

## **The Samurai in Postwar Japan: Yukio Mishima's "Patriotism"**

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### **Introduction**

See also "The Place of the Samurai in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Japan" on the ExEAS website.

This unit addresses the role of the samurai as an icon by examining Yukio Mishima's short story "Patriotism," which can be read as a proclamation of sorts written to promote traditional Japanese values, aesthetics and the honor of the samurai's "warrior code" (*bushidō*). The unit also offers exercises for teaching students about the close reading of texts, critical standards, and the text-context relationship.

### **Audience and Uses**

This unit could be useful in a wide variety of courses, including but not limited to:

- Nationalism and Patriotism
- Military history
- World history
- East Asian History
- Representation and image
- Gender studies (masculinity)
- Gender and Nationalism
- Modern Asia/Japan
- Japanese history
- Japanese literature
- English

This unit can be taught alone, as a single class exercise, or together with the accompanying unit “The Samurai in Japan and the World, c. 1900.” Taken together, the two units provide an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the place of the samurai in twentieth-century Japan and the world. The two units could be used in successive class sessions to make up a week-long study, or if time permits, spread over more sessions for a longer study.

### Using this text in an English course

In English literature classes such as a first-year writing seminar, the unit could be used to explore ideas of close reading, critical standards, the constructed nature of images, or the text-context relationship (reading a text as a historical document versus reading it as “literature.”)

The text-context relationship and the nature of “literature” are always tricky subjects to discuss, but using a Japanese story may open the door to a wider and more insightful discussion purely because students may not be familiar with either the Japanese text or the Japanese context. It may be easier for students to put their assumptions on hold if they don’t know the context of the story, and you may get more students arguing for the value of reading the text in a vacuum, simply because they would naturally read this story in such a manner.

### **Student Reading**

MISHIMA, Yukio, “Patriotism”, trans. Geoffrey W. SARGENT, in *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth: Secker and Warburg, 1967, pp.102-127.

The immediate postwar period in Japan was one of rapid growth, rebuilding and Westernization under the Allied Occupation (1945-1952). When the Occupation ended, Japan continued in its upward economic trajectory, and the spending power of the Japanese consumer continued to rise. Mishima Yukio was dismayed at the growing materialism he saw in his society, seeing it as evidence of the moral and spiritual degeneracy of the Japanese people. “Patriotism,” first published in Japan in 1961, may be seen as a manifesto of sorts, written to promote traditional Japanese values and aesthetics and the honor of the “warrior code” (*bushidō*). Mishima also had a more concrete aim — disillusioned with contemporary Japan, Mishima wanted to oust the government, rewrite the constitution, and reinstate the Japanese Emperor to what many conservatives thought was his rightful place as the true spiritual, military, and political leader of Japan. While most Japanese found this position to be extreme, Mishima was popular among rightist groups and continues to inspire nationalistic sentiment in conservative groups today.

(For more on the samurai as a historical figure, see “The Emergence and Disappearance of the Samurai” in “The Samurai in Japan and the World, c. 1900.”)

### About the Author

Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) is one of Japan’s most famous postwar writers. Part of the reason for his fame comes from the spectacular way in which he chose to end his own life. Mishima committed ritual suicide by disembowelment, known as *seppuku* (or the vulgar alternative, *hara-*

*kiri*) on the morning of November 25, 1970. He took four cadets of his own private army to the Ichigaya Headquarters of the Japan Defense Force and reading his Manifesto from the balcony, Mishima shouted ‘Long Live the Emperor!’ before disemboweling himself with his sword. Mishima had long been dissatisfied with the lax nature of Japanese society, arguing in many of his essays and published works for the reinstatement of Japan’s traditional martial ethics. A sickly and weak child, Mishima had devoted himself to the martial arts in order to build up his body. By the time of his death he was a talented and devoted martial artist and head of a student martial-arts group known as the Society of the Shield (Tate no Kai). Many of Mishima’s works glorified militarism, death, and the arts of the samurai. By the 1960s in Japan, these ideals were seen as passé, overly militaristic or even laughable, and the more intense and obsessed Mishima became, the less he was taken seriously in the Japanese literary world. However, at the same time, Mishima’s increased focus on traditional Japanese culture intrigued Western readers, and from the 1960s many of his works were translated into English. With his sensational death in 1970, many of these translations were reissued with photographs of Mishima on the cover, usually wearing only a loincloth and brandishing a sword. (For example, see:

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0811213129/ref=sib\\_dp\\_pt/103-9750962-2669469#reader-link](http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0811213129/ref=sib_dp_pt/103-9750962-2669469#reader-link)

or

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0870114255/ref=sib\\_dp\\_pt/103-9750962-2669469#reader-link](http://www.amazon.com/gp/reader/0870114255/ref=sib_dp_pt/103-9750962-2669469#reader-link).)

