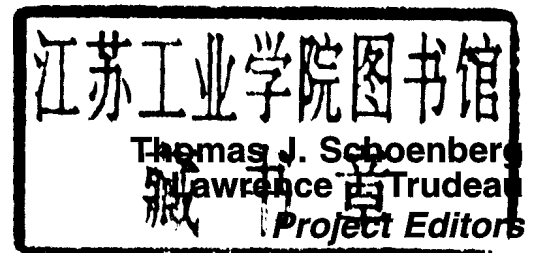


Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 161

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 161

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 76-46132

ISBN 0-7876-8915-7
ISSN 0276-8178

Printed in the United States of America
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Preface

Since its inception more than fifteen years ago, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by nearly 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 500 authors, representing 58 nationalities and over 25,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

TCLC is designed as a companion series to Thomson Gale’s *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

Organization of the Book

A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the original date of composition.
- A **Portrait of the Author** is included when available.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

works have been translated into English, the English-language version of the title follows in brackets. Unless otherwise indicated, dramas are dated by first performance, not first publication.

- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 14th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Thomson Gale.

Indexes

A **Cumulative Author Index** lists all of the authors that appear in a wide variety of reference sources published by Thomson Gale, including *TCLC*. A complete list of these sources is found facing the first page of the Author Index. The index also includes birth and death dates and cross references between pseudonyms and actual names.

A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *TCLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *TCLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, and the *Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook*, which was discontinued in 1998.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Thomson Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Brossard, Nicole. "Poetic Politics." In *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, edited by Charles Bernstein, 73-82. New York: Roof Books, 1990. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 127, edited by Janet Witlec, 3-8. Detroit: Gale, 2003.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments xi

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xiii

Yukio Mishima 1925-1970	1
<i>Japanese novelist, playwright, essayist, and short story writer</i>	
Marcel Proust 1871-1922	121
<i>French novelist, essayist, poet, and short story writer</i>	
Mark Twain 1835-1910	208
<i>American novelist, short story writer, journalist, essayist, travel writer, memoirist, autobiographer, and dramatist</i>	
<i>Entry devoted to The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884)</i>	

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 355

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Topic Index 455

TCLC Cumulative Nationality Index 467

TCLC-161 Title Index 473

Yukio Mishima

1925-1970

(Pseudonym of Hiraoka Kimitake) Japanese novelist, playwright, essayist, and short story writer.

INTRODUCTION

Mishima is commonly considered one of the most important modern Japanese writers. He is recognized as a master stylist and a powerfully imaginative author who wrote successfully in a number of genres, most notably novels and plays. A controversial figure both in Japan and abroad, Mishima's focus on themes such as homosexuality, death, and political change has garnered a great deal of both Japanese and Western study. However, Mishima is perhaps as well-known for his public death by ritual suicide (*seppuku*)—after a failed attempt to overthrow the Japanese government—as he is for his massive body of work.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Mishima was born Hiraoka Kimitake in Tokyo in 1925. His family was of samurai ancestry, and his father was a government minister. The dominant figure in Mishima's childhood was his paternal grandmother, Natsu, who forcibly separated Mishima from his mother when he was a baby, insisting that he live with her downstairs in the family home. Although a semi-invalid, Natsu encouraged the young Mishima's interest in Kabuki theater and in the notion of an elite past. Even after his parents and siblings moved to another house, Mishima stayed with Natsu, nursing her as her illness grew progressively worse. Finally, in 1937 he was allowed to rejoin his family. Mishima did well in school, immersing himself in Japanese and Western classical literature. He began writing stories in middle school and had his first work published while he was still a high school student. It was upon this occasion in 1941 that he first assumed his pen name. After high school he studied law at Tokyo University and subsequently accepted employment in the government's Finance Ministry. Within a year, however, he resigned in order to write full time. With the great success of his first novel, *Kamen no kokuhaku* (*Confessions of a Mask*) in 1949, Mishima established himself as an important voice in Japanese literature.

