Swaddling Clothes Study Guide

Swaddling Clothes by Yukio Mishima

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Yukio Mishima's "Swaddling Clothes" was first published in Japan in 1955 in the highbrow literary journal *Bungei*. Its first English language publication appeared in *Today's Japan,* 1960, translated by Ivan Morris. The original Japanese title, "Shinbun-gami" simply means "newspapers" and the story's standard English title is an interpretive translation by Morris. It has since been included in several English translations of Mishima's work such as *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories* (1966). By 1955, Mishima was already a well-known literary figure, having received much attention and acclaim for his autobiographical *Confessions of a Mask* (1949) and *Kinjiki* [also known as *Forbidden Colors* (1951)]. During this early period, Mishima's works had not yet taken a decidedly political turn and were more interested in personal exploration and the nihilist aesthetics of the Roman-ha group (or "Japanese Romanticists") who took Mishima under their wing.

It would be difficult to exactly locate when Mishima's works became overtly political and whether or not Mishima even intended his early works to be characterized as such. But "Swaddling Clothes," published one year prior to *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion,* which is generally considered to criticize western importation of modernization and degraded moral values into Japan, and just ten years after Japan's devastating loss in World War II, can be read as political critique. "Swaddling Clothes" is a story replete with contrasts: tradition and modernization; sensitivity and callousness; morality and amorality; genuineness and artificiality; wealth and poverty. Through the author's omniscient narration of Toshiko's thoughts and the physical assault on Toshiko at the end of the story, Mishima offers a vision of modernization and change ushered in by western countries that is unwelcome and violent. The ambiguous ending (Is Toshiko raped? Does she die? Or, does she survive the attack and perhaps retaliate?) asks the reader to weigh the benefits and losses of change and modernization in a rapidly globalizing world and imagine what the fate of traditional values and ethics might be.

Author Biography

Born Kimitake Hiraoka, Yukio Mishima was born into an upper-class family and raised primarily by his possessive grandmother who was a descendent by marriage of the Tokugawas, the ruling family of feudal, samurai-governed Japan from the seventeenth century to 1868. Though Mishima and his grandmother lived in the same house as his parents, she raised him in relative isolation in her private ground floor chambers where she often lay ill with her grandson tending her. Mishima published his first long work, *Hanazakari no Mori* (*The Forest in Full Bloom*) in 1944 when he was only nineteen years old.

Mishima's pseudonym was chosen by Fumio Shimizu, an editor of the literary magazine that the *The Forest in Full Bloom* first appeared in, and teacher at the prestigious Gakushuin (Peers School) in Tokyo where Mishima excelled in writing and literary studies. The pseudonym was chosen for its romantic evocations: "Mishima" is the name of the town which reputedly affords the most splendid view of Mt. Fuji and "Yukio" derives from "yuki" meaning snow. Having written over 100 novels, plays, short stories, and essays in his short lifetime, Mishima rocketed to popular and highbrow literary renown in Japan and English speaking countries (Mishima is the most highly translated Japanese author into English) and was recommended for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968, losing to his mentor and literary sponsor, Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972), the first Japanese citizen to win the prize. After receiving a law degree from Tokyo University and working briefly in a prestigious position at the Ministry of Finance, Mishima dedicated his life full-time to writing.

Throughout his literary career, Mishima was a highly visible public figure, at times associated, intentionally or not, with controversial aesthetics, politics, and highly publicized personal "pursuits." For example, in 1955 Mishima embarked on a rigorous program of bodybuilding, in fulfillment of his dedication to the philosophy of *bunburyodo*, the samurai philosophy of the "dual way of Art and Action." Showing off his newly formed muscular body, Mishima posed nude and semi-nude for a controversial book of photographs, *Ba-ra-kei*, (*Ordeal by Roses*) taken by Eikoh Hosoe and published in the United States in 1985. Mishima was deeply interested in reviving samurai ethics in modern, democratizing Japan, and this desire may have stemmed from the influence of his grandmother. In 1966, Mishima's "Yokuku" ("Patriotism") was published and included a graphic and protracted dramatization of the main characters' *seppuku*, ritual suicide by disembowelment, a practice also dictated by samurai codes of honor and that Mishima himself would commit in 1970.

