

Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai Study Guide

Musui's Story: The Autobiography of a Tokugawa Samurai by Katsu Kokichi

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Plot Summary

Musui's Story is the autobiographical account of samurai Katsu Kokichi, who lived in the early 1800s during the height of the Tokugawa period in Japan. He took on the name Musui after he officially retired. Musui lived an adventurous life, full of swordfights, family squabbles, thievery, prostitution, and get-rich-quick schemes. Musui hopes that his story might help others, especially his ancestors, avoid the mistakes he made.

Musui is born to a concubine, given up to a wet nurse, and only at seven is he adopted into the Katsu family. He is a hellraiser in his youth, getting into fights and disobeying his father and his constantly scolding grandmother. He learns horseriding and swordfighting at an early age, and has no interest in reading and writing.

At fourteen, Musui runs away from home and spends several months begging at the side of roads and sleeping at various shrines or merely on the ground. Malnourished, Musui nearly dies from sickness until rescued by a priest. Musui then hits his testicles on a sharp rock while sleeping on a mountainside, and his testicles swell up so that he can hardly walk. After working on a fishing boat for a time, Musui returns home and spends the next two years bedridden because of his untreated testicle infection.

After recovering, Musui spends a couple years mastering fencing and becoming a local leader of swordfighters, arranging duels and bullying rival fencing schools. In order to keep up appearances, Musui becomes badly in debt, so much so that he decides to run away again to avoid financial problems. Masquerading as an important official, Musui spends time on the road until his family beseeches him to return home. To teach him a lesson, Musui's father literally imprisons him in a cage in his home for a period of three years, from age twenty-one to twenty-four.

Musui's adult years consist of a series of financial up and downs and other adventures. He spends a lot of time in Yoshiwara, the pleasure district, where he smokes, sees shows, and pays prostitutes for sex. He becomes a merchant of swords, earning profits only to spend every bit of it in short order. He also masquerades as a mystic, and gets rich (only to quickly lose it on prostitution) by peasants paying him to guess lottery numbers. He steals from the rice coffers of his brothers, and negotiates various disputes, usually involving money, with his landlord or troublesome peasants.

His bad reputation forces him into an early retirement at age thirty-seven. From then on, little changes for Musui as he continues to try to get rich and enjoy a lazy life and carnal pleasures. He starts to loan money to gamblers at interest. He also begrudgingly steps in to save his landlord from financial ruin by tricking the landlord's peasants into giving more money by threatening to commit suicide—something he has no intention of going through with. More recently, Musui has found it profitable to charge pleasure district merchants and brothels for "protection" much like the American Mafia of the mid-twentieth century.



Musui ends his story both acknowledging he lived a full and fun life, and regretting the harm he did to his family and his reputation, which undoubtedly led to poverty and a bad reputation.



Prologue

Prologue Summary and Analysis

In the free time Musui has enjoyed in his retirement, he has read a great many books. He is interested to discover in the course of his reading how very many books are devoted to the familiar story of a great general or nobleman who experiences ruin or a great fall from grace due to his own greed or meanness or other flaw. In this context, Musui is amazed that his own character flaws have not led him to ruin as well. On the contrary, his son Rintaro is the perfect example of a responsible and virtuous family man, and Rintaro and his family care for Musui and his wife in their retirement very well. Musui hopes the reader will heed his tale well and learn from his mistakes in order to become virtuous.

Musui gives advice for young boys and girls. Both sexes should be serious students of literature and art and read books often. Boys should learn the military arts, respect their shogun master, treat their family with respect, eat simply and well, and be physically fit. Girls should learn the art of braiding samurai hair as well as their own, take up sewing, learn to write, and be able to maintain a household independently.

He provides more advice for young men: learn to trust your emotions, and learn to read the emotions of others; pursue moderation and gentleness; choose friends wisely and do not associate with suspect individuals; and most importantly, do not let greed rule one's life, as Musui let it rule his. Let Musui's story be a lesson in this regard. Always be generous with helping others financially. Musui also warns that it is dangerous to aspire to climb the social ladder, which he regards as a form of greed.

However, it is important to pursue prosperity and success for one's family and to engage in worthwhile activities. Musui admits he spent most of his life pursuing worthless activities, and now he has a well-deserved reputation as a ne'er-do-well and a dishonest person. Instead of being angry at people who treat him like this, Musui has gained the wisdom to accept blame for his reputation, and even to wish his enemies and detractors well. This attitude has resulted in a happy home and personal happiness.

Musui praises the ancestors, and especially Lord Tokugawa Ieyasu, for ushering in the present era of prosperity. Everyone should hold the ancestors in such esteem. And everyone should be grateful for the simple things in life, such as a good roof over one's head and having enough to eat, rather than be unhappy and aspire to foolish luxuries.



Childhood

Childhood Summary and Analysis

Musui was born to his father's concubine. She fell out of favor, and so Musui is born in the concubine's family home. His father's wife—who Musui regards as his real mother—takes Musui and gives him to a wet nurse, who then raises him. Musui is very naughty as a child and makes the household angry. In particular, he spends all day swimming in an ornamental pond, making the water muddy. He also steals sweets from his mother.