Throughout his adult life Mishima was disturbed by what he felt was Japan's image as "a nation of flower arrangers." He became increasingly consumed by a de-



sire to revive *bushidō* ("the way of the warrior"), the traditional values of the samurai, and he vehemently opposed the Westernization of his country that was taking place after its defeat in World War II. A supporter of *Bungei Bunka* (*Literary Culture*), a small nationalist magazine that had printed Mishima's early fiction, introduced Mishima to the *Nihon Romanha*, a group of intellectuals who stressed the "value of destruction" and called for the preservation of Japanese cultural traditions. The group had a profound influence on Mishima, who found reinforcement of his personal ideals in its emphasis on death and self-sacrifice. In 1968 he formed the *Tate No Kai*, or Shield Society, a private army of university men who believed in the way of the samurai, including the practice of *seppuku*, a form of ritual suicide that involves self-disembowelment and beheading by an associate. On November 25, 1970, Mishima and four of his followers from the Shield Society entered the headquarters of the *Jietai*, or Self-Defense Forces, took its commander hostage, and demanded that Mishima be allowed to address an assembly of the sol-

diers. Speaking from a balcony, Mishima exhorted the men to overthrow the American-imposed Japanese constitution and restore the emperor to his former position of preeminence. When he was jeered by the crowd, Mishima shouted, "Long live the Emperor!" and returned to the commander's office, where he performed the *seppuku* ritual. Immediately after beheading Mishima, a devoted follower performed his own ritual suicide before the crowd.

MAJOR WORKS

Mishima's life-long fascination with suicide, death, sexuality, and sacrifice suffuses most of his writing. In his first novel, the semi-autobiographical *Confessions of a Mask*, the narrator gradually realizes that he must hide his supposedly deviant sexual urges behind a mask of normality. Based on an actual court trial, the novel *Kinkakuji* (1956; *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*) tells the story of a young Buddhist acolyte whose ugliness and stutter have made him grow to hate anything beautiful. He becomes obsessed with the idea that the golden temple where he studies is the ideal of beauty, and in envy he burns it to the ground. One of Mishima's best-known works translated into English and widely anthologized is the short story "Yukoku" (1960; translated as "Patriotism" in *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories*), an overtly political work that tells the story of a married couple who decide to commit *seppuku* together. With its elements of emperor worship and right-wing political theory, as well as its explicitly detailed accounts of sex and death, the story remains one of Mishima's most shocking works. Mishima's last work, considered by many to be his masterpiece, is the tetralogy *Hōjō no umi* (1969-71; *The Sea of Fertility*), the final portions of which he completed and submitted to his publishers on the day of his suicide. The first novel in the cycle, *Haru no yuki* (1969; *Spring Snow*), which Mishima considered to represent the "feminine," aesthetic side of Japanese culture, is based on an ancient romance featuring star-crossed lovers. In contrast, *Homba* (1969; *Runaway Horses*), the second installment in the cycle, symbolizes the "masculine," martial arts-oriented side of Japanese culture. The novel concerns a plot by a group of young men to perform a series of assassinations of corrupt business leaders. The third novel in the series, *Akatsuki no tera* (1970; *The Temple of Dawn*), tells of the character Honda's voyage of spiritual discovery to Thailand and India. Because the awakening involves much esoteric Buddhist teaching, the work is considered the most problematic of the four novels in the series. Finally, in the last volume, *Tennin gosui* (1971; *Decay of the Angel*), Honda returns to the corrupt world of 1970 Japan, where he encounters emptiness and hopelessness.

Although the works best known in the West are his novels, Mishima was as esteemed in his country for his

plays as for his fiction, and he was the first contemporary Japanese author to work in the Nō theater genre. In his Nō pieces, including *Kantan* (1950), *Aya no tsuzumi* (1951; *The Damask Drum*), *Sotoba Komachi* (1952), *Aoi no ue* (1954; *The Lady Aoi*), and *Hanjo* (1955), he updates time-honored works by combining the linguistic grace and mood of classical Nō with modern situations and character complexity. Mishima also wrote many plays in the *shingeki*, or modern, style, featuring fully developed characterization and realistic settings. Notable plays of this type include *Nettaiju* (1959; *Tropical Tree*), *Sado kōshaku fujin* (1965; *Madame de Sade*), and *Waga tomo Hittorā* (1968; *My Friend Hitler*).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

