Socio-cultural reflection and shaping

JAPN 309

Japanese Literature in Translation

Final Paper

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Introduction

Stories have always been a huge part of every culture. They are used to teach, but they are also representatives of the world in which they are written. They create a snap shot into the lives of the people they were written by and for, and because of that, they are able to influence the people that read them. They reflected and shaped the social and cultural environments of Japan itself. By looking at different stories from different time periods, even if they are works of fiction, a reader would be able to gain insight into the way people of that time period lived in their daily lives, what was valued by the general population, what religion was like, the way that women were viewed and treated, the way marriage was viewed, and many other aspects of the culture and society at the time.

Each of the stories that I have chosen, all represent in one way or another, an aspect of Japanese society and the culture of that time. Japan, like any other country, is influenced by their history, told through stories. One thing that seems to be unique to Japan though, is how strongly their history and their stories still influence Japan today. Similarities can always be drawn between the past and the present, because people will continue living their lives as comfortably as they can, no matter what era.

Reflecting different eras, two of the stories represent the changing views towards women and marriage of the times. The stories all take place at different time periods in Japan, giving a good perspective of the way things changed depending on era. The stories that I chose are The Lady Who Loved Insects by Sei Shonagon, The Shop Boys’ God by Shiga, The Dancing Girl of Izu by Kawabata and four stories from the book Japanese Tales, one each about superstition, religion, love of food and love of music.

The Lady Who Loved Insects

The story The Lady Who Loved Insects written by Sei Shonagon takes place during the Heian Period. It follows the daughter of a provincial inspector who is considered very strange by those around her and anyone who meets her. She is a logical and scientifically minded young woman, and is completely uninterested in social norms or popular ideas of conventional beauty. The story follows her thoughts and impressions of society and the culture of Japan. It also highlights how the general population would react to such a woman and, in turn gives an insight into the social and cultural values of the Heian period from the perspective of someone who was actually alive during that time.

The lady who loved insects is a story that would have made a large impact at the time it was written. The woman in the story “hated anything that was not natural” (1) and consequently refused to follow with the customs of hygiene and beauty care that were standard. Through this literature we learn that, in order for women to be considered beautiful, they have to pluck out their eyebrows and blacken their teeth. The society seemed to have a lot of social pressure and doing things that were not considered socially normal were essentially shunned. However, this story portrays such a woman in a more favorable light; she is someone who does not care about the thoughts of others and, when she is leaning out the window to the garden she replies to her maid’s scolding by saying “Well, what if l can be seen? I am not doing anything to be ashamed of,” (1) further portraying her in a good light. She seems to be a strong willed woman, showing that women at that time were not always simple minded or frivolous and further making alright for more women to behave how they saw fit in their society.

Even today, this story has had an impact on current Japanese society. The famous movie studio Ghibli came out with a movie inspired by this story called Nausica. The movie portrays a strong willed young woman who is pretty but that is not the main focus of her. She is intelligent and quick witted with a great love of nature, just like The Lady Who Loved Insects. There have also been other stories and Manga inspired by this story, showing how it was able to leave an impression on Japanese society.

The Dancing Girl of Izu

The story The Dancing Girl of Izu by Kawabata takes place in the early 1920’s, a time much changed since the Heian era. The story follows the travels of a young man of twenty years old as he makes his way around Japan on his break from University in Tokyo. While travelling he encounters a travelling performance group. The dancing girl of the troupe especially catches his eye, and because of that, he decides to travel around following them in the hopes of seeing more of the dancing girl.

The young man of the story starts out romantically and sexually interested in the dancing girl, however, the moment that he finds out that she is in fact just a child. The passage where he realizes she is just a young girl he says “I felt pure water flowing through my heart” (2), meaning that all of his impure intentions towards her had been washed away. Very different from the Heian Era, where a girl of twelve would have been married off, this story shows the change in what was considered acceptable thoughts and opinions of young women and girls in their society.

At the time that the story was written, a twenty-year-old man who was attending university would have been someone relatable or admirable to others. Because of this, seeing the way that he behaved would have been a reflection of the beliefs of the general society as well as setting an example for others.

The Shopboy’s God

The story, The Shopboy’s God Shiga Naoya, is about a boy who works as an apprentice at a scales shop. The time that is represented a much more modern Japan, although exactly when is uncertain, it is modern enough that they have cigarettes, trolleys, and cardboard boxes. The shop boy in the story is an unremarkable boy, even though he is an apprentice of the shop, all he ever really does is run errands. Senkichi overhears some of the shop clerks talking about a sushi shop that Senkichi has passed by before, making him very badly want some sushi. When he goes to the shop, he does not have enough money to buy even one piece of sushi. Senkichi is only a boy of about thirteen of fourteen, so when he leaves the shop feeling humiliated, another patron of the sushi shop can’t help but feel sorry for the boy.

