

# Growing Up In JAPAN

By JUNE KUSHIDA



**One common theme . . . is the sensation of living almost entirely through retrospection and introspection. Most of the romance occurs not in physical action, as in the West, but in internal monologue and observation.**

**R**etrospection and introspection are terms suggested by a high school senior in this excerpt from his final exam in Japanese Literature. Although writing about two specific stories, Kawabata Yasunari's "Umbrella" and Murakami Haruki's "On Seeing the 100% Perfect Girl One April Morning," this student neatly defined a major challenge in teaching Japanese literature at the high school level. How do we interest students, who are accustomed to exciting plot and vivid characterization, in literature that relies heavily on retrospection and introspection, on internal monologue and observation?

Japanese Literature, a semester elective for juniors and seniors at The American School in Japan, attempts to meet that challenge. It is designed both for students new to Japan and for bilingual/bicultural students who have spent a significant part of their lives in Japan. Although offered by the English department and meeting National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) English Language Arts Standards, the course also fulfills a graduation requirement in the study of Japan. During their high school years, students must take at least one of the following courses: India and East Asia, Japan Studies, Japan Seminar or Japanese

Literature. Consequently the course objectives are somewhat interdisciplinary:

- To search for patterns in modern Japan's complex culture through study of major Japanese literary forms, themes, and authors of past and present.
- To gain and share experience in responding to literature through written work, discussion, and oral presentations.
- To practice writing Japanese forms such as haiku, *tanka*, and *zuihitsu* (miscellany) in English. (The unit discussed in this article does not include these literary forms.)
- To practice both reflective and analytical essay writing.
- To build vocabulary.

In its focus on Japan, the course supports the emphasis on diversity advocated in the English Language Arts Standards published by the National Council of Teachers of English. The NCTE/International Reading Association (IRA) list of twelve standards emphasizes the importance of cultural variety in reading materials and in writing and speaking assignments (Standards 1–5). Other NCTE standards encourage research gathered from a variety of sources, student-directed learning (Standards 7, 10, 11),

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and development of respect for diversity in building community and discovering individuality (Standards 9, 11, 12). Again, as advocated by the NCTE, many of the instructional activities in the course address multiple standards simultaneously (NCTE List of Standards for the English Language Arts, at <http://www.ncte.org/standards/thelist.htm>).

Japanese Literature is organized into four units of approximately five weeks each:

- **Japanese Folk and Fairy Tales**—selected stories from *Kwaidan* and *The Japanese Fairy Book*; stories chosen and told by students; modern stories by Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Ohba Minako, and Kawabata Yasunari using folk tale motifs; screenplay of Kurosawa Akira's *Rashōmon*; film excerpts from *Kwaidan*, *Rashōmon*, and *Dreams*.
- **Philosophy and Aesthetics**—Heian and medieval miscellanies; Donald Keene's "Japanese Aesthetics"; *tanka* and haiku poetry—from the *Manyōshū* to Tawara Machi's *Salad Anniversary*.
- **Growing Up in Japan**—short stories by Shiga Naoya, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, Hayashi Fumiko, Kawabata Yasunari, Mishima Yukio, Yoshimoto Banana; film *The Family Game* (Morita Yoshimitsu, Director).
- **Modernization**—short stories by Mori Ogai, Hirabayashi Taiko, Dazai Osamu, Murakami Haruki and others; film excerpts from *Meiji: Asia's Response to the West* in The Pacific Century series.

In addition to the short stories and poetry studied together, students select two novels for outside reading. One of these is read in groups of four students; the other is read individually. Selections for the group novels are made from among *Kokoro*, Natsume Sōseki; *Deep River*, Endō Shūsaku; *The Doctor's Wife*, Ariyoshi Sawako; *Black Rain*, Ibuse Masuji; *Shizuko's Daughter*, Kyōko Mori; *The Sound of Waves*, Mishima Yukio. Individual novels are selected from a list provided.

Of the four units, since *Growing Up in Japan* provokes the most thoughtful and engaged response from students, I will discuss it in this article. Often coinciding with college essay time for the seniors, the topic of growing up provides them an opportunity to reflect on their own experience in Japan as they study examples of such reflection from across the centuries.

The central theme of the *Growing Up* unit is *Outsiders*, people who have felt excluded either for reasons of temperament or of social circumstance. Identifying this theme at the outset helps students quickly understand that the stories they read are not to be taken as precise descriptions of life for the average Japanese young person at a given point in history. Rather, as in any culture, the stories tend to present atypical or extraordinary lives and perceptions. Through examining the experience of outsiders, however, students discover that we can also infer the values of mainstream insiders, those whose experience and outlooks may have been more typical of their societies.