Critics often describe two of Mishima's autobiographical works as embodying the "Mishima aesthetic": his first full length novel *Kamen no Kokuhaku* [*Confessions of a Mask* (1949)] and a tetralogy that he worked on over four years *The Sea of Fertility* (1966-1970). These works explored the impossibility of beauty, purity, tradition, virtue, and spiritual satisfaction in a rapidly modernizing Japan, and nihilistically looked towards death and destruction as solutions to these problems. For example, in *Kinkakuji* [*Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956)] the protagonist burns down the sacred

temple when he realizes the untenability of maintaining the pureness of its beauty in post-World War II Japan. In fact, he had hoped that it would be destroyed during the American air-raids and when it survives, he chooses to destroy the temple himself in order to prevent its contamination by the western-influenced social, economic, and political structure that Japan would shortly adopt. The explicit discussion of homosexuality in *Confessions* and other works is also viewed as addressing the general alienation of the post-war Japanese citizen. Mishima's frank treatment of homosexuality also became the source of many exaggerated rumors about his sexual promiscuity. In 1958, upon learning that his mother was dying of cancer, which turned out to be a misdiagnosis, Mishima married Yoko Sugiyama and had two children.

Mishima maintained close personal and public relationships with conservative politicians, such as the Defense Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone, and in 1968 formed a civilian militia, the *Tatenokai*, that was dedicated to reviving the divine power of the Emperor. The *Tatenokai* rebuked the current tenets of the new Constitution, as dictated by the United States after the Japanese defeat in World War II, which forced the Emperor to admit that he was a mere human functionary of the state. "Shinbun-ga mi" ("Swaddling Clothes") dramatizes some of the negative consequences resulting from the nation's enforced democratization and weakened allegiance to the Emperor. While the late years of his life were overtly dedicated to "political" causes, Mishima claimed his earlier works were primarily concerned with aesthetics, and frequently denied connection with right-wing groups that found support in his works. Nevertheless, Mishima spent the last years of his life organizing and training the *Tatenokai* under the auspices of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party who allowed the group to train with the *Jieitai*, the National Self-Defense Army.

On November 25, 1970, shortly after he finished *Tennin Gosui* (*The Decay of an Angel*), the last segment of *The Sea of Fertility*, Mishima and the *Tatenokai* entered the *Jieitai*'s Tokyo headquarters under a premise of a friendly meeting. They held General Kanetoshi Mashita hostage in his own office and demanded that he assemble a large audience of *Jieitai* soldiers to hear Mishima's planned speech. Mashita's men carried out the demands and though Mishima successfully delivered a thirty minute address inciting the Japanese soldiers to reject the American written Constitution and revive *kokutai* (the institution of the divine Emperor), Mishima perceived his revolutionary speech to be a failure as the soldiers booed and jeered at him. Dismayed by the western, political liberalism and apathy of the soldiers, Mishima returned to the General's office and committed *seppuku*, with the cooperation of his *Tatenokai* second-in-command, Masakatsu Morita, who also beheaded himself. The General and his men were left unharmed. It is unclear whether Mishima's speech was a genuine call to revolution or a dramatic and romantic fulfillment of the samurai ethic that required its adherents to commit suicide rather than face dishonor.

Plot Summary

"Swaddling Clothes" is Toshiko's story. In fact, she is the only character that is named throughout the narrative. As Toshiko rides home alone in a taxi, she sorrowfully contemplates the details of "the incident." The nurse she and her husband had hired to take care of their son has given birth to an illegitimate baby in their house, revealing nothing of her pregnancy until the moment of delivery. Toshiko is saddened by the attenuation of moral values in modern Japanese society as she contemplates the nurse's situation and her husband's blithe treatment of the event.