It’s interesting to me that the man, Awano, feels embarrassed by doing a good deed and treating Senkishi to some sushi when they inadvertently meet at the shop where Senkichi works. This shows that, for people of that time, they are humble. Doing good deeds are well received by society at large but the modesty and almost embarrassment involved in doing them makes it seem as though the people performing the acts of kindness are saintly in a way. A story such as this would have instilled in readers a sense of humility and kindness and generosity.

Another interesting way that this story reflected the beliefs of the time was how quickly and easily Senkichi believed that it was a god who had helped him out, rather than an ordinary man. This showed that the traditional beliefs that people had about gods and spirits were still prevalent, despite the modern times. Even today, the Japanese people as a whole are still superstitious and believe in spirits and gods. Many people still visit shrines, they are very much still a part of daily life.

Superstition

The Man Who Stole a Dream came from a collection of tales in a book called the Uji Shui. The idea in the story that, if you tell a dream to someone it can be stolen from you, is a very superstitious one. Japanese tales are always full of superstition, but this one struck me as a sort of teaching superstition. The idea that, “you should keep your dreams to yourself” (4), gives the reader the impression that one should not take their dreams or ambitions for granted. Even if something seems like it is destined to happen, if you do not work towards it and instead simply expect it to come true after speaking about it with surety, it will come as a disappointment and humiliation if it does not end up happening. This superstition serves a purpose in making sure that people in society do not expect things to happen simply because they have been told that it will.

Religion

The story called ‘Paradise in the Palm of the Hand’ came from a collection of tales called the Konjaku Monogatarishu. The man in the story is a monk, who watches his fellow monk wither away and die, only to dream of him in paradise and wishes to stay in the dream. When he questions “why must I go back?” (4) his fellow monk tells him he has not earned it. This idea in the Japanese religion that, if you want to reach paradise you must earn it, is prevalent through their religious history. By “contemplating Buddha’s countenance” (4) one is able to reach paradise after death. This encourages people to be thoughtful, to organize your mind and think on things. Rather than other religions where they are confrontational, the Japanese religion focuses more on simply living.

Love of Food

The story ‘Syrup’ comes from a collection of stories called the Shasekishu. In the story, a monk who makes a delicious sweet syrup is greedy and hoards it to himself, even going as far as to tell his little acolyte that “the stuff would kill you if you ate it” (4). The boy, desperate to have some, sneaks the jar of syrup while the monk is away. He ends up spilling some and eating all of it, guzzling it down. The fact that the monk so loved the syrup he was willing to say it was poison just to keep others from eating shows how far people were and are willing to go when there is good food involved. Conversely, the fact that the little acolyte was willing to risk his position, the wrath of his master, and the possibility that it was actually poisonous, shows how much people are willing to do do and how far they are willing to go in order to get really good food.

Love of Music

‘Genjo’ is a story that came from a collection titled Konjaku Monogatarishu. In this story a Biwa called Genjo, which is a priceless royal instrument, suddenly disappears. A renowned musician called Hakuga no Sammi is greatly aggrieved over its disappearance. The fact that a musician would be grieving over the loss of an instrument that was not his, even if it was a royal treasure, shows how deeply people loved music. One night when he hears it being played, he follows the sound of the Biwa to the Rasho Gate. It is incredible to think that a musician would be able to recognize the sound of a specific instrument, especially when he exclaims that “I heard it all the way up at the palace” (4). In the story, it is a demon who stole the Genjo, showing that even demons have a great love of music.

Conclusion

Overall, the stories and their impact cannot always be foreseen. People will always interpret a story different from another, but the important part is the fact that it does leave an impression and affects those that read them. By also giving a snapshot for what the world was like at the time that the stories take place, the writers are able to send their stories through time, affecting more than just their intended audiences.

Each story shows a different period in time in Japanese history, giving readers all over the world an idea of what the culture at the time was like. It also is able to portray the social situations of the times as well, what was valued and what was believed in.

The story ‘The Lady Who Loved Insects’ showed the way that beauty and women were viewed at the time, and also showed that, even if someone may have been beautiful naturally, if they did not adhere to social customs of beauty, it was thought that their prettiness was wasted. People in the Heian Period were very opinionated about their aesthetics and their ideals of beauty in women. This story also shows that women were not being forced or subjected to those ideals, but instead followed them willingly. It also shows that it was alright for women to not follow them; they would simply not be able to be a part of high society.

The Dancing Girl of Izu showed Japans changing morals and ideas towards women, marriage and girls. By portraying an admirable and relatable figure as someone who would not have impure thoughts about a young girl shows how much the socially acceptable age for women to be courted and married off has changed.

The Shopboy’s God showed how, even with modern times and a more scientific outlook on life, the people of Japan still held on tightly to their traditions and beliefs and how readily they were willing to believe in them. There will always be that aspect of Japanese culture where they believe in their spirits and Gods and accept them as a part of life.

The four stories representing Superstition, Religion, Love of Food and Love of Music are still relevant today in Japan’s society and culture. They are ideas that continue on throughout time and still play a part in society. The people of Japan have a great appreciation for Food and Music, people still visit shrines on a regular basis, and superstition is a part of their daily lives.

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