Most clearly illustrating an atypical, even rebellious, attitude is the anonymous twelfth-century story *The Lady Who Loved Insects*. Students can easily identify with this young woman who refuses to accept the fashion dictates of her own time. Although nagged by parents and mocked by young men, she refuses to shave her eyebrows, blacken her teeth, or hide her intelligence—all apparent requirements of Heian etiquette. Her defiance of the cult of beauty extends to a preference for caterpillars over the butterflies glorified in art and poetry. Another youth whose aesthetic preferences bring him into conflict at home and at school is the protagonist in "Sebei's Gourds," a Meiji-era short story by Shiga Naoya. While his classmates are engaged in kendō practice, Sebei, much to the dismay of his teachers and parents, visits local curio shops in search of perfectly shaped gourds. When he is discovered polishing a gourd rather than paying attention during ethics class, his teacher explodes in anger, confiscates the offending gourd, and pays a visit to Sebei's home. His father promptly smashes Sebei's entire collection, but in the last scene we see that Sebei has taken up painting.

Other early stories of outsiders show lives constrained by poverty. Meiji writer Higuchi Ichiyō, in "Separate Ways," shows the inevitable loss of hope and idealism as her characters grow up and come to understand the limited options they face. Sixteen-year-old Kichizō, an orphan who works as an umbrella maker's apprentice in Tokyo's *shitamachi* (the low city), is mocked as a dwarf by others until he finds a friend in Okyō, a seamstress a few years older than he. Pure hearted Kichizō is shocked and pained when Okyō decides to become the mistress of a wealthy merchant rather than continue her life of drudgery. Hayashi Fumiko, in "The Accordion and the Fish Town," an apparently semi-autobiographical story set in the 1920s, describes the humiliation of entering a new school as a fifth grader at the age of thirteen. Her father's life as an itinerant peddler had meant constant moves and a sporadic education for his daughter. The final blow to her pride comes at seeing her father arrested and cruelly beaten by the police for selling a "hand lotion" made of water and flour.

Not all is bleakness, however; in Kawabata Yasunari's 1925 story *The Izu Dancer*, a Tokyo student who feels himself an outsider by temperament, a "lonely misanthrope," finds his way back into a circle of human warmth through the kindness and sincerity of a group of traveling entertainers—themselves outcasts by social circumstance. Poverty has forced the family members into their occupation, but as the student travels with them through the mountains of Izu, where signs in villages read "Traveling entertainers keep out," he loses his cynicism when he hears himself disingenuously praised by the dancers. In a modern parallel, the lonely protagonist of Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen* also finds herself helped by a highly unconventional family. In this case, too, the father/mother figure is an entertainer, a person living outside the norms of mainstream society.

Two of Japan's great mid-century authors, Dazai Osamu and Mishima Yukio, provide us with what seem semi-autobiographical glimpses of their precocious but alienated pre-WWII childhoods. The first section of Dazai's novel *No Longer Human* grips students as the first person narrator, recalling his childhood, explains that his frantic clowning and false smile had masked terror at what he saw as the cruelty and indifference of human beings. Mishima, by contrast, in "The Boy Who Wrote Poetry," looks back at a smug, precocious teenager confident that his masterful vocabulary meant deep understanding of the world. The boy, Mishima tells us, had yet to learn that, in fact, all he knew were empty words.

Students who have come away from history classes with the impression that Japanese support for WWII was monolithic are sometimes surprised to read accounts of outsiders from this period. Excerpts from Senoh Kappa's recent popular autobiography, *A Boy Called H*, describe his irreverence toward the Emperor during required school ceremonies, and the suspicion his family faced because they were Christians and known to have had foreign friends. In excerpts from *Barefoot Gen*, a *manga* rendering of the sufferings of a Hiroshima family, Gen's father is arrested for ridiculing the use of bamboo swords in mandatory neighborhood defense practices. After the bombing, Gen is mocked for his hair loss; he has become another kind of outsider—a *hibakusha* or radiation victim.

Although Anglo-Japanese literature, Kazuo Ishiguro's short story "Family Supper" introduces generational conflict and changing values in the postwar world during a tense family meal overshadowed by ghostly presences. Yoshimoto Banana's *Kitchen* and *Moonlight Shadow*, along with Murakami Haruki's short story "On Meeting the 100% Perfect Girl," both first person narratives of solitude, love and friendship, bring the unit to a close with their wistful, surreal, and completely contemporary outlook.

Films are used as time allows for enrichment, individual projects, and bringing additional perspectives to growing up in Japan. Students are intrigued by the satirical view of a middle schooler's home and school life presented in the 1986 film *The Family Game*. The middle class family's desperate efforts to see that a reluctant son passes his high school entrance exams include hiring a highly unusual tutor—an alienated young man of unclear background and unconventional methods. Because of its exaggeration and the almost cartoon-like characters, this film can be misleading if not accompanied by a documentary such as *Schools of Thought* or *Making the Grade in Japan*. Filmed partially in Japan but designed for American audiences, these videos highlight positive achievements of the Japanese educational system as well as its negative pressures. Topics such as *kyōiku-mama* (education mothers), bullying, and the exam system, treated satirically in *The Family Game*, are put into context in *Schools of Thought* and *Making the Grade*, which show both mainstream students and outsiders.