The circumstances surrounding Mishima's spectacular suicide continues to influence critical opinion of his work. Many critics have explored how his works reflect his preoccupation with aggression and eroticism as well as his dedication to the traditional values of imperial Japan. Scholars often interpret Mishima's writings from a biographical perspective and routinely detect apparent contradictions between the man and his works. An ardent supporter of distinctively Japanese values, he was also steeped in Western aesthetic traditions and lived in a Western-style house. A master of traditional dramatic forms, he yet created some of his country's most notable modern theatrical pieces. A tireless writer, body-builder, and swordsman who possessed a vibrant and charismatic personality, he nevertheless in his works displayed a markedly erotic fascination with death. Married and the father of two children, he created some of the most vivid and realistic depictions of homosexuality in literature. It is Mishima's encompassing of such apparent contradictions, critics note, his melding of Eastern and Western influences, and blending of modern and traditional aesthetics, that gave rise to enduring literary works that transcend cultural boundaries.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Hanazakari no mori* [*The Forest in Full Flower*] (essay) 1941
- Kamen no kokuhaku* [*Confessions of a Mask*] (novel) 1949
- Ai no kawaki* [*Thirst for Love*] (novel) 1950
- Kinjiki*. 2 vols. [*Forbidden Colors*] (fiction) 1953
- Yoru no himawari* [*Twilight Sunflower*] (play) 1953
- Shiosai* [*The Sound of Waves*] (novel) 1955
- Kindai nogaku shu* [*Five Modern No Plays*] (plays) 1956

- Kinkakuji* [*The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*] (novel) 1956
Utagoe ato [*After the Banquet*] (novel) 1960
Gogo no eikō [*The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*] (novel) 1963
Sado kōshaku fujin [*Madame de Sade*] (play) 1965
 **Death in Midsummer and Other Stories* (short stories) 1966
Taiyō to tetsu [*Sun and Steel*] (autobiographical essay) 1968
Hōjō no umi [*The Sea of Fertility: A Cycle of Four Novels*; includes *Haru no yuki*, *Homba*, *Akatsuko no tera* and *Tennin gosui*] (novels) 1969-71
 †*Haru no yuki* [*Spring Snow*] (novel) 1969
 †*Homba* [*Runaway Horses*] (novel) 1969
 †*Akatsuko no tera* [*The Temple of Dawn*] (novel) 1970
 †*Tennin gosui* [*The Decay of the Angel*] (novel) 1971

*This collection includes the short story "Patriotism" (1960).

†These works comprise the tetralogy *Hōjō no umi* (*The Sea of Fertility*).

CRITICISM

Sanroku Yoshida (essay date summer 1983)

SOURCE: Yoshida, Sanroku. "Mishima's Modernist Treatment of Time and Space in *The Sea of Fertility*." *World Literature Today* (summer 1983): 409-11.

[In the following essay, Yoshida explores Mishima's manipulation of space and time in *The Sea of Fertility*.]

At the age of forty-five, Yukio Mishima provided his own conclusion to the drama of his life by committing *seppuku*, ritual disembowelment. He died on 25 November 1970, the same day that he finished his last work, the tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility*, comprised of the novels *Spring Snow*, *Runaway Horses*, *The Temple of Dawn* and *The Decay of the Angel* (all published in English translation by Knopf in 1972-74). There is a striking similarity between the suicide of the main character in the second novel of the series and the circumstances of the author's suicide. Literary criticism has tended to blur the line between the work and the life of its author, an approach to which Mishima would have objected. Most reviews of the work by Japanese critics have been unfavorable, with little attention paid to the structural scheme of time and space and to the other modernistic aspects of the novel. Some critics have claimed that the lack of Mishima's usual impeccable craftsmanship, especially in the third and fourth novels, was caused by an increasing obsession with his own death and by the exhaustion of his talent as a novelist.

The major modernistic aspect in the tetralogy is Mishima's treatment of time and space. In the traditional novel, time and space are two indispensable organizing elements. Time is the medium of narration, and space provides the narrative with an orientation to reality. In chronological terms, time flows only in one direction, as in actual life, and thus the novel is fixed in its temporal limitation. In the same way space has its own unshakable norm: no one can exist in more than one place simultaneously. In *The Sea of Fertility*, however, the temporal and spatial sequences are arranged to create the effect of an interfusion of time and space beyond their physical limitations.