In another naughty event, when Musui was five he fights with a young boy, Chokichi, who steals and breaks his kite. Musui retaliates by hitting Chokichi in the face with a rock, bloodying him. Musui's father sees this and punishes Musui by tying him to a post and hitting him on the head with a wooden clog. Musui still has the bald spot and dent on his head from the incident.

Musui is officially adopted by the Katsu family at age seven. At that age, he has another fight over a kite, this time with twenty or so boys, who beat him up badly. Shamed by the defeat, Musui strips down and prepares to commit harakiri (ritual suicide) with his toy sword, until he is discouraged by a passing adult. Nevertheless, Musui's resolve impresses the local boys and he becomes their leader.

When Musui is eight, he moves to a rented residence because the family residence near the sea is often flooded. He must put up with his grandmother's constant scolding and nagging. He also gets into plenty more trouble, including a fight with about thirty boys, involving bamboo spears and wooden swords, for which Musui and his brother Tessaku are locked up as punishment by his father.

At nine, Musui travels to take judo lessons. His entire class hates him (probably because he fights all the time), and one time the boys gang up on Musui, tying him to the rafters as they break into his lunch of bean cakes. Musui gets revenge by pissing all over the boys and the cakes from his placed tied up on the rafters.

At ten, Musui learns horseriding and enjoys it greatly. At eleven, he learns swordfighting, and at twelve, he is admitted into the shogunate academy as a student. He is soon dismissed by the teachers because he doesn't want to read and write. He only wants to ride horses. Soon Musui is stealing money from his mother and turning into the "black sheep" of the family. His grandmother continues to make his life hell, and Musui remembers this time with his grandmother as the worst time of his life.



I Run Away

I Run Away Summary and Analysis

At fourteen, Musui decides to run away from home and go to the city of Kyoto. He takes a couple swords, his kimono, and a money belt with some money he steals from his mother. On the way, he falls in with two travelers who invite him to accompany them to Kyoto. They stop at an inn for the night, and Musui awakens to discover the men were thieves and they have stolen his money, swords, and kimono. He now has nothing. Musui spends the day begging for coppers, and after one more day at the inn, he sets off for Ise Shrine on the advice of the innkeeper, who thinks Musui should pray for his own well-being. Musui spends several days homeless, sleeping under trees and begging.

While at Ise, Musui befriends a fellow beggar named Murata. Musui eventually lies to a local priest about his background so that he is given room and board as well as a thousand copper as a "loan." Musui spends some days in the countryside until he is flat broke again. He finds himself outside of Fuchu Castle, where local samurai are practicing riding. He makes fun of their technique and is beaten before showing the samurai his expert horseriding skills. One samurai is impressed and invites Musui into his home to take care of him. Musui again lies about his background. Not content to stick around, Musui steals away in the middle of the night, still intent on reaching Kyoto.

Musui spends many more days wandering with little to eat. Eventually he falls ill with a bad headache and fever. Alone in the countryside, he collapses and nearly dies before a local priest finds him and nurses him back to health. He recovers, but still cannot walk well, and so he uses crutches to hobble around. His health again starts to deteriorate due to his very poor diet of uncooked grains and rice, and he spends most days sleeping. Finally he gets his hands on a sake bottle so that he can cook grain in the bottle, and his health improves.

His fortune also improves when he happens by a brothel. A customer of the brothel takes pity on him and gives him food, a kimono, and some money. However, Musui must soon pawn the kimono for money. And fortune definitely takes a turn for the worse when, one night, Musui sleeps on a mountain face and falls down a cliff in his sleep. He wakes to discover he hit his testicles on a sharp rock. They become badly swollen and he can hardly walk.

In this state, after a few days he lays down from hunger and pain. A group of coolies (laborers) find him and one, named Kiheiji, agrees to hire Musui as a fellow laborer. Musui is nursed back to health in the care of Kiheiji and his wife. Musui spends the next couple of weeks doing work on a fishing boat and running various errands. Kiheiji treats Musui like his own son and invites Musui to officially join his family. At this point, Musui realizes he abandoned a pretty good life as a samurai, and he figures it would be better to return home and beg for forgiveness than to spend the rest of his life as a beggar or



laborer. He leaves the coolie in the middle of the night and spends a couple more weeks begging and sleeping on the ground or wherever he can.

Finally Musui returns home. His father is prepared to disown him, but his superior, the commissioner, believes that Musui's running away was simply a mistake of youth, and that Musui will learn from his mistake and mature. Musui stubbornly refuses to accept medical treatment for his swollen testicles, and as a result spends the next two years housebound with limited mobility and in poor health.



Youth

Youth Summary and Analysis

At age sixteen, Musui is recovered from his testicle problem, and it is decided he should find a career. He goes to the commissioner's office and starts the process. However, through his much older brother's office, Musui comes to know a shady man by the name of Kuboshima Karoku, who introduces him to Edo's "pleasure district" in Yoshiwara (for prostitution). Musui enjoys the experience "immensely," and when annual tax money comes in, Musui and Kuboshima conspire to steal a little of it to use in Yoshiwara. The older brother, Hikoshiro, accuses Musui of the theft, but their father "looks the other way" in order to protect Musui's honor in the face of a relatively small theft.

