A Comparative Analysis of Social Diversity and Traditional Practices in Japanese Literature

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Introduction

Japan has a unique history and relationship with foreign interaction, the culture has withstood interferences with many western nations and has managed to maintain purely “Japanese” ideals and aesthetics while simultaneously exposing itself to a variety of foreign insights. Compared to other nations, Japan has very deep connection with literature. Murasaki Shikibu of the Heian period is credited with writing the world’s first novel. It is said that by the Edo period, half of the male population and twenty percent of the female population were able to read, regardless of social standing. While such phenomenon occurred prior to major western involvement in Japan, the incorporation of books from Europe did spark changes in the national education system and, more importantly, in Japan’s approach to written works. In this paper, by comparing the themes of “The Sparrow’s Gifts” and “The Grateful Crab” of *Japanese Tales* edited and translated by Royall Tyler, *Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon, *The Dancing Girl* by Mori Ogai, and *The Clock Tower of Yon* by Jokichi Hikage, I will be able to analyze how diverse cultural identities and socio-religious contexts influence the creation of the literary works in Japan, as well as how traditional Japanese themes stand against foreign influences.

Major analysis: Japanese literature prior to foreign involvement

Japan’s relationship with literature started prior to having a written language, folk tales were shared audibly in order to instill traditional morals onto the new generation. *Japanese Tales* by Royall Tyler offers a wide variety of short stories that make it possible for non-Japanese readers to gain an understanding of Japanese aesthetics and values, without containing analysis from a western viewpoint or bias. For this comparison, I chose to focus on the stories “The Sparrow’s Gifts” and “The Grateful Crab”, both of which focus on our relationship with nature and the power it has over us. Each tale incorporates the idea of animism, the idea that the nature around us is actually a deity and has the power to either reward or punish us for our behavior. In western folklore, it was often believed that there was only one deity, and said deity would never be portrayed as an animal. However, like most nations in the midst of developing a written language, spoken-word stories did include lower social classes in order to create a nationally acknowledged code of morality.

“The Sparrow’s Wish” incorporates not only the idea that one shouldn’t desecrate nature, the tale also warns readers against greed. The protagonist lives a humble life and when she receives gifts from a sparrow that she nursed to health, she is rewarded with rice which she immediately shares with those around her. In contrast, the woman’s neighbor does everything she can to reap the same benefits under completely different circumstances. While expressing envy for the protagonist, the neighbor harms innocent birds, and in turn, the bitter woman and her family are punished via sickness and an infestation of harmful creatures.

Likewise, in “The Grateful Crab” a young girl is rewarded with protection from a snake disguised as a man after saving a humble crab. While this story closely mimics the theme of “The Sparrow’s Wish”, this particular folktale emphasizes how animals can be punished in the same manner for unethical behavior; humans and animals are seen to have equal value in the world. Western tales and ideals give the most value to the human race despite being only a small part of the earth’s inhabitants, leading to a cultural shift featuring a strong “us versus them” and superiority complex that isn’t as easily found in traditional Japanese works.

By the Heian period, literature was a part of everyday life for the social elite. Murasaki Shikibu may have been crowned as the author of the world’s first novel *The Tale of Genj*, but during this period, a unique genre documenting the thoughts and aspirations of courtesans came into fruition. *Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon is aHeian period diary that includes more than just religious topics and values; it expands on unique Japanese beauty standards, visual aesthetics, and social etiquette. Due to the importance placed on beauty during this period, many of Japan’s literature composed at the time was done by women, and *Pillow Book* is no different.Written by a woman in the eleventh century, *Pillow Book* uses a voice that could resemble modern gossip magazines, but also introduced used such a tone to promote the well-being of the greater group through harsh criticisms of people both inside and outside of the Heian court.

*Pillow Book* is probably best known for its lists, arranged in such captivating categories as “Infuriating things,” “Occasions when the time drags by,” “Things that make the heart lurch with anxiety,” “People who seem enviable.” Sometimes the lists suggest unspoken dramas or offer a glimpse of court life. When noting “Things that give you pleasure,” she includes “piecing back together a letter that someone has torn up and thrown away, and finding that you can read line after line of it.” Under “Things of elegant beauty,” she also mentions “a charming cat with a white tag on her red collar walking along by the railing of the veranda beyond the blinds, trailing her long leash behind her.” The attention to detail found in this collection of notes is impeccable and it truly emphasizes the significance of seemingly minute qualities or the pathos of things—*mono no aware*—in Japanese literature, whereas its western counterparts tend to focus on a particular topic if it is deemed grand enough.