The four novels in *The Sea of Fertility* are set in a sequence of historical time spanning more than sixty years. Chronological time in the narrative is built on solid, careful historicity and is skillfully combined by Mishima with three different philosophical concepts of time: the cyclical time of Buddhist reincarnation, the linear time of Judeo-Christian thought and the spatial time of the Buddhist school of *yuishiki* (consciousness only). The cyclical nature of time experienced by the four main characters in the tetralogy is a literary projection of the Buddhist concept of reincarnation: the mystic transmigration of a consciousness from one human embodiment to another at death, rather than a genealogical transmission as from father to son.¹ In contrast, Honda, the primary character who lives through these four generations of reincarnation, represents a linear experience of time analogous to the Judeo-Christian concept. The third temporal concept which unifies this gargantuan novel is the spatialization of time. Time is only cognizable at the present moment; and as soon as that moment slips into the past, it is no longer time but is like a series of dots or discrete units receding into the past, disconnected from the present.

It is well known that the first novel in the tetralogy, *Spring Snow*, was inspired by "The Tale of Hamamatsu Chūnagon," one of many tales written in the Heian period (794-1185). It is true that the story line of *Spring Snow* somewhat resembles that found in the first half of "Hamamatsu Chūnagon"; but more important is the fact that the historical period in which *Spring Snow* is set—the Taisho aristocracy (1912-25)—is superimposed onto the Heian era, creating a simultaneity of the Taisho and Heian periods and thus suggesting that historical time is cyclical as well.

Mishima accomplishes this feat by depicting in detail the court rituals and customs of the Taisho period, which had originated in the Heian period. Then he places these Heian-like characters in a pseudo-Heian atmosphere. For example, the model for Kiyooki, the protagonist, is the young hero of *The Tale of Genji* who jeopardizes his future by falling in love with Oborozukio, the crown prince's betrothed. Tadashina's obsessive devotion to

Satoko's illicit love affair, for instance, can be accepted by the reader only when Tadeshina is interpreted as a thinly disguised Ukon or Jijū or Kojijū, who is intimately involved in her mistress's love affair, as described in *The Tale of Genji*. Inuma, Kiyoaki's tutor, can be categorized in the same fashion. Honda, in the Kamakura scene, is almost an exact replica of Koremitsu, Genji's confidant. Satoko's seeking of sanctuary at the convent of Gesshu reminds the reader of Ukifune's decision to take vows—probably the archetypal solution in the Heian period for a woman caught in a love triangle.

Mishima not only fuses the Heian and the Taisho eras in this fashion, but also dissolves the distinctions between past, present and future. His literary device for the blending of future and other sequences of time is the "Dream Journal" of Kiyoaki, which provides the novel with the secret tunnels of the time machine connecting to the future. Kiyoaki's dream is the passage-way to the militant Isao in *Runaway Horses* and to the lustful lesbian Ying Chan in *The Temple of Dawn*. Mishima also rearranges the sequence of the novel's incidents in a symbolic way and foreshadows the ending of the tetralogy at the beginning. The death of Kiyoaki as well as the ultimate defeat of the power of *samudara* (karma and reincarnation) is suggested when the abbess of the Gesshu Temple, Satoko's great-aunt, visits the Matsugaes and the dead body of a black dog is found at the top of the waterfall in the garden. The color black is consistently used throughout *Spring Snow* to represent passion. At the end of the tetralogy, Satoko, who has succeeded her great-aunt as abbess, denies the existence of her once-passionate lover Kiyoaki, since she had seen the death of romantic passion in the dead body of the black dog sixty years before.