Unlike his wife, Toshiko's husband, a handsome, popular actor, is seemingly undismayed by "the incident" and freely chatters about it to his friends as if it were nothing more than fodder for entertainment. Toshiko feels alienated from her husband not only for his inability to share her concern for the nurse's apparent loss of moral values in modern society, but also for his own lighthearted, non-reflective participation in modern, "western" influenced life. Toshiko's husband's acceptance of and participation in modern western culture is also expressed through the American style clothing he wears and the "western" style, parquet-floored house he chooses to live in.

Observing the scenery on the ride home, Toshiko also notes the damage modernization has wrought on the landscape of Japan. Parting from her husband, she notices the fake, paper cherry blossoms that decorate an entertainment district theater and compares them to the real cherry blossoms "in all their purity" lining the park adjacent to the Imperial Palace, which stands against a background of glittering office buildings. In contrast to the solemn, looming figure of the Imperial Palace, the surrounding park is littered with empty bottles and waste paper, and populated by vagrants.

Another contrast that Toshiko ponders on is the immense rift between a young boy born in material privilege, like her own son, and one born in poverty and shame, such as the nurse's baby. She accepts that these two babies can only live in mutually exclusive worlds divided by class where they can only interact through violence. She imagines the future of the illegitimate baby as being desolate and eventually ending in a life of crime. She is jolted by fear thinking about the potential chance meeting of her own educated and privileged son with the nurse's baby, a meeting she imagines would inevitably result in the "other boy" assaulting or murdering her son.

Unsettled by her wandering thoughts, Toshiko capriciously stops the cab and gets out at the park, despite the impropriety for a young, married woman to be walking alone at night. She meanders through the park thinking about the nurse's baby and the newspapers that the doctor had disrespectfully wrapped him in. Having sympathy for the baby, Toshiko had replaced the newspaper "swaddling clothes" with a piece of new flannel cloth.

Toshiko's thoughts take an eerie manifestation as she comes across a homeless youth sleeping on a park bench. He has blanketed himself in newspapers for warmth, and the white bundle on the bench reminds Toshiko first of cherry blossoms and then of the

newspaper "swaddling clothes." Toshiko imagines that this is what the nurse's baby will grow up to be—a homeless, poverty-stricken and criminal vagrant. Startled that "all her fears and premonitions had suddenly taken concrete form," but curious, Toshiko dangerously approaches the sleeping figure to get a closer look. The youth is awakened by Toshiko's gaze and seizes her. The story ends at this point making it unclear whether Toshiko is murdered, raped, or both, but at any rate, concluding on a note of violence.

Characters

Homeless Youth

Like the babies in the story, the homeless youth functions more as a symbol than a character. Sleeping on a park bench, his ragged body covered in newspapers for warmth, he forms a stark contrast to the luxurious Imperial Palace looming in the background. Bundled in newspapers, he reminds Toshiko of the nurse's baby and is the immediate manifestation of the crime, poverty, and ignominy that the illegitimate baby will inevitably inherit in a social system divided by class. As if to confirm Toshiko's fears that different classes can only interact through violence, the homeless youth attacks Toshiko and most likely murders or rapes her.

The Nurse

The Nurse that Toshiko and her husband hire to tend to their baby lies about her pregnancy, claiming that her stomach is swollen because of "gastric dilation." Like Toshiko's husband, she seems unconcerned with the moral implications of her pregnancy and delivery out of wedlock. She carries on in high spirits, even using her "stomach ailment" as an excuse to eat heartily. Her pregnancy remains a secret until the day of her delivery when she is found in the nursery delivering her child. Negligent not only of her own self-respect and the respect of her employers, the nurse gives birth next to Toshiko's son's crib, while the boy looks on, frightened and crying. Like Toshiko's husband, the nurse is a character who has been negatively affected by modern, westernized Japanese life. In her case, she is depicted as dismissing traditional moral values by engaging in sex outside of marriage.