For many readers in Japan and in the West, the name of Mishima is inseparable from the icon of the samurai.

### **Discussion Questions and Classroom Exercises**

Depending on the kind of course you are teaching, you can use “Patriotism” as a historical document, a literary text, or a starting point to spark discussion on a number of different topics. Five options for classroom exercises and discussions are included below. (The last three are most suited to introductory or intermediate level literature classes.) In all cases, have the students read the story in preparation for class.

#### **Samurai as Constructed Figure**

##### Discussion Questions:

- If an image is held up and glorified, such as the icon of the samurai in this example, what is the author trying to achieve by this?
- Mishima has chosen certain words, images and so on in order to achieve a particular effect in his work. What else was he trying to achieve?
- By elevating the image of the samurai to such an extent, Mishima creates and reinforces the idea of the samurai as the embodiment of true Japanese aesthetics and values. Why is he doing this?
  - One reason could be that Mishima was enacting a critique of contemporary Japan in the 1960s. The story can be read in terms of a manifesto, in which Mishima was arguing for a return to traditional Japanese values and aesthetics as a remedy for the ills of material modernity.
  - Another reason could be Mishima’s own political agenda. Because he was disillusioned with contemporary Japan, Mishima wanted to oust the government,

rewrite the constitution, and reinstate the Japanese Emperor. Mishima's failed coup was meant to achieve these ends.

### Western Appropriation of Japanese Figures

When we, as Westerners, hold up the image of the samurai, what are we doing with it? What do we want to achieve by this?

Use the recent film *Kill Bill, Volumes I and II*, by Quentin Tarantino to discuss these questions further. What is Tarantino doing with the image of the samurai? How does he construct this image? What effect does this image have on the audience? (Similar questions could be asked of *The Last Samurai*.)

For higher-level students, you may want to take this discussion even further, in terms of the power of Hollywood film:

- If it is a Hollywood film constructing such an image, backed by funding from Hollywood, what does this say about the American manipulation of the Japanese image? Hollywood here has the power over this image.
- How would this image be received in Japan? Is there a dialogue between the Japanese and American film industries?
  - Note that *Kill Bill* was a success in Japan and that Japanese samurai films were heavily influenced by Hollywood from as early as the 1910s.
- What does Tarantino's construction (or appropriation) of this image say about American society in the twenty-first century?

### The Text-Context Relationship

This exercise allows students to explore the many different ways of reading a text in relation to its context, and the limitations of the various readings. It may be useful for history classes in discussing the usefulness of literary texts as historical documents.

Discussion Questions:

- Does knowing about the extraordinary life of Yukio Mishima help or hinder our reading of the text?
- Is it necessary to know about Mishima's obsession with the samurai code to appreciate the beauty and power of the work?
- Why is it important or even relevant to know the historical or political context of a work?
- If the writer is writing within and for a particular context, then isn't this important for our understanding of the text?
- Consider this interpretation: It is said that Mishima wrote this story because he was sick and tired of the contemporary Japanese preoccupation with material goods in the postwar economic boom. Therefore, we can read this story in terms of an argument for a return to traditional Japanese values and aesthetics as a remedy for the ills of material modernity.
  - If we read the text entirely in terms of its context, whether historical, political or biographical, then do we lose sight of the literary value of the work?

- Is it all right to read a text purely as a historical document, as a barometer of attitude in the late 1960s in Japan?

What is useful about using an unfamiliar Japanese text for this exercise as opposed to a more familiar one?

- The text-context relationship is always a tricky subject to discuss, but using a Japanese story may open the door to a wider and more insightful discussion purely because students may not be familiar with either the Japanese text or the Japanese context. It may be easier for students to put their assumptions on hold if they don't know the context of the story, and you may get more students arguing for the value of reading the text in a vacuum, simply because they would naturally read this story in such a manner.

### Close Reading Exercise (Approx. 1 Hour)

This exercise encourages students to learn the technique of “close reading” — looking very closely at a text and breaking it down into component parts. Once you have completed the exercise, remind students that they can use this technique to find evidence to support their arguments in regard to any text.

Ask individual students to respond to the following questions in a large group discussion, or break students into groups of two or three to discuss Mishima's technique, and then report back to the class. If you choose the latter method, it may be useful to assign different pages to different groups, so that they are not all reporting back on the same passage. Alternately, you may find that if they all dissect the same passage, they may come to different conclusions, in which case you can have a good discussion. If you want to spread this exercise out over two sessions, you can also ask them to write down their response as a written homework assignment. Discuss students' written responses in the next class.

### Discussion Questions:

- What effect did the story have on you (e.g. disgust, shock, feeling like a voyeur, absorbed, etc.)? (Note: The vivid imagery and powerful combination of sex and death make “Patriotism” an excellent text for discussing the effects a text can have on the reader.) Which sections had the strongest effect on you? Point to particular pages.
- Explain how, exactly, the effect is achieved through Mishima's choice of words. What kind of words, phrases, and images does he use to evoke our emotional response? Examine how Mishima used particular words, phrases, colors, senses and so on to create such a vivid picture.