Mishima's technique of blending historical time and narrative time, of fusing the future into the present and of rearranging the sequence of the incidents resembles what Sharon Spencer calls "the spatialization of time." Spencer contends in *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel* that modern novelists splinter and rearrange the events in their novels so that past, present and future actions are presented in reversed or combined patterns. When this is done, time in their novels is "spatialized," for the reality of the events is determined by the place where they occur rather than by the time sequence in which they occur. In this way novelists may achieve simultaneity—that is, the presentation of two or more actions in different places occurring at the same moment in time—and consequently they may dissolve the distinctions between past, present and future as they are dissolved in dreams and in the stream-of-consciousness flow.² The future is usually conceived of as something like unmarked pages of a notebook; for the future, unlike the past, has no records.³ However, when the future is recorded in dreams, there is no dif-

ference between it and the past. Kiyoaki of *Spring Snow* sees in his dream the future event of his death, of his rebirth under the waterfall and of his third life in a tropical land.

When the second novel, *Runaway Horses*, opens, Honda is now thirty-eight years old and feels as if his youth had ended when Kiyoaki tragically died at the age of twenty. Every time he browses through the pages of Kiyoaki's "Dream Journal," it becomes more and more difficult for him to draw a clear line between dream and reality, between what had happened and what could happen. The "Journal" predicts the future, sometimes a future which is already in the past and sometimes a future still to come; so in Honda's mind the future and the past begin to fuse and create a spatial time.

Kiyoaki's purity of passion is replaced by Isao's nationalistic purity, a Japanese quality associated with the Shinto deity called Susanō, the Mars of the Japanese creation myth. This mythical archetype is presented in a dual structure of time: one is the narrative time of fanatic militarism on the eve of the Japanese invasion of the Asian continent (1931); the other is the historical time of the Shimpūren incident (The League of the Divine Wind), a failed coup d'état which had taken place in 1876.

Isao, eighteen years of age, forms a secret group of single-minded, patriotic friends at the Academy of Patriotism owned by his father. Their purpose is to carry out a coup d'état in order to prevent the corruption of the political and financial world and to save Japan from the evil influence of Western countries. They try to follow the example of the Shimpūren rebellion against the *bummei kaika* (civilization and enlightenment—that is, Westernization) of the Meiji era. By superimposing this early Meiji movement upon Showa jingoism, Mishima again suggests the cyclical nature of history and further develops in the third and fourth novels the recurring theme of the impurity brought by Americanization. Isao's struggle for purity is doomed, however, since it is a struggle against the flow of time, against the course of history—the overwhelming Westernization of Japan. Time invariably involves changes and absolute irreversibility. The only way to overcome time is somehow to transcend it, as Satoko does. Consequently Isao kills himself after accomplishing only part of what he had planned.

In the third novel, *The Temple of Dawn*, Mishima achieves simultaneity between parts 1 and 2 of the novel, between the Indian city of Benares and the Japanese city of Gotemba. The first part mainly deals with Honda's experiences in Thailand and India. His encounter in Bangkok with Ying Chan makes him feel as though he were in the center of time, and he is able to see Kiyoaki and Isao in the past as well as Ying Chan

and other transmigrated beings in the future. Another experience is the gruesome scene in Benares of a funeral pyre at the public crematorium on the Ganges. The fire purifies human bodies which otherwise would decompose, and the water of the Ganges washes the ashes away. In the second part of the novel this Hindu ritual of purification is conceptualized and superimposed upon Honda's villa in Japan at Gotemba, near Mount Fuji, the Japanese equivalent of the Temple of Dawn. Mount Fuji probably symbolizes the eternal beauty of Japan immune from the passage of time.

The expression of sexual monomania at Honda's villa is the schematization and spatialization of hopeless chaos resulting from a frantic Americanization in post-war Japan. It also simulates the Nepalese Temple of Love in Benares, whose golden spire has sculptures depicting the thousand postures of sexual intercourse. In Benares the Temple of Love, a crematorium, the holy Ganges and the glorious, awesome sunrise all exist side by side. In Gotemba, Honda's peephole, a pornographic performance to satiate his voyeurism and an immaculate Mount Fuji are all clustered together. When Honda has a swimming pool constructed in the backyard of the villa in an attempt to see Ying Chan nude, the villa blazes up one night with a couple of the sexual avant-garde in it. Honda's crematorium is in action, with the reflection of flames on the surface of the pool water. He has unwittingly created the Ganges beside his crematorium. A crimson Fuji slowly shows its form in the morning sun. Thus simultaneity between Benares and Gotemba is completed.