Next Musui relates the story of visiting his two cousins and meeting their swordsman friend, Genbei. Genbei has heard of Musui's fighting reputation, and asks if they'd like to start a fight at the festival happening at a local shrine. The four men agree and attend the festival looking for any chance to fight. One cousin punches a porter in the nose, and before long the four men are desperately fighting off about forty or fifty armed men vowing revenge for their companion. They manage to escape from town unwounded and having wounded about a dozen men. Musui continues to learn swordfighting from Genbei from that point, and eventually graduates to learning from a well-respected master. Musui spends the next couple of years mastering the sword and using his newfound skills to bully rival fencing schools and, as usual, pick fights.

At seventeen, Musui is asked by his older brother Hikoshiro to be an enforcer and tax collector of sorts, going around the district Hikoshiro oversees to collect rice taxes and deal with any ruffraff. Musui handles a few troublemakers, and all the while his reputation continues to increase from his swordsmanship and duels. Soon Musui has a group of followers from several fencing schools, and he spends many days and nights roaming Japan looking for duels to increase his renown. In particular, Musui relates the story of his victory over a "scoundrel" and bully from the Otani school of fencing, Kobayashi Hayata. Musui beats Kobayashi handily in a duel, and subsequent petty attempts from Kobayashi to ambush Musui on city streets also end in Musui gaining the upper hand. Musui's conquest of Kobayashi cements his reputation as the local swordfighter leader.

At eighteen, Musui takes a wife and moves into his own residence. He is set up by his brother and father and is free of debt. However, Musui's obsession to remain the swordfighter leader and keep up appearances forces him further and further into debt he cannot repay. At twenty-one Musui is near penniless, and he is forced to sell his beloved sword. To take his mind off his problems, Musui increasingly visits the "pleasure district" of Yoshiwara.

I Run Away Again

I Run Away Again Summary and Analysis

Musui decides to run away again. He pawns several possessions, steals some fencing gear from the practice hall, and leaves in the middle of the night. He walks for many days and decides to find the coolie, Kiheiji, who took him in several years ago. Kiheiji is surprised to see the beggar he knew as a samurai. After a day with Kiheiji, Musui goes further west. Travel barriers are set up and permits are needed to travel the provinces, but Musui manages to lie his way past barrier officials. He also manages to stay in an inn by adopting the fictional persona of "Harima-no-kami of Mito." Mito is a famous noble house, and Musui finds that the name gets him influence and favors.

Finding himself in the province of Totomi, Musui seeks out an acquaintance from Edo, named Tatewaki. Tatewaki and his family take Musui in and give him room and board. Musui decides to stay with the family during the hot summer months. In this time, he takes on several fencing students, whose fees pay for his living expenses.

One day, his nephew Shintaro appears on behalf of the Katsu family, and asks Musui to return to Edo. Musui agrees and travels back to his family. On orders of his father, Musui is imprisoned in a large cage set up in the middle of his house. His father believes such an imprisonment will straighten out Musui and teach him what to properly value. For the next three years Musui is thus imprisoned in a cage in his own home, a time he calls "an extremely painful period." He spends the days learning to read and write, including learning military strategies from books. He spends time with various visitors, and he also corresponds in letters with his father. At this time, Musui wishes to relinquish the family headship to his three-year-old son, Rintaro, but his father believes Musui should fully atone for his sins before such a decision. Musui finally earns enough goodwill to be let out of his cage at age twenty-four, after which he again pursues legitimate employment through the commissioner's office.



Adult Years

Adult Years Summary and Analysis

Musui registers with the commissioner for a government post. The commissioner is hesitant based upon Musui's reputation, but ultimately he concedes and agrees to register Musui. However, Musui waits literally years, and still no position comes his way.

Musui builds a house for himself on the property of the Amano family, and finds himself caring for the Amano household after the patriarch dies. He also manages to contain the new widow, who is sleeping around since the death of her husband and causing multiple scandals. Musui wonders why he's doing so much for a family and so little for himself, but he finds that his good deeds begin to create goodwill, and that good deeds are eventually rewarded.

In the meantime, Musui makes a living selling swords and other military supplies. A couple years later, his father dies of a stroke suddenly, and Musui mourns his death. That same year, he meets a priest named Yashida Hyogo, and Musui agrees to help Hyogo start a spiritual organization, the Day of the Boar Association. In a year and a half, Musui manages to get about six hundred people to join. Hyogo decides to hold a festival day, which Musui arranges. During the festival, Hyogo gets drunk and loudly proclaims that he is the only reason for the Day of the Boar Association's success, and not Musui. This enrages Musui and association members must act as mediators, forcing Hyogo to apologize and Musui to accept the apology.