### Critical Standards Exercise (Approx. 1 Hour)

- Complete the Close Reading exercise above. Once the students feel familiar with the text and feel comfortable discussing it, ask them whether this story is an example of good or bad writing.
- See how many students reply to this question with a subjective response: “I liked it,” “I hated it,” etc. Point out that this is subjective and not actually based on critical standards.

- Encourage students to make a judgment, not based on whether they “liked” the text (subjective), but whether the text has elements within it that we can objectively say are successful or unsuccessful as literary devices (objective).
- This should engender a discussion of what constitutes a “successful” literary device. Ask the students to come up with a list of what makes literature “successful.” Note: some students may say that successful writing “has to have good structure” or “has to have good style.” This is not actually defining the successful element, however. Make sure they understand that they need to define what it is that makes the structure or style “good.” For example, some might say the structure should have a clear introduction, middle and end to the story, and others may say that the story needs to entertain the reader, etc.
- There will most likely be a difference of opinion in the class over two issues: 1) the critical standards themselves (e.g. what makes the structure “good”) and 2) the application of those critical standards (which elements of the story are successful and which are unsuccessful). Make sure that the class understands the distinction between coming up with a set of critical standards and then applying those standards to a specific text.
- As a homework assignment, ask the students to write a short critical review of the text, stating what their standards are and then applying them to the text.
- As an experiment, you could ask the students to apply their critical standards to a completely different text in the following week, using a text from Greece or Scotland or wherever.
- The difference in opinion among the students can lead to an interesting discussion of whether we can ever arrive at a truly “objective” reading of literature.

### **Further Reading and Online Resources**

Donald KEENE, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era*, New York: Holt, 1984, ch.27 (pp. 1167-1224).

A very good background read for information on Mishima’s life, death, his obsessions, and all of his works. “Patriotism” is discussed on pp.1203-5.

Gwenn Boardman PETERSEN, *The Moon in the Water: Understanding Tanizaki, Kawabata and Mishima*, Honolulu: Hawaii University Press, 1979.

This is an interesting book for literature courses, because it explores the meaning of various symbols in Mishima’s works. As different symbols have different meanings in different cultures, this is a good guide to deconstructing symbols in Japanese literature.

Henry Scott STOKES, *The life and death of Yukio Mishima, Tokyo*: Tuttle, 1975

More detail about Mishima in his historical context.

The following three works are more advanced, specialized texts that would be useful for students writing major research papers on Mishima in regard to literary themes:

- Susan J. NAPIER, *Escape from the Wasteland: Romanticism and Realism in the Fiction of Mishima Yukio and Ōe Kenzaburō*. Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991.
- Roy STARRS, *Deadly dialectics: sex, violence and nihilism in the world of Yukio Mishima*, Folkestone : Japan Library, 1994.
- Dennis WASHBURN, “Structures of Emptiness: Kitsch, Nihilism, and the Inauthentic in Mishima’s Aesthetics”, in Dennis Washburn and Alan Tansman, eds, *Studies in Modern Japanese Literature*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997.

For students who want to read some of Mishima’s more famous works, these are recommended:

Mishima Yukio. *Confessions of a Mask*, Tr. Meredith Weatherby. New York: New Directions, 1958.

----- . *On Hagakure: The Samurai Ethic and Modern Japan*. Tr. Kathryn Sparling. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.

----- . *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*. Tr. John Nathan. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965.

----- . *Sun and Steel*. Tr. John Bester. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1970.

----- . *The Temple of the Golden Pavillion*. Tr. Ivan Morris. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1959.

### Online Resources

The Yukio Mishima Cyber Museum is an excellent resource for information on Mishima, including a full timeline of his life and works:

<http://www.vill.yamanakako.yamanashi.jp/bungaku/mishima/index-e.html>

Another excellent site on Mishima:

[http://www.f.waseda.jp/mjewel/jlit/authors\\_works/modernlit/mishima\\_yukio.html](http://www.f.waseda.jp/mjewel/jlit/authors_works/modernlit/mishima_yukio.html)

For additional online resources related to the theme of samurai, see:

- *Chūshingura* and the Samurai Tradition (syllabus) <http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/samurai-tradition.html>
- Samurai, Cowboy, Shaolin Monk: National Myth and Transnational Forms in Literature and Film (syllabus) <http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/cowboy-samurai.html>
- The Samurai Tradition in Japanese Literature and Film (syllabus) <http://www.exeas.org/syllabi/samurai-japanese-lit.html>
- Law and Society: The Story of the 47 Samurai (teaching unit) (forthcoming on the ExEAS website)