Mount Fuji is still an eternal symbol of Japanese beauty in the final novel of the tetralogy, *The Decay of the Angel*. [DA] Mishima uses the legend of "Hagoromo" (The Robe of an Angel) and its location—Miho, on the bay of Suruga at the foot of Mount Fuji—to symbolize the purity of ancient Japan. It is a spatialization of the cultural archetype whereby Mishima unfolds the theme of Japan's deterioration as well as of the future decay of Honda's angels. Honda, now a wealthy, seventy-six-year-old retired lawyer, muses on the once-immaculate beach of Miho:

Benares was sacred filth. Filth itself was sacred. That was India.

But in Japan, beauty, tradition, poetry, had none of them been touched by the soiled hand of sanctity. Those who touched them and in the end strangled them were quite devoid of sanctity. They all had the same hands, vigorously scoured with soap.⁴

The trip to Miho leads Honda to the fourth reincarnation, sixteen-year-old Toru. He is a narcissist, aloof and indifferent to disorder outside himself. His only *raison d'être* is to see, as his name implies. He has the white, clean hands of those who have killed Japanese beauty,

tradition and poetry. Toru decays in a most hideous way—but does not die—at the age of twenty. A short life span for his predecessors seems to suggest that longer experience of time in this world invariably brings more human deterioration, just as longer exposure to oxygen brings more rust to iron. This cyclical experience of time, however, has obviously caused the person through succeeding generations of reincarnation to increase in decadence. Finally there is Toru, completely soiled, in the wealthy Honda's house—strongly suggestive of the fate of the angel in the Hagoromo legend—in an affluent but polluted Japan.

Honda, who has reached the age of eighty-one at the end of the tetralogy, is victimized by his advanced voyeurism. His dignity as a retired judge is defiled. Obviously Honda has decayed progressively during his linear experience of time. His desire for an endless cycle of time urges him to adopt Toru, but contrary to his expectation, Toru shows no sign of death at the age of twenty. Instead, Toru blinds himself as a result of a suicide attempt. Thus deprived of his *raison d'être*, he continues to live and later fathers a child by his insane girl friend. The child will be Honda's grandchild, and it will probably procreate offspring to form a genealogical line for Honda—but not that mystical and therefore precious cycle of reincarnation.

When Honda, after sixty years, visits Satoko at the Gesshu Temple, he is dumbfounded to see that time has worked quite differently on her. Satoko is eighty-three years old, very beautiful, clear-eyed and now the abbess of the convent: "Age had sped in the direction not of decay but of purification. . . . Age had crystallized into a perfect jewel" (DA, 243).

The secret of the effect of time on Satoko is the *yuishiki* concept of temporality, the doctrine that is the major subject of study at the Gesshu Temple. In simple terms, the *yuishiki* concept is something like a constant and endless juxtaposition of annihilation and renewal of causality. This concept of time provides the possibility of breaking the chain of karma, or moral cause and effect. When enlightenment occurs, the chain can be broken as a result of the inherently discrete structure of time according to *yuishiki* doctrine. The enlightened being therefore transcends the entire temporal sequence as it is normally experienced by those still bound to the karmic cycle of transmigration, and the moment of enlightenment terminates that being's karmic burden. If time is recognized as a line, whether cyclical or linear, connecting the past to the present, then Satoko's present is none other than the result of the past—the past that she shared with Kiyoaki. However, her realization of the *yuishiki* doctrine has eliminated the causality between the past and present and thus makes it possible for Satoko to deny the existence of Kiyoaki in her mind.

Satoko's purity has been attained by a liberation from the experience of time. Honda has lived within a linear kind of time mainly as an observer seeking sincerity and purity, the most precious human qualities, in the four agents of cyclical time; finally, here at the Gesshu Temple, he finds them in Satoko. Honda feels as if eighty-one years of his life are crumbling to nothing as he gazes with Satoko at the empty garden of the temple.

