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# Modern Japanese Literature for the Western Reader

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Modern Japanese Literature for the Western Reader  
by Debra Curtis  
Honors Senior Project

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## **I. Introduction**

Over the last eight months, I've delved into the world of modern Japanese literature by researching the history, culture, literary tradition of Japan. The purpose of the project is to use the skills I've learned as an English Lit major to analyze a modern Japanese short story. I've done research into Japanese history, philosophy, religion, and literature, but some of what I've included on the site is from my own personal experience living in Japan and talking with Japanese people about their culture.

In the West, an amazing portion of the literature that we study and value is influenced by two things: Greek and Roman mythology, and the Old and New Testaments. Even stories with surprise endings follow certain patterns that we've become accustomed to, and this affects the way we read literature; picking out certain words, phrases, and characters and attributing them to events and stories in our history.

Imagine if the myths were all different, and the Christian bible had a different ending, and instead of Shakespeare plays we had shadow theater, and an entire different idea of heroism that defined our history. Switching from one way of thinking to another is a shock to the brain. My research and website are meant to help the Western reader better grasp where modern Japanese writers are coming from.

In this paper I'll explain my project objectives, including my reasons for choosing to do this project, where I got my information, and my criteria for selecting a story to analyze. Then, I'll give an overview of the most influential background information I've found about Japan and Japanese culture, including literary periods and history, contact with the West, religion, mythology, magical realism, and the I-novel. Finally, I will recount my analysis of Yoko Tawada's "The Bridegroom was a Dog," focusing on the literary and historical

references as well as briefly describe the Japanese and Western references that can be found in the text.

## **II. Project Background**

My interest in Japan began with an act of violence: my overzealous older brother forcing my me and my sister to watch *Dragonball Z* every day after school until we began to enjoy it. An interest in Japanese cartoons became an interest in Japanese comic books, language, music, and finally Japanese literature. Throughout the last decade my interest in the uniqueness and foreignness of Japanese culture has grown and expanded, and last year I was able to spend ten months in Japan studying Japanese language and culture.

As an English literature major, for years I've studied Western writing in context; from historical, cultural, biblical, political, and a multitude of other perspectives. In order to better understand the Japanese novels and short stories I was reading, I decided to look behind surface story and search for the origin: the Japanese versions of our bible, Greek mythology, and Shakespeare, and the Japanese group mindset that is so different from our Western individualism.

In order to clarify these things in my mind enough that I could concisely describe them on my website, I drew from the surprisingly diverse selection of Japanese literature and literary critique in both the South Bend Public Library and the GVSU Zumberge Library. Any deficiencies found in these libraries were filled by borrowing books from my advisor, Jeremy Robinson, and extensive internet searches. Although my own experiences with Japanese culture, both through Japanese media and conversations with Japanese people about their own culture, were extremely helpful, these books and websites expanded my understanding of Japan tenfold. In particular, Donald Keene's [Japanese Literature](#) was invaluable to my

understanding of Japanese literary characters and the influence of the West on literature in Japan.

After reading dozens of Japanese short stories, I finally settled on Yoko Tawada's *The Bridegroom was a Dog* for my literary analysis. More than any other story I'd read, *The Bridegroom* was distinctly Japanese. From the references to Shinto, the fox spirit, Japanese and Western foods to the very characterization of the protagonist – an impersonal distance is always kept from the reader – Tawada's story was ideal for my project. It was also an entertaining and utterly baffling story that I looked forward to unraveling.

### **III. Background Research**

The first thing I began to take notes on in my research were the periods of literature in Japan. Styles of writing and thinking about the world changed throughout time just like in Western literature, and when I began researching historical time periods (which is separate from literary time periods in my project), the correspondence between events and the ideas that were swirling at the time became clear and distinct.

One of the most influential things in modern Japanese literature, and one of the most interesting things, is the influence of the Western world on literature. In working to catch up militarily and culturally to the Western world, Japan wanted to create a comparable body of literature. The literature at the time in Japan was mostly didactic, and from the Western example Japanese authors began writing for entertainment and cultural value as well.

Despite their borrowing ideas from the West, the Japanese voice in literature has remained distant and impersonal. The introduction of the “I” – the individual, set apart from the average or ideal – by the West led to the popularity of the I-novel, which first turned up in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Mythology is another major player in Japanese literature. The prevalence of animal spirits in Japanese mythology makes it easy for an author to insert meaning into a situation simply by referring to a myth, folktale, or animal with a certain trait. Many myths have similar themes, often dealing with animals or spirits pretending to be animals or people. Myths are, like those of Greek and Roman origin, full of unusual things happening in everyday situations. This is another way that these stories have an influence on modern Japanese literature – through Magical Realism.