Toshiko

"Swaddling Clothes" is narrated in the third person author omniscient, centering around the character of Toshiko, the wife of a handsome and successful Japanese actor. Toshiko has been raised and continues to live in material luxury, but despite her "easy" and "painless" lifestyle, or perhaps because of it, she suffers from a "delicacy of spirit."

Of all the characters in the story, Toshiko is the most thoughtful and sensitive. During the lonely taxi-ride home, Toshiko is depressed by her inattentive husband, her modern, westernized lifestyle, and the recollection of the agonizing "incident"—the birth of an illegitimate baby by Toshiko's new nursemaid—and morosely contemplates the loss of tradition and moral values in the people surrounding her. Toshiko is upset that her husband had trivialized "the incident" into a laughable and grotesque story for the entertainment of his friends. She feels great sympathy for the newborn, having replaced the degrading newspaper "swaddling clothes" that the doctor wrapped the baby in with a new piece of flannel from her own cupboard. She mourns the shameful history that the child will have to live with as an adult, and compares his bleak future with that of her

own privileged son. Toshiko implicitly longs for the more conservative and traditional days of the past, unaffected by modernization and its attendant loss of tradition and moral values.

Toshiko's husband

Toshiko's actor husband is never named, perhaps to help portray him as a general typification of morally remiss "modernization" and to offer a contrast to his sensitive, sympathetic and contemplative wife. Toshiko's husband participates in only two actions: sending his wife home alone and trivializing and laughing at "the incident." In fact, Toshiko's husband "flamboyantly" repeats the story of the illegitimate baby to his friends at the nightclub "as if it were no more than an amusing incident which they (Toshiko and her husband) chanced to have witnessed." To Toshiko's husband, an entertainer himself, "the incident" evokes none of the deep ethical concerns that it does for Toshiko. Like the brash band that plays at the nightclub, "the incident" is little more than another source of consumable entertainment for Toshiko's husband and his friends.

Toshiko's husband's insensitive behavior is associated with his "modern" lifestyle and attitude. He is described as wearing a "garish" American-style suit and choosing to live in a cold, "unhomely" western style house. He is entirely self-centered, spending his time "dashing off to appointments" and socializing in the entertainment district, rather than going home to spend time with his wife.

Toshiko's Son and the Nurse's Illegitimate Baby

The two babies described in "Swaddling Clothes" are not properly "characters" as they do not directly participate in the narrative action, but they are important and central symbols of the story. Like his mother, the newspaper-wrapped baby represents the degradation of moral values in modern, westernized Japan. According to Toshiko, the illegitimate baby has little chance to overcome class barriers and is unlikely to grow up into a "respectable citizen" because of his ignoble birth. In contrast, Toshiko's son, because of his birth into a wealthy upper-class family, will have access to opportunities for social and economic success.

Though Toshiko feels much sympathy for the illegitimate baby, she does not challenge the existing social system that excludes and limits individuals on the basis of class, a system inherited from the feudal period of Japan. Imagining the meeting of her son with the nurse's baby in twenty years, Toshiko believes such a meeting will inevitably result in a violent and fatal "clash" with the nurse's baby, likely grown up into a criminal, murdering her own son. The violence between the two boys represents the larger violence between classes in a society rigidly stratified by class.

Themes

Culture Clash: Japanese Tradition vs. Western Modernization

The "culture clash" depicted in "Swaddling Clothes" is unique because it is expressed through the struggle of traditional Japanese morals and ethics sustaining itself under the powerful influence of western modernization. In this story, modernization of Japanese social life is represented primarily as an unwelcome import from the west. As the figure who most readily embraces western, modern influence, Toshiko's husband is portrayed negatively. Unaffected by the nurse's loss of moral values, he recounts "the incident" with humor and nonchalance to his nightclub friends, commenting that he was more worried that his "good rug" would be ruined. He wears American clothes that strike Toshiko as "garish" and chooses to live in a western style house. Toshiko reflects: "she dreaded going back to their house, unhomely with its Western-style furniture and with the bloodstains still showing on the floor."

