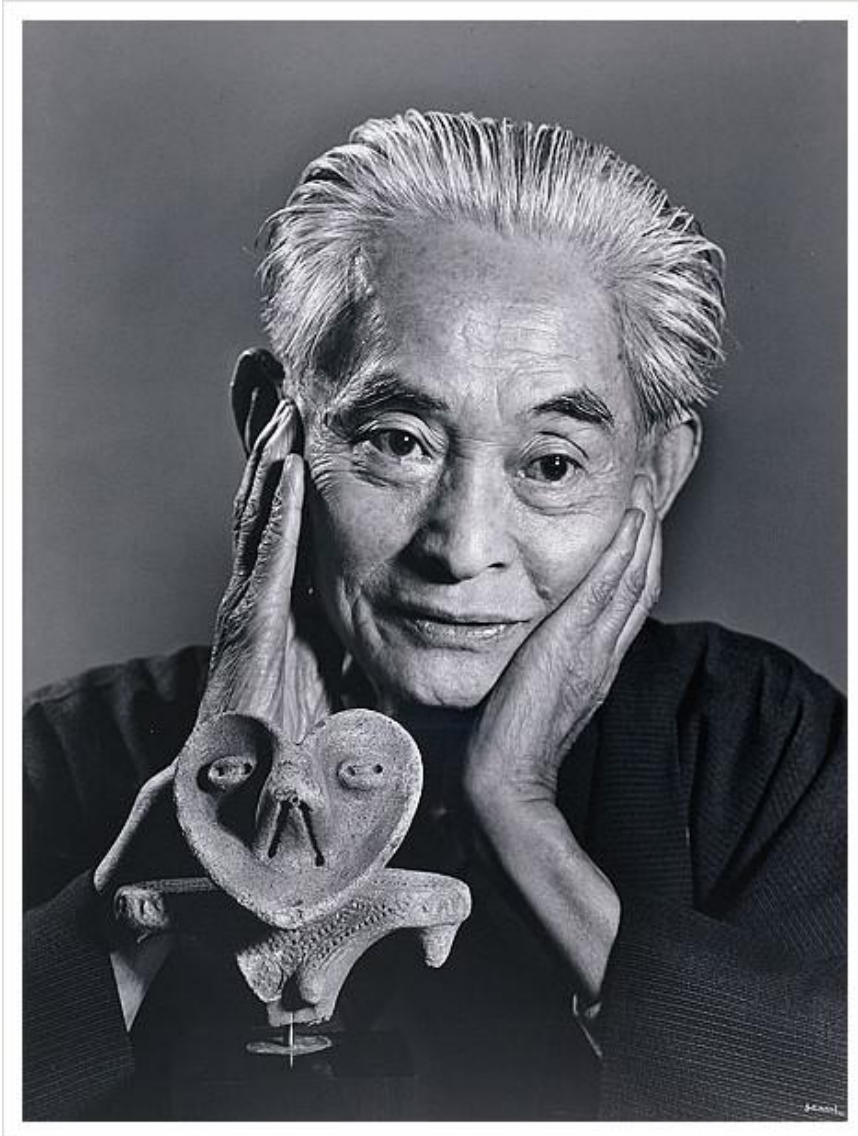
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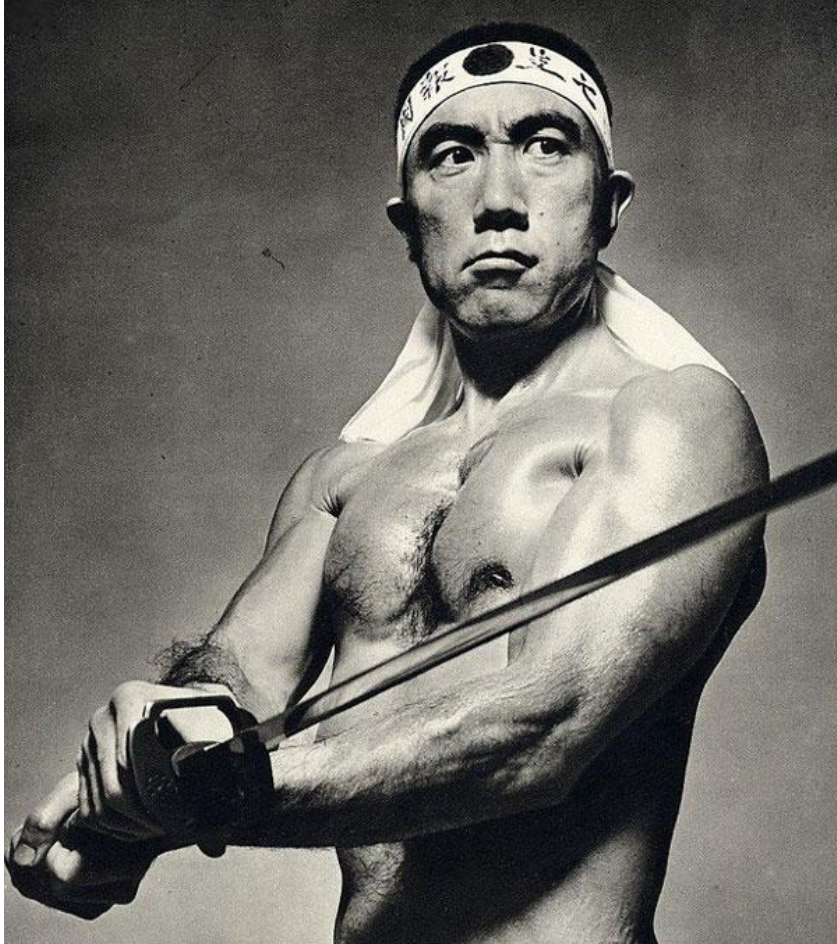
Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927)