However, Musui perpetuates the fight by calling Hyogo a "back alley priest," and Hyogo's nephew takes offense, challenging Musui to a duel. Musui obliges, and the young nephew runs away in fear. Musui chases him and manages to get locked in a storage room. Again, association members must beg for Musui's apology. Musui leaves the organization, which crumbles, and to this day considers Hyogo to be a second-rate priest. Musui then studies with another holy man who he considers legitimate, named Tonomura, from whom he learns how to commune with spirits and gods.

Some time after, Musui acts as a mentor to Kobayashi Hayata, who he had bested in a duel in his youth. Kobayashi turns sword salesman and fencing teacher under Musui. Also, Musui turns into a mystic of sorts after he is dared by a lowly tailor to perform incantations to guess winning numbers in the local lottery. Musui makes a lot of money by charging peasants to guess lottery numbers, and he makes several pilgrimages to local shrines. Shortly after, Musui next decides to set up a sword association, bringing together sword buyers with those involved in sword making.

Next Musui relates an incident where he is evicted from his house by his landlord, named Yamaguchi Tetsugoro, because Musui discourages Yamaguchi from pursuing a position as district administrator. Musui feels Yamaguchi has neither the money nor the skills to succeed, which Yamaguchi takes offense to. Years later, Yamaguchi is elected



district administrator but fails miserably, validating Musui's prediction. Musui takes pity on the man and helps his family to avoid disgrace from all the debt incurred.

One day, while walking home, Musui's son Rintaro is bitten in the testicles by a dog. The doctors tell Musui that Rintaro will not live, but Musui constantly obsesses over Rintaro and cares for him. Rintaro recovers, and Musui considers the event evidence that great care can cure any ailment.

Musui gets a new landlord, Okuno Magoichiro, and foolishly helps Okuno pay down serious debt. Okuno cannot pay back Musui, and Musui becomes badly in debt himself, and is forced to sell most of his possessions. Nevertheless, when Okuno is forced into retirement, Musui steps up to put his house back in order and try to recover the family name. He goes as far as to help Okuno's son find a wife, which was difficult considering the family name is tarnished.

Musui, initially discouraged, eventually finds success in his sword selling business, treating his suppliers to good meals in order to butter them up and have them lower their rates. In a couple years' time, Musui has paid down his considerable debt through hard work and business acumen.

As if to provide a contrasting merchant story, Musui relates his dealings with a cloth merchant who goes back on his word regarding payment of monies for securing a cloth contract with the shogunate. This cloth merchant is disgraced and forced out of business. It's clear that Musui believes honesty is the best policy.

However, as is often the case, Musui reverts to old ways and ruins his prosperity. He begins to leech off his second-oldest brother, newly appointed district administrator Matsusaka Saburoemon, and spends his days buying luxury items and having fun in the pleasure district. Musui goes over his brother's head and begins advising Saburoemon's son about being a district administrator by writing the young man a letter, which infuriates both Saburoemon and Musui's other older brother, Hikoshiro. Musui lies to his family straight-faced that the letter is a clever forgery. Musui also begins to bribe shady thugs in the pleasure district to follow him and do his bidding.

Musui's family responds by building a cage to imprison him, as his father had done years before. Indignant, Musui elicits sympathy from his family by not only agreeing to the cage, but by swearing to fast and die. His family then dissuades him from entering the cage. Short of committing such a suicide, Musui relinquishes his family headship in shame to his teenaged son Rintaro, essentially retiring. At this time, Musui is thirty-seven years old.



Life After Retirement

Life After Retirement Summary and Analysis

Musui begins his retirement dreaming up money-making schemes. He first takes revenge on his brother Saburoemon, who he guesses convinced his family to build the cage, by forging his seal and stealing a significant sum of money from Saburoemon's rice agent, all without the crime being able to be traced back to Musui. Musui then finds money by lending gambling money to his friends at a high rate of interest—although Musui swears he himself never gambles.

Musui next relates the story of his having fun with a very straitlaced samurai. Musui corrupts the upright man by dragging him to the pleasure district and introducing him to prostitution and smoking. Afterward Musui "struts his stuff" and shows his power and influence in the district to impress the samurai.

The next story of Musui's retirement involves his landlord, Magoichiro. Magoichiro is given to drinking heavily, and his already troubled financial situation becomes worse. A retainer, Josuke, is hired to straighten out the books and try to solve the problem. Musui does not agree with this hiring, but Magoichiro only responds with anger and a threat of eviction. Josuke balances the ledger, but is also suspected of taking a significant sum for himself. Because of this suspicion, and because he can't pay, cheap Magoichiro refuses to pay Josuke, and Josuke responds by burning the ledger book.

What follows is several months of nightmarish fights and squabbles between Josuke and his wife and the Magoichiro family. Josuke tries to petition the local government official to file a grievance and is imprisoned to protect Magoichiro. Josuke's wife is also imprisoned, and both break out at several points only to be re-imprisoned. No one can seem to solve the increasing hostility, and several government officials even retire or get moved to avoid having to deal with the problem. Musui takes particular pleasure in seeing Magoichiro sweat, seeing as how he advised Magoichiro not to hire the man in the first place.