In *The Sea of Fertility* Mishima presents the theme of the gradual decline and ultimate nothingness of human existence by telling his story within a structure of simultaneity. A cyclical view of history is skillfully employed to fuse narrative time and the past. The concept of cyclical time, embodied by Kiyooki and his reincarnation, presents one aspect of the power of Eastern mysticism; the Judeo-Christian concept of linear time, represented by Honda, symbolizes Western logic and reasoning. In the end both fail. Furthermore, Honda's attempt to fuse these two only results in the meaningless life of Toru and his posterity. Satoko alone remains intact in a timeless world at the convent. Trying to find any meaning in human existence is as much of an illusion, Mishima seems to say, as naming a barren sea on the moon "The Sea of Fertility."⁵

Notes

1. Patricia Drechsel Tobin points out that the major organizing element in such family-chronicle novels as Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks* or D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* is the genealogical continuation of time. See Patricia Drechsel Tobin, *Time and the Novel: The Genealogical Imperative*, Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1978, pp. 3-28.
2. See Sharon Spencer, *Space, Time and Structure in the Modern Novel*, New York, New York University Press, 1971, pp. 155-59.
3. See Hans Meyerhoff, *Time in Literature*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1968, p. 43.
4. Yukio Mishima, *The Decay of the Angel*, E. G. Seidensticker, tr. New York: Pocket Books, 1975, p. 60. Subsequent references use the abbreviation DA.
5. On Mishima see also Bettina L. Knapp, "Mishima's Cosmic Noh Drama: *The Damask Drum*," *WLT* 54:3 (Summer 1980), pp. 383-87.

Stephen Chan (essay date September 1985)

SOURCE: Chan, Stephen. "Mishima—Against a Political Interpretation." *Contemporary Review* (September 1985): 133-35.

[In the following essay, Chan argues that Mishima concerned himself more with culture than with politics.]

Fifteen years ago the Japanese writer, Yukio Mishima, died after an abortive coup attempt. This year, Paul Schrader's film of his life has been released. Already the subject of controversy, the film depicts Mishima's death not as a political one but as an indigenous expression of values—a statement of authentic culture in which the right-wing political label was incidental.

At first glance there appears some truth in this approach. Left-wing Japanese radicals have seemed as morbidly inclined and more violent than Mishima. The Japanese Red Army caused great bloodshed, and its members lived by a spartan discipline which almost mocked Mishima's. Critics of Mishima's work have invariably become commentators on his life. There are two schools of thought: one, to which Schrader belongs, stresses the primacy of cultural motivations; another which makes the plain statement that a man's political convictions, especially when sealed by his death, can be taken at face value.

Schrader's interest in things Japanese predates his cinematic career. One of his first film scripts, *The Yakuza*, caught brilliantly the values and code of Japanese society. Most of Schrader's films have had an other-worldly spirit. In *Cat People*, this was made explicit through horror. In *American Gigolo* he worked hard to create a mood of artificial behaviour, of short-term life-styles that either believed in nothing, or believed absolutely in an emerging, brooding and completely modern metaphysic. There is no decadence unless it has a social and cultural core.

In his film on Mishima, Schrader reveals a metaphysic which is ancient rather than modern, and one which is compulsive. Certainly Mishima's life appeared compulsive. His interest in bodybuilding and the martial arts seemed compulsive to the point of neurosis. Shortly before his death, he posed for a series of photographs, nude and with the body of a Greek god—induced through years of weight-training—depicting various forms of death. In the martial arts, he had achieved third-dan black belt levels in karate, kendo, and iaido (ceremonial swordsmanship). In all three arts, the essence of practice is to imagine an opponent whom one faces without fear of defeat or death. Eventually, this gives way to a facing of oneself and one's mortality, so that one pursues life without fear of death, expecting it rather as the culmination of training which has already overcome pain.

The concept of rehearsing for death becomes the theme of Schrader's film. The film opens with Mishima's last day—for which he had prepared the previous night in exemplary classical fashion: making passionate love to his wife and writing his final valedictory poems. From his last day the film proceeds by way of flashbacks to his earlier life, and to dramatised scenes from his last

novels. Each segment concludes with prophetic allusions to his death. This is a perfectly valid way of proceeding—except, of course, an interpretation could be advanced that Mishima was intending to depict a certain degeneracy in Japanese life, and its death as a valued cultural well-spring. The reply has always been that Mishima afterwards sought to personify the death of culture.