Magical Realism was an important thing for me to understand when doing my research; most of the stories I'd read by Japanese authors – along with the anime and manga I'd seen and read as a child – had an element of this. It was sometimes almost frightening the way characters would be so accepting of wild things happening to them, as though the unrealistic elements of their world were inherent in it. We can see this in some Western literature, for instance with authors like Franz Kafka, or more recently Sherman Alexie, but this form of literature seems much more acceptable in Japan than it is in the Western world.

Religion and modern cultural trends were other things that I included in my website; the lack of religious fervor in Japan is an important aspect that Western readers should understand. Although religion plays a major part in the everyday lives of the Japanese, its more of a social custom than an individual choice. Additionally, the different religions in Japan don't conflict with one another; one can practice Buddhism, Shinto, and Christianity in the same week without issue. I also used the website to briefly describe education/work, music, television, and technology in Japan.

#### **IV. The Bridegroom was a Dog**

Most of my focus in this project was on the analysis of the story “The Bridegroom was

a Dog,” by Yoko Tawada. I included a synopsis, and then information on the cultural, historical, literary, and Western perspectives of the story.

The Western and cultural perspectives of the story included instances of Western and Japanese culture in the story. For instance, mentions of cheeseburgers, *yakitori*, Shinto rope, and a Snoopy pencil. These sections also included information on Japanese culture that appears in the text that Western readers may not normally pick up on, like the instances of bullying against Fukiko, and later Taro, that can become so out of control in Japan that it can lead to children becoming *hikikomori* – confined to their houses or rooms, refusing to go to school. This section also included information on the way gossip and rumors can run rampant in small communities in Japan, especially in more rural areas of the country; a lot of what we learn about the protagonist's background is given in rumors toward the beginning of the story. Finally, the Western Perspective section reviewed the way views on sexuality, homosexuality, and nudity differed in Japan and the United States, and how that is seen in the story through matter-of-fact descriptions of sex and sexuality, and Mitsuko's showing her class her breasts without any backlash from parents (in fact, not even rumors).

“The Bridegroom” references a story called “The Crane Wife,” which is an old Japanese tale about a man who marries a crane who'd changed into a woman. The title of the story is a tale that Mitsuko tells her class about another animal marrying a human, this time a dog and a princess. Pieces of Mitsuko's story seem to be taken from other pieces of Japanese mythology, particularly two tales that I found which involve humans marrying animals. Add to this the multitude of references to fox spirits throughout “Bridegroom,” and one can see how full of Japanese mythology this story really is.

The fox spirit was an important part of the story, and required special attention in my research. Although the fox can signify several things, most often it is a trickster character, sometimes changing into a woman in order to seduce a man into doing its bidding. There are

so many references to the fox spirit in the story that one wonders who is the fox and who is the human – Mitsuko, Taro, or Ryoko?

Finally, the historical perspective on “The Bridegroom” was the section I found the most surprising; while I only focused on two references to past events in the text – World War II bombings and cadmium rice – what I found led me to realize the important divide between old Japan and modern Japan that lay hidden in the text.

There are two parts to the neighborhood in the story; the north side and the south side. The north is full of modern apartment complexes, gossiping mothers and eager young children, while the south side is "*really* old, with the remains of ancient pit houses discovered near the river -- human dwellings that dated back farther than you could imagine" (Tawada 19). It's in this strange and distant land in Japan's past that the strange events in Mitsuko's story can come to live, where fox spirits can enter one's home and turn their world upside down.

The two sides of the neighborhood represent the two sides of everyday Japanese culture; the traditional and the modern. Although they are completely different ways of looking at the world and at Japan, they exist side by side for the Japanese and create a completely unique cultural identity.

## **V. Conclusion**

Through this project my interest in Japan has been raised tenfold, but more importantly, my understanding of Japanese culture and literature has become much more clear. Although I knew starting out that my lack of historical and cultural knowledge of Japan hid the meanings of the Japanese stories I read, I had no idea that a little research could so brightly illuminate what I'd been missing. I hope that my website helps Western readers of Japanese literature to realize the same thing.

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