Seemingly out of options, Magoichiro's family begs Musui to intervene. After much prodding, Musui agrees to negotiate with Josuke and promises that the family will not have to pay Josuke if they follow Musui's scheme without question.

Musui visits one of Magoichiro's fiefdoms and convinces the peasants to lend some money, and then he travels to another fiefdom. This fiefdom's peasants are much more reluctant to provide any more money: they are tapped out. Musui spends several weeks playing things very cool and not mentioning money. Musui pays a well-respected magistrate to send messengers with gifts to Musui (who then gives to the peasants), and the peasants are awed that Musui knows such a powerful man.



In the final part of his scheme, Musui wines and dines the village leaders with a lavish dinner, getting them drunk. He then makes the leaders feel guilty about not supporting Magoichiro, as is their duty in a feudal system. Musui finally vows that he will commit suicide out of shame for being unable to solve the Magoichiro problem, and he goes as far as to start the harakiri ritual and raise his dagger to stab himself. The village leaders beg him to stop, and swear they will sell all their possessions to raise the money if only he will promise not to kill himself. Thus Musui successfully tricks the villagers into giving him money for Josuke: he had no intention of actually killing himself.

Musui pays Josuke, who is eternally grateful, and is given a hero's welcome by the Magoichiro clan back in Edo.

Musui's last money-making scheme involves offering protection, American Mafia-style, to brothels in the pleasure district in return for gifts of cash and food. He does quite well, but as usual Musui spends more money than he makes and once again he finds himself in poverty.



Some Other Incidents, and Reflections on My Life

Some Other Incidents, and Reflections on My Life Summary and Analysis

Some Other Incidents: Musui relates a few events before his retirement. One time, Musui raises money to buy a sacred mirror for a local shrine. He entrusts the gathered money to a noble samurai who agrees to donate a large sum of money, but in the morning the man and the money are gone. Musui later learns the man is a known confidence man. In a related event, a couple of Musui's friends get their money stolen by another con man masquerading as a merchant who can make loans. Musui confronts this con man in his richly-decorated house, and reveals he knows how the man got all his luxuries. To silence Musui, the con man gives Musui enough money to repay his friends.

At another time, Musui becomes smitten with a woman and reveals his lust to his wife. His wife tells Musui that she will leave at once to obtain this woman for Musui's happiness. Musui thinks he has a very devoted wife who will do anything for her husband, but after talking to friends for advice, it quickly becomes apparent his wife is probably leaving in order to kill this woman. Musui is able to stop his wife before she goes to murder the woman. The issue is dropped, and Musui resolves to be more considerate toward his wife, including not hitting her every day.

Lastly in this chapter, Musui relates going to a pleasure house and picking a fight with a man named Kuma, who he pushes down a flight of stairs. Kuma's friends back him up and attack Musui. Musui manages to injure a few samurai, though he has some comic difficulty in unsheathing his very long sword from his kimono. Musui admits he has had plenty of other fights and adventures, but he has forgotten the details because they happened so long ago.

Reflections on My Life: Musui is ambivalent about his past exploits and how he has lived his life. In one way, he believes the gods have smiled on him, because despite all the trouble he has caused, at age forty-two he is healthy, happy, and he has a good wife, virtuous son, and family and friends who care for him. And, frankly, he had a lot of fun living large, spending lavish sums of money, and having all the prostitutes he wanted. On the other hand, he has acquired a poor reputation, he has done great harm to his family and friends, he has disrespected his superiors and the shogunate, and he spends his retirement in a "low estate" because of the folly of his youth. Musui hopes that his grandchildren and great-grandchildren will read this account and learn from Musui's mistakes.



Characters

Katsu Kokichi (Musui)

Musui is born to a concubine and subsequently raised by a wet nurse. He is adopted by the Katsu family at age seven. From the youngest of ages, Musui is rambunctious and a troublemaker. When it is time for him to begin samurai training, he would rather fence and ride horses rather than learn and read and write. He runs away from home twice in his youth, and is nearly disowned by his father. In his teens, he becomes an excellent swordsman and uses his skills to pick fights and bully rival fencing schools.

As an adult, Musui never quite rises above his relatively lowly station, despite several schemes to get rich which involve deceit and thievery. Any money he earns is just as quickly spent in the infamous pleasure district on prostitutes and the like. Musui is a disgrace to his family, and especially his two older brothers who are respected government administrators.

Musui is forced to retire in disgrace at the early age of thirty-seven, and his retirement is filled with more adventures with money and brawls. Despite all his troubles, poverty, and bad reputation, Musui considers himself blessed with good health and a fine family, and he looks back upon the follies of his youth with a good deal of pride. In the text, he frequently inflates his importance and claims that entire neighborhoods adore him or fear him, a sentiment which conflicts with the reality of his low station and sometimes comic misadventures.