His attempt at a coup was certainly symbolic. It is surprising how few people have made the obvious statements that his private 'army' was extremely small, noted for its fine tailoring more than its military capacity. His take-over of a defence force base was no more than the taking as hostage of the base commanders—who were certainly surprised, having expected Mishima and his tiny band as tea guests—and an impassioned and, often, inaudible harangue of the assembled soldiers. He urged them to reaffirm cultural values and to defeat the modern political institutions that had eroded them, particularly the post-World War II constitution imposed by the Americans. Then, without offering a programme for an uprising, he retired to the commander's office and, in front of the bound commander, committed *seppuku* (ritual self-disembowelling). It all seems a piece of theatre, deliberately put on for the sake of its polemic. Those who view Mishima as a political animal, however, indicate the pointed references in his last speech to the need to overthrow the constitution.

The argument against the constitution is not necessarily that its provisions are modern and guarantee liberties and equalities that are at odds with the mainstream of Japanese class traditions. Feudal distinctions had eroded and been replaced by an ersatz descendant well before World War II. The samurai ethic had been sanctified with time, but the samurai class had lost its right to wear swords decades earlier. The constitution was not vilified because it enshrined changes but because these changes were put into a constitution that had been imposed. The constitution was the immediate effect of military defeat, and symbolised a further defeat by way of cultural decline. An attack on the constitution could be political, but it could also be cultural, or merely sentimental and nostalgic.

What did Mishima want? To turn back the clock to the days of the samurai? He, himself, had benefited by Japan's modern institutions. He had been a brilliant student of jurisprudence at Tokyo University; he was hardly displeased at his fame abroad; his books were all translated into English and other languages; he was frequently interviewed by foreign literary journals and made a literary tour of the United States while still a young and promising author. He had ascetic habits but lived comfortably, surrounded by antiques—cultural artefacts. Through his books, he strove to represent the spirit of Japanese culture, not as an artefact, but as

something that resided in the Japanese personality. Commentators, uncertain as to exactly how much Japanese personality could be located or defined at large, personified it in Mishima.

For Mishima, this was expressed in his writing in the form of a brutal and morbid minimalism. Beauty, good, and life were all counterposed with death—the ultimate white and black. Leading to these two colours was writing that spilled forth images in monochrome. His homosexual novel, *Confessions of a Mask*, ends with white and black fused: the beautiful body of a young man, the object of the protagonist's desire, bound and slashed by swords in his imagination. This is not merely the standard fare one finds in homosexual sadistic writing. It is an expression, in homosexual terms, of the opposites of beauty and violence cojoined in a form of love. 'The Sea of Fertility' is a title from his last works and expressed the contradiction without intervening factors. The Sea of Fertility is the name of a broad empty plain on the moon. In the imagination, there is a stark beauty there—but hardly fertility.

Contradictions are opposing forms. They are reconciled in death, in formlessness. From formlessness, new forms arise. A form of spiritual or metaphysical dialectic. But, apart from portraying this movement in his books, how far did Mishima wish to portray it in his life? There is no doubt that he had right-wing associates and sponsors. Much is made of the fact that the present Japanese prime minister, Yasuhiro Nakasone, in his earlier days as an extreme right-wing politician, was known to Mishima. The question is whether right-wing politics was primary or incidental to his life.

There is a coincidence between Mishima's real death and his cinematic one in Schrader's film. Without any programme for a real coup d'état, or any contingency plan in the event of the coup's (certain) failure, it was, in the literal sense, a *coup de théâtre*—a symbol, culminating in his death, for which he had assiduously rehearsed. One stage up from the nude photographs shortly before his death, he planned his death in powerful cinematic images. Was this a call for a political uprising, for which he had left no political guidelines, or a cultural statement of extreme intensity? If it were the former, one has no path to follow; if it were the latter, one is required to consider culture, its decline, and the concept of its rebirth, phoenix-like, through the death of one of culture's practitioners and advocates.

Altogether, by his life and literature, Mishima emerges as a man who believed in cultural values. Perhaps there is indeed no culture without politics? Insofar as Mishima was a political animal, he believed there could be no politics without culture.