This sentence is revealing because it closely associates a western-influenced lifestyle with an image of violence ("bloodstains"). The implication is that westernization/modernization is a damaging process that brings violence and bloodshed into private and public Japanese life. As the nurse has scandalously conceived and delivered out of wedlock, she is a symbol of the loss of moral values in modern society. The implication is that western modernization is also responsible for weakening traditional, Japanese moral values. In this context, the birth of the illegitimate boy is represented as a moment of bloodshed. Toshiko comments, "it was a scene fit for a butchershop." The association of western influence in Japan with violence evokes the literal violence used by American Naval Commodore Matthew Perry in 1853 to open Japanese trade ports to the west.

Western induced modernization and the loss of traditional Japanese mores and ethics is symbolized through the images of newspapers, trash, and cherry blossoms. The cherry blossoms that Toshiko sees around her are mostly fake and artificial as she notices that it is "depressingly obvious" that the cherry blossoms decorating an entertainment district theater are "merely scraps of white paper." At this realization, Toshiko goes into the park to cheer herself up by absorbing herself in the atmosphere of the real cherry blossoms that line the park. But their natural splendor is obscured by the electric light bulbs that have been installed in the trees which "shone dully beneath the blossoms." Her attention is also drawn to the litter and trash lining the park grounds and the crumpled up newspapers that cover the homeless youth. At first she mistakes the hunched figure for a pile of cherry blossoms and then is reminded of the newspapers in which the doctor had spitefully wrapped the nurse's baby.

This progression of images that assault Toshiko's line of vision—fake cherry blossoms, gaudy light bulbs, trash, newspapers—implies that Japanese society has been so degraded by westernization/ modernization that real cherry blossoms no longer adorn

the Japanese landscape; they have either been replaced by artificial ones or obscured by garish modern decoration or waste. As a long cherished and popular flower of Asian cultures, cherry blossoms "in all their purity" represent both the purity and delicacy of Japanese traditional culture and their degradation symbolizes the decay of this culture. Mishima uses cherry blossoms in particular—a flower that is only in full bloom once a year and whose blossoms are swiftly washed away after the first spring rain—because they represent the vulnerable and delicate project of maintaining tradition. The implication here is that with the ubiquity of litter and trash in the modern environment, real cherry blossoms may not have the opportunity to bloom again. This inauspicious vision of Japan's so-called modern "progress" is expressed in Toshiko's thoughts: "thoughts of the future made Toshiko feel cold and miserable."

Sex and Gender Roles

"Swaddling Clothes" casts a negative light on female reproduction and sexuality, or at least that which is outside of the proper domain of marriage. In addition, Toshiko's husband describes the birth through images of animalistic "squatting" and "groaning" and even likens the nurse to a cow and a "stuck pig," invoked for the mocking pleasure of his friends. The nurse is generally characterized in two ways: as a scandalous woman who gave birth without a husband and as the butt of a joke. In this way, while the negative portrayal of the nurse offers a critique of the loss of morals in a modernizing society, not only has she expressed her sexuality outside of marriage but she is not particularly ashamed of herself (she deceitfully laughs off her swollen stomach as "gastric dilation"), the burden of maintaining traditional values falls on the women in the story. When women fail to do so, they are stripped of any modicum of respect and subjected to public ridicule like the nurse. Having no voice in this story, the nurse is not given a chance to defend her situation.