While this diary may not appear to be a very dependable resource when comparing elements of cultural products, *The Pillow Book* is an explicit collection of what the people of the Heian period valued. The Heian period is one of Japan’s most notable points in history due to the extreme rise in production of art and literature, and the aesthetics of this period have stood against the test of time and foreign interference in order to build Japan’s undeniably resilient cultural standards.

Major analysis: Japanese literature following foreign involvement

Early Japanese literature obviously acted as a permanent record of a nation’s moral and aesthetic values, but *The Dancing Girl* by Mori Ogai, and the short story *The Clock Tower of Yon* by Jokichi Hikage, a part of *Kaiki: Uncanny Tales from Old Japan*, were both written following western involvement in Japan such as the American occupation, in which foreign ways were forced onto the nation. Although the authors and a majority of the characters of both stories are Japanese, I want to focus my analysis on how foreign themes can influence Japanese literature, whether it is through writing style or a migration of popular subject matter .

*The Dancing Girl* or *Maihime* was the first published short story by the writer Mori Ogai, and is based on Mori's own experiences as a medical student in Germany. In some ways, this tale closely mimics Giacomo Puccini's opera *Madama Butterfly*, which deals with a similar plot. In *Madama Butterfly*, an American military man abandons a Japanese woman, while in *The Dancing Girl*, a Japanese man leaves a German woman in the midst of determining his future and the relationships he carries with those around him. The short story is the account of the unlikely romance between a German girl and dancer, Elise, and the protagonist, Toyotaro, a Japanese exchange student who must choose between his career and his feelings. After consulting with a childhood friend, he chooses his career, sending the dancing girl into a nervous breakdown, eventually leaving Elise alone and pregnant with his child.

Although Ogai’s work is heavily influenced by his experiences overseas, his Japanese upbringing translates well into this piece. The setting may be foreign, the circumstances may not reflect many of the lives of Japanese youth in that time period, but the underlying themes found in *The Dancing Girl* are undeniably Japanese. Toyotaro’s life has revolved around obeying the wishes of his family and superiors, he is merely a puppet. As he attempts to uphold their demands and maintain peace amongst the group—a Japanese value—Toyotaro is burdened with internal conflict and seeks solace in Elise—a quintessential western motif. This story doesn’t include many obvious Japanese writing tools or aesthetics, but what stands out it the use of *mono no aware*, the pathos of things. Although Toyotaro chooses to obey his family’s wishes and focus on his career, he is still appreciative that he was able to have the relationship he had with Elise and understands that he is not meant to stay in Europe. This conflict also illustrates Japan’s relationship with foreign countries at the time, caught between accepting new beliefs and maintaining an identity that is purely Japanese.

Similarly, *The Clock Tower of Yon* also written after western interference and manages to balance both western and Japanese themes. The short story by Jokichi Hikage is part of the second volume in the *Kaiki* series, in which the subject matter moves into the country, where old traditions and older fears are preserved. Many of the stories in the collection are based in Japan, whereas Hikage’s uses the forgotten village of Yon in France which builds a feeling of discomfort and confusion for the protagonist as well as for readers. While focusing on the concept of time and loneliness, the story follows a Japanese photographer and documents the changes in his mental state as he experiences strange happenings in a mysterious village in the mountains. Upon his arrival, he is given the responsibility of translating the message of the clock tower, but unfortunately, his understanding of the situation develops too late, and the village is engulfed in water.

*The Clock Tower of Yon* finds a balance between Japanese aesthetics and foreign ideas. The plot is similar to that of *The Dancing Girl* as it illustrates a Japanese man reevaluating what it means to be part of society in a foreign country, but it manages to incorporate a timeless Japanese idea: the power held over humanity by nature. The protagonist doesn’t appear to be as emotionally moved by the mysterious village and its demise as one would expect from a western viewpoint. He leaves with minimal distress, understanding the pure strength of nature and the transience of all things.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while foreign interferences have altered the subject matter and writing styles of modern Japanese literature, a long held connection with the written word has built a culture of resilience that has helped maintain what is considered to be Japanese. Whether it is the strength of nature, our small role in the world as humans, or the beauty found in the end of things, traditional themes continue to be a consistent part of written works in Japan, regardless of the acceptance of overseas products, ideas, and understanding.

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