Hikoshiro

Hikoshiro is Musui's significantly older half-brother. He represents the sort of respectable, civic-minded, and virtuous man that Musui sometimes aspires to be but can never quite become. Hikoshiro is an important administrator who works for the government, who carries out such duties as collecting taxes from peasants and settling disputes. Hikoshiro barely tolerates Musui's laziness, thievery, and deception, and at one point even builds a cage to imprison Musui in when he becomes fed up with Musui's antics. Musui paints this event (the cage building) as the result of Hikoshiro having been fed lies by their other brother, Saburoemon, though it's clear Musui deserves such a punishment.

Hikoshiro hires Musui as an enforcer of sorts, to travel through districts under his control in order to collect taxes and handle any troublemakers. Musui takes the opportunity as another chance to lord his power over peasants and live off the fat of the land without working too hard. On the contrary, Hikoshiro is by all accounts very hard working and family-oriented, following in their father's footsteps. In comparison to Hikoshiro, and to a lesser degree Saburoemon, Musui is certainly the "black sheep" of the family, the one whose next lamentable action is dreaded by his family members. Musui's own petition



for a government post is never fulfilled. However, Musui never expresses any jealousy over his brother's station: he is quite content with the freedom afforded by the life he leads.

Musui's Father

Musui's father is a strict disciplinarian who nearly disowns Musui for running away and his other troubles. Instead, to teach Musui a lesson, the father imprisons Musui in a cage for three years. Musui learns to read and write in this time, and calms down. Despite their battles, Musui is fond of his father, and when he dies Musui observes a long period of mourning.

Musui's Grandmother

Musui recalls his youth living near his grandmother as the very worst time of his life. Grandmother's constant nagging and scolding drives Musui crazy and is one of the reasons he runs away at age fourteen. Later, Musui begins to perform good deeds for his grandmother, and her stance softens somewhat.

Rintaro

Rintaro is Musui's son. When Musui retires at thirty-seven, he gives the family headship to his young son. Musui is relieved that his son turned out to be a virtuous and responsible family man, unlike himself.

Kiheiji

Kiheiji is a "coolie," or unskilled laborer, who Musui runs into during his travels. He spends some time with Kiheiji's family, doing labor on a fishing boat and other errands, but decides the laborer's life is not for him.

Yashida Hyogo

Hyogo is a priest who forms the Day of the Boar association. Musui works hard to increase the membership of the association and schedule events. When Hyogo becomes drunk and claims all the credit for the success of the association, Musui becomes offended and eventually the association and friendship disintegrate.



Kobayashi Hayata

Kobayashi is a rival swordsman who challenges Musui, and who Musui handily defeats. Kobayashi tries to ambush Musui in anger, but Musui defeats these attempts as well. Later in his life, Musui helps Kobayashi gain a following to teach fencing.

Magoichiro

Magoichiro (first the elder, then the younger) is landlord of the estate Musui lives on. Musui helps to straighten out the financial mess the elder Magoichiro becomes enmeshed in. Later, Musui helps the younger Magoichiro out of a nearly impossible dispute with a retainer, Josuke.

Matsusaka Saburoemon

Saburoemon is Musui's second-oldest brother, behind Hikoshiro. Like Hikoshiro, Saburoemon is a local government official who handles tax money. Musui and Saburoemon are constantly at odds with one another, and Musui feels no guilt in swindling Saburoemon of some tax money.



Objects/Places

Aburahori section of Fukugawa

The Aburahori section of Fukugawa is Musui's first childhood home. It is here where Musui gets into his first trouble, muddying the ornamental pond by swimming in it.

Edo

Edo (later Tokyo) is the largest city in Japan, and the one in which Musui spends most of his adult life.

Yoshiwara

Yoshiwara is Edo's pleasure district, where men can find such recreational activities as drinking, smoking, prostitution, and seeing shows like puppet theater and chantings. Musui spends a lot of time and money in this district.

The House Cage

Because of his amorality, Musui's father imprisons Musui for a period of three years in a cage constructed in Musui's own house. Musui learns to read and write during this imprisonment. Later, Musui's older brothers build another cage to jail Musui, but Musui manages to guilt his family out of going through with the imprisonment by pretending he will commit suicide.

Day of the Boar Association

Musui helps a priest named Hyogo get as many as five hundred to six hundred members for the spiritual Day of the Boar Association. When Hyogo claims credit for the association's success, Musui insults the man and eventually the association dissolves.

Swords and Swordfighting

The sword is a central concern in Musui's life as a samurai. He learns swordfighting as a teen and becomes a local swordfighting leader. Later, he sells swords for a living, and eventually creates a trade association which brings together sword buyers and sword makers.



Harakiri

Harakiri is a form of ritual suicide performed by the warrior class during Musui's day because of some sort of shame of failure. No less than three times, Musui uses the threat of harakiri to get his way.

Testicle Infection

When Musui runs away, he sleeps on a mountainside and slips onto a sharp rock which pierces his testicles. They swell up to the point he has difficulty walking, and eventually the infection forces Musui to be essentially housebound for two years, from fourteen to sixteen.

Sacred Mirror

Musui starts a collection in order to buy a sacred mirror for a local shrine. He entrusts the collection to a con man who steals the money.