Toshiko is also criticized and even punished for her impropriety, although more indirectly. For the most part, Toshiko is an obedient representative of conservatism and tradition as the bulk of the story focuses on her disenchantment with the modernization around her. Nonetheless, Toshiko is inspired to get out of the taxi and wander around the park grounds, fully aware of the impropriety of this action but momentarily in desperate need to break out of such boundaries. Yet Toshiko's impropriety not only fails to ameliorate her confusion, it also results in her assault and/or murder. The "moral" here is reminiscent of that of the popular fairy tale *Bluebeard*. Like Bluebeard's wife, Toshiko is violently punished for stepping out of conventional boundaries and attempting to satisfy her curiosity. "Swaddling Clothes" concludes on this note: "[S]uddenly [she] had an overmastering desire to get a glimpse of [the homeless youth] . . . But Toshiko had approached too close. In the silent night the newspaper bedding rustled, and abruptly the man opened his eyes. Seeing the young woman standing directly beside him, he raised himself with a jerk, and his eyes lit up. A second later a powerful hand reached out and seized Toshiko by her slender wrist." Again, the burden of upholding propriety and tradition falls on women and they are punished when they fail to do so. In contrast, Toshiko's husband, like the nurse, is also a figure that has embraced

decadent, modern values, but he suffers little for his behavior. On the contrary, he appears complacent as well as economically and socially successful.

Class Conflict

Despite the modernization and change that Toshiko bemoans in this story, one "traditional" structure that remains intact is the rigid class system of Japan. As a feudal country before the rise of the western-influenced Meiji government (1868), Japa-nese society was unequivocally demarcated by class, with the military samurai on top and their agricultural vassals on bottom. Mishima tended to romanticize this social structure, ignoring the often harsh and exploitative treatment of the vassals by the ruling class, envisioning it as a harmonious system where each Imperial subject knew his/her class position and dutifully fulfilled its requirements.

Though Toshiko is in some regards a "progressive" figure (she is uneasy with the role assigned to her as a refined, upper-class housewife and mother) she is primarily the story's main proponent of holding on to tradition, evidenced by her gloomy thoughts on the transformation of Japanese society. Though she feels sympathy for the illegitimate child and even makes an attempt to help him by replacing the ignominious newspaper "swaddling clothes" with a piece of her own cloth, she holds on to the belief that the child can never break out of his low class standing. She perceives his future as hopeless because of the ignoble conditions of his birth: "He will be living a desolate, hopeless, poverty-stricken existence—a lonely rat. What else could happen to a baby who has had such a birth?" Furthermore, she envisions the meeting of her "fine, carefully educated" son with the nurse's baby as a violent struggle: "Say twenty years from now . . . one day by a quirk of fate [my son] meets the other boy, who then will also have turned twenty. And say that the other boy, who has been sinned against, savagely stabs him with a knife . . . " In this way, Toshiko does not question or challenge the still existing rigid class structure of Japanese society, though somewhat modified since feudal times, and even supports the strict separation and division of classes as evidenced by her frightful vision of the struggle that would inevitably ensue from their interaction.

Style

Point of View and Fragmented Narration

"Swaddling Clothes" is not narrated in a straightforward, linear style. While the present action of the narrative is generally progressive (Toshiko leaving the nightclub and heading home in a taxi), the linear progression of events is interrupted by Toshiko's memories and contemplations. The nurse's delivery is also recounted in pieces and from different points of view (Toshiko and her husband's) offering the reader a comparison of the character's attitudes.

There are many reasons why an author may choose to disrupt a traditional, linear narrative with fragmented memories and contemplations—for instance, to use the present action as a mere premise for unearthing the past, to underscore the difficulty and painfulness of remembering the past, or to stress the discontinuity of a character's experience. In this way, a fragmented narrative style can emphasize major themes within the story. For example, Asian-American literature that dramatizes the arduous and often interrupted and diverted journeys of immigrants across North America often uses fragmented narrative styles to enhance the feeling of discomfit and unsettlement in American culture. In "Swaddling Clothes," Toshiko is afraid of the future, as the narrator comments "thoughts of the future made Toshiko feel cold and miserable," because she anticipates only increased violence, bloodshed, and loss of moral values in the rapidly modernizing Japanese society. In this context, the frequent interruption of the present action by Toshiko's memories, projections and meandering thoughts emphasizes her unwillingness to move forward in time into an inauspicious future.

Symbolism and Setting

Much of the symbolism in "Swaddling Clothes" is achieved through elements of setting and their contrasts. Each place or piece of the Japanese landscape that Toshiko views from the taxi window are symbols of tradition and its decay through the oppressions of modernization: for instance, the tacky entertainment district versus the solemn, stately Imperial Palace, and the organic, comforting structure of the Imperial Palace versus the cold and uninviting, ultra-modern skyscrapers in the background. The visual contrast of these structures standing together symbolizes the chaos and incongruence Toshiko feels in a modernizing society that seems to have irretrievably abjured its culture and tradition. The park in front of the Imperial Palace contains many internal contrasts also symbolic of this chaotic transformation. While the park has preserved its splendid vista of cherry blossoms, the trees are decorated by garish, colored light bulbs, reminiscent of the "pinpricks of light" emanating from the stark, modern office buildings, and the park grounds are littered with bottles, waste paper, and sleeping vagrants.

Waste paper, newspapers, and cherry blossoms form the central group of symbols of the story. The crumpled up trash reminds Toshiko of the "mere scraps of white paper"

that have been crafted into fake cherry blossoms to decorate a theater, and the newspapers that cover the homeless youth remind her of both cherry blossoms and the shameful newspaper "swaddling clothes" of the illegitimate baby. It seems to Toshiko that the Japanese environment is no longer naturally adorned by real cherry blossoms, which represent the purity of Japanese culture and tradition, and is now instead "decorated" with trash and newspapers, representing the contamination of that culture and tradition. In other words, cherry blossoms have been degraded—made artifi-cial or replaced by the waste products of a careless modern culture.

Another symbol of purity that suffers degradation is the figure of the newborn baby. Conventionally, babies and births connote joy and celebration, but in "Swaddling Clothes," the nurse's delivery is perceived as a violent scene of bloodshed by Toshiko and a laughably grotesque vision of mockery by Toshiko's husband. The nurse's baby wrapped in soiled newspapers embodies not only the nurse's loss of moral values, but the staining and contamination of Japanese society's future. Toshiko comments: "Those soiled newspaper swaddling clothes will be the symbol of his [the illegitimate baby's] entire life." The figure of the homeless youth curled up on the park bench under a layer of newspapers echoes this earlier symbol, and as Toshiko imagines it, is the manifestation of the poverty and crime that the nurse's baby will no doubt grow up in.

A Modern Parable

"Swaddling Clothes" functions as a modern parable or allegory, a pithy moralization of general social problems through a specific and concrete story. By imbuing various objects and places with symbolism, the story not only dramatizes a particular incident in one woman's life, but can be widely applied to society in general. In this way, Toshiko's experience is presented as a *universal* truth, to which society as a whole can broadly relate. The function of a parable is also to provide a moral lesson. The lesson or "message" in "Swaddling Clothes" warns of the destructive effects of western-induced modernization.

Historical Context

Art in a Political World

The Japan that Mishima lived and worked in had little reprieve from political upheavals. As an adolescent, Mishima would have been aware of the NiNi Roku Incident or the February 26th Incident (1936), a violent resistance movement that resulted in numerous deaths including the assassination of three high-ranking government officials when a military faction attempted to resist a large transfer of their group out of Tokyo by officials whom they claimed sought to attenuate the Emperor's power. In 1945, when Mishima was twenty years old, he witnessed the surrender of Japan to the United States which was radio broadcast nationwide by Hirohito on August 15, 1945. Japan was to be occupied by United States military from 1945-1952 and forced to accept an American written Constitution that dictated radical changes in the country's political structure. For one, Japan could no longer have a standing military force, although they were allowed to maintain a "self-defense" army, the *Jieitai*. The previously Emperor-centered government was turned into a western style "democracy" and the Emperor, while being permitted to remain on the throne and given immunity from prosecution as a war criminal, was forced to renounce his rule by divine authority and declare that he was a mere functionary of the state. This announcement, the *ningen singen*, occurred on January 1, 1946 and deeply affected Mishima as he dedicated several of his later works to criticizing the effects of American democracy on Japan and resurrecting absolute loyalty to the