Included on the study sheet for the unit is a list of possible assignments. This assignment fulfills the course objectives of practicing both reflective and analytical essay writing as well as oral presentation.

## SUGGESTED WRITING ASSIGNMENTS OR ORAL REPORTS

Choose one:

1. Write a chapter from a work of your own entitled *Something Like an Autobiography* in which you include a first person account of life at an international school. Outline specific incidents, paying particular attention to those illustrative of cross-cultural confusion or enlightenment.
2. If you are writing a college essay that requires you to discuss your experience in Japan, you may work on that essay for this assignment. Meet the requirements of the question you are answering, but be specific about experiences, people, and places in Japan. How have you changed or what have you learned as a result of living in Japan or attending The American School?
3. Write Book 2, an original continuation of "The Lady Who Loved Insects." Your account must reflect knowledge of Heian customs as well as introduce a new twist of plot. Inclusion of poetry would add a note of authenticity. One good source for additional knowledge of Heian customs is Chapter VIII, "The Women of Heian and Their Relations with Men" in Ivan Morris's *The World of the Shining Prince*, 199–220.
4. Write a sequel to *The Izu Dancer* from the point of view of the dancer. Clarify whether she is speaking immediately after the departure of the student or some years later. Has she become a traveling entertainer? Did she ever meet the student again? Try to reflect specific scenes or themes from the original novel in your sequel.
5. Read one of the "Other Recommended Stories" listed below. Write an essay showing which of the major issues discussed by the writer are universal, faced by anyone growing up, and which represent a particular era. The high school narrator of *Sixty-nine* by Murakami Ryū, for example, hopes to impress a female classmate by leading a sit-in demonstration of the kind being staged by college students in 1969. His aim may be universal; his method reflects the era.
6. Interview someone who grew up in Japan during the pre-WWII or occupation eras. Compare this person's experience to your own in such areas as school life, recreation, friends, and family. Plan a list of questions to ask, and pursue those topics your informant finds most interesting. Organize your essay into a focused character description. Including direct quotation may be effective.
7. Part of growing up Japanese today is watching Japanese animation films. In an oral report, introduce the class to films by Miyazaki Hayao, perhaps Japan's most famous animation director. Commentators have pointed out that Miyazaki's films often feature young heroines successfully overcoming challenges. Does your investigation support this? Show and analyze specific scenes.
8. The film *The Family Game* is exaggerated satire. In an essay, identify the specific aspects of family and school life that are targets of satire. Do these reflect any realities of Japanese family or school life that you have observed or experienced?

9. The three films *Good Morning*, *The Family Game*, and *Shall We Dance?* show three different stages of postwar ideals and realities in housing and family life. Each uses humor or satire but makes a serious point. Show the class scenes from each film, identifying the changes in both physical environment and in people's aspirations over the years. What do you see as the theme of each? What is the role of children in each of the film families?
10. Write a critical analysis of *Schools of Thought*, filmed by an American crew in Japan and a Japanese crew in the U.S. Do the scenes appear typical of American or Japanese schools as you know them? Do the reporters and observers ask fair and appropriate questions? To what extent do the cultural biases of the observers seem to affect what they choose to film? The American observers, for example, seem most concerned about creativity, while the Japanese observers wonder about coverage of basic skills.

At the end of the unit this year, several students chose to write about their own experience as outsiders. A Japanese student who has lived in the U.S. wrote:

*I didn't know where I belonged, so I bleached my hair blond, pierced more holes in my ears, and wore color contacts. After I decided that I belong to wherever I am at that moment, my hair color changed back to my natural black, blue eye color to brown, and banana to papaya!*

Others wrote more directly about the literature. A student who read Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With the Sea* discussed this chilling story of murderous adolescents:

*This book reminded me of "Seibei's Gourds" and "The Girl Who Loved Insects" in the sense that in all three stories, the children seem outcasts because of their interests. They all feel as if they are misunderstood and mistreated by the rest of the world. The boys in The Sailor, however, judge people by their own standards, and no one is able to measure up to them—hence the planned killing of Ryūji, a man they had once admired.*

A few, like the student who identified *retrospection* and *introspection*, formed generalizations about overarching themes and methods:

*Many Japanese stories have an element of fantasy, sorrow, and innocence. They are all wonderful stories to read—a refreshing difference from the typical Cinderella stories we are all used to.*

As it skims across history, a course organized in thematic fashion of this sort is inevitably marked by omission and oversimplification. Yet in capturing student interest, providing an introduction to Japan and its literature, and fulfilling standards of instruction in English Language Arts, the approach has proven rewarding at the secondary school level. ■

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