Commissioner's Office

Musui petitions the commissioner's office for a government post. While the commissioner reluctantly agrees to submit Musui's name for consideration, Musui is never given a position, no doubt due to his reputation.



Themes

Get-Rich-Quick Scheming

Many of Musui's exploits involve troubles with money. This is related to a larger life philosophy which might be summed up best as "easy come, easy go." Musui is seemingly able to amass large amounts of money—though legitimate business enterprise, or through deceit or crime—only to spend it just as quickly, most often on prostitution, but sometimes on failed business ventures, as when he organizes donations for a sacred mirror and gets fleeced by a con man. There is also the fact that much of Musui's wealth (by his own admission) goes toward keeping up appearances by pretending he is wealthier and more important than he is.

Some "get-rich-quick" schemes include: stealing rice money (essentially taxes paid by peasants based upon the amount of rice a fiefdom produces) from his administrator brothers; offering "protection" in exchange for gift money from brothel owners and vendors in the pleasure district; masquerading as a holy man who guesses lottery numbers for peasants in exchange for donations; buying low and selling high in respect to swords and military goods; and lending money to gambling friends at high interest.

Musui endears himself to the reader with this constant scheming. The reader admires his tenacity and entrepreneurial spirit and roots for the underdog trying to better himself only to be undermined by his own flaws.

A Life Well Lived?

Musui spends significant portions of the text, especially the first and last chapters, reflecting on his life and whether it has been a life well lived. In society's view, the answer is clearly no: he is a thief, a con man, a rabble rouser, and is constantly in debt. He disrespects his family, never gets a government post, and spends much too much time in the pleasure district. Musui demonstrates regret at his resulting poor reputation and the harm he has caused his family. He does not wish for any of his descendents to repeat his mistakes, and this wish is ostensibly a major reason why he endeavored to write his story in the first place.

At the same time, Musui believes the gods have favored him. Despite all his wickedness, all the fights, all the bad debt, at the time of the writing he is forty-two, in good health, he has a son who is virtuous and who takes care of him, and he is having a pleasant retirement surrounded by family and friends.

In the end, Musui is a reformed man who nevertheless still has a strong sense of pride and nostalgia for the rowdy life he lived. He lived above his means, and at one point he brags, "No other samurai with such a low stipend spent money as I did," (p. 156). His debt, like his fights or misadventures, is a sort of badge of honor, an indication that he packed a lot into his life.



Temptation, Virtue, and Relapse

Like his rags to riches back to rags financial career, Musui experiences a roller coaster ride with respect to personal morality. Musui frequently tries to stick to a righteous and moral path, only to stray from that path in sometimes spectacular fashion. For example, Musui spends much time in a laudable spiritual quest to commune with the gods and meditate on the questions of existence with his mentor Tonomura. However, he sees Tonomura providing lottery numbers to peasants through his spiritualism and realizes his once-noble pursuit can be a way to make money, and so he abandons any spiritualism for deceitful profiteering. There is another example when Musui trains for fencing as a young man. He brings several young men under his tutelage, teaching them the nobler aspects of the samurai, the value of camaraderie and honor, etc., but then he uses his sword skills to begin bullying other schools and picking fights.

This struggle is constantly at play in Musui's Story. He can laugh at his landlord's folly in dealing with a troublesome retainer, only to next spend several months aiding the landlord. He starts a spiritual organization (The Day of the Boar Association) and spends a year or more of his life building its membership, and then he wastes all that work by bullying and insulting the priest.

Musui's Story in this respect is the story of an inherently wicked man who tries to do right but whose very nature pulls him down into amorality. Only through a lifetime of painful trial and error is Musui able to contain this wicked nature and let reason rather than impulse rule his actions.



Style

Perspective

Musui's Story is told in the first-person. This is the autobiographical account of samurai Katsu Kokichi (later Musui), told directly from Musui himself as he tells stories from his life. There is a strong (however unintentional) sense of the unreliable narrator in the book. Perhaps wishing to paint himself in the best light for posterity, Musui is always quick to justify the worst sins he commits. A fencer he bullies may be portrayed as a bully in his own right. Or Musui's refusal to help his landlord out of a financial issue may be motivated by the landlord's cruel behavior towards Musui before the trouble started. Stealing from his brother is framed as simple payback for the wrongs committed to him. Also, Musui's grandmother's scoldings are framed as a product of innate meanness rather than anything Musui did to deserve such scoldings.

There are also several incongruous moments in the text wherein Musui brags about his standing in the local neighborhood, or how everyone respects or fears him, when in fact other aspects of the text seem to contradict such a conclusion. Every indication is that Musui is artificially "pumping himself up" in order to appear bolder, smarter, and more virtuous than he actually is, a deception which would be entirely appropriate given Musui's own shady character.

Tone

Tone is difficult to ascertain in a relatively creative translation such as this in which the translator has taken significant liberties in order to make the text accessible to a modern Western reader. However, the reader can conclude that tone is located somewhere between swagger and shame, and usually closer to swagger. Musui strikes the "correct" and traditional tone in his prologue and epilogue by properly venerating the ancestors and warning his reader not to follow in his footsteps. However, in the actual relating of events, Musui comes across as rather proud of his accomplishments, and pleased with the success of his trickery or his cleverness at not being caught stealing, etc. There is an undeniable sense that Musui, despite the poverty and harm to his reputation, had a lot of fun, and a sense of this fun and adventure is imparted to the audience. Musui takes everything in stride, and for Musui any periods of poverty are offset by periods of quick wealth when he is able to enjoy the pleasure district and impress friends with lavish spending.

However, as if to avoid the controversy of celebrating such a rowdy life, Musui is usually quick to temper the fun with sober assessments of the damage Musui did to his family, or how his behavior prevented him from obtaining a government post. Apologetic elements feel only half-hearted, however, and only inserted for the sake of what a modern reader might call "political correctness."

Structure

Musui's Story is divided into nine sections. The first and last sections can be viewed as a prologue and epilogue, and they have similar goals. The prologue seeks to set out why Musui has written down an account of his life, and how he hopes this account can be valuable in teaching others how to live life. In the epilogue, Musui restates his hope about the value of the text, and expresses ambivalence towards the decisions he has made.

Between these two bookending sections, Musui's Story proceeds in roughly chronological order, though "Some Other Incidents" is inserted as a sort of afterthought, and properly belongs under the "Adult Years" heading. Musui begins with his birth to a concubine, proceeds through his youth and two runaway attempts, relates the follies of his adult years, and then finally relates what has happened since he retired at the age of thirty-seven.

Events are usually provided as only loosely connected anecdotes. Most of Musui's misadventures are complete tales in their own right, and as such these tales can stand on their own and do not depend upon context. Appropriately, Musui and his attitude toward life changes little throughout the text. Most events revolve around getting money through some trickery or scheme, or Musui getting into trouble or fights.



Quotes

"Do not consort with useless friends. Be discreet in your conversation. Respect your superiors. Keep things to yourself. Venerate your ancestors and take care that no sacrilege is committed. Arrive at your place of work one hour early." Prologue, p. 3

"Children and grandchildren—heed my advice. As I have said, I am altogether ignorant when it comes to writing difficult characters and have made many errors in setting down this record. Read it, nevertheless, with great thought and care." Prologue, p. 8

"My grandmother by adoption had been known for her mean disposition from the time she was a young girl. It was said that she drove both of my adoptive parents to an early death. She was nasty to me, too, and nagged and scolded day after day." Childhood, p. 14

"A doctor was sent for. After examining me, he said, 'Now, is there something you want to tell me about yourself below the waist?' My testicles were still in bad shape, but I stubbornly denied any trouble. Within three months, however, they had become so infected that I could no longer move about. I had to stay home for the next two years." I Run Away, p. 42

"I demolished every good-for-nothing in my own neighborhood of Honjo. Everybody obeyed me. I feared absolutely no one. But all this took a lot of money—appearances had to be kept up—and I fell further and further into debt." Youth, p. 60

"Of one thing I was certain—I had nothing to fear, for in setting out on my travels around Japan, I had resolved that if need be I would die by the sword." I Run Away Again, p. 65

"How many people I helped I'll never know, but it paid off nicely years later when I traveled in the provinces. No matter where I went, I was recognized and treated exceedingly well." Adult Years, p. 73

"You see, around where I live in Honjo, I'm well known and regarded as a hero of sorts. The fact is that people who don't know me are looked down upon. But after a humiliation like this, I could never show my face to my fellow men. I will fast and die as soon as possible." Adult Years, p. 107

"I probed around and became fairly certain that Saburoemon and his family had been

behind [trying to put Musui in a cage], peddling tales to Hikoshiro and even feeding him lies, all in revenge for their humiliation the year before. Well, then, I could teach them a lesson, too." *Life After Retirement*, p. 109

"[I]t had gotten so that anyone who wanted to set up shop or conduct business in the area felt obliged to send me 'gift money.' It was all very simple—I was the boss of the entire neighborhood." *Life After Retirement*, p. 145

"[I]f samurai insist on walking around with their noses stuck up in the air, they'll never learn what's what in this world." *Some Other Incidents*, p. 151

"Although I indulged in every manner of folly and nonsense in my lifetime, Heaven seems not to have punished me as of yet. Here I am, forty-two, sound of health and without a scratch on my body." *Reflections on My Life*, p. 156

Topics for Discussion

How does Musui feel about the life he has lived? Has he lived life to its fullest? Did he live life in the best way possible?

What are some pieces of advice that Musui gives to those reading his autobiography? What does he hope that readers will take away from his story?

In what ways is Musui an unreliable narrator?

Describe how Musui is able to resolve the dispute between his landlord Magoichiro and Josuke.

Describe three ways in which Musui tries to earn money. Why is Musui never able to amass wealth of any significance?

What philosophy does Musui eventually arrive at in respect to good deeds and helping people?

In what three instances does Musui use the threat of committing harakiri (suicide) to get his way?