Tanizaki Jun'ichirô (1886-1965)



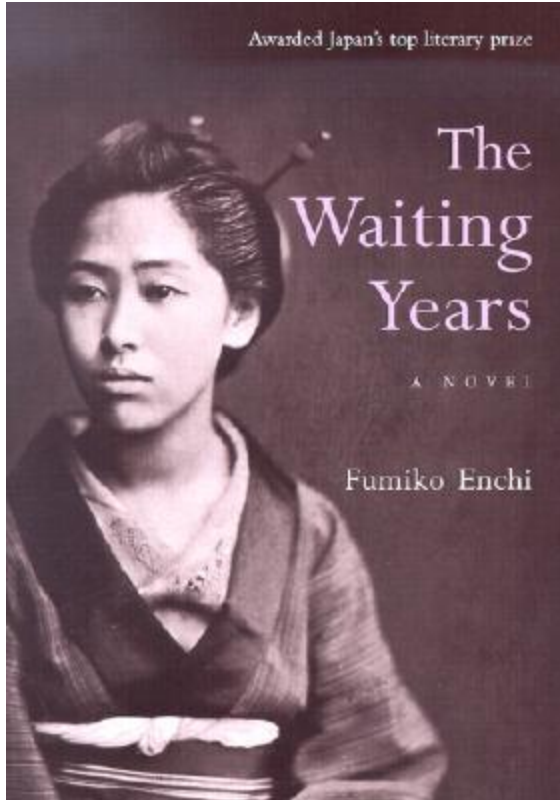
Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972) (Source: Pinterest)



Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) (Source: Open Culture)



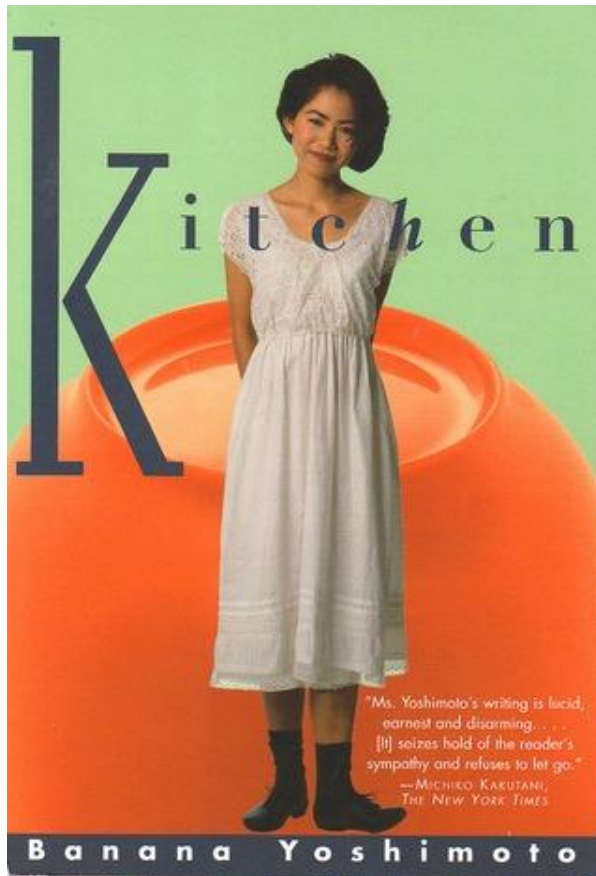
Abe Kôbô (1924-1986)



Enchi Fumiko (1905-1986), as depicted on the cover of one of her finest novels (Source: Goodreads)



Ôe Kenzaburô (1935-), being interviewed in Germany, in 2008



Yoshimoto Banana (1964-), as depicted on the cover cover of her best-known novel (Source: Goodreads)



Murakami Haruki (1949-) (Source: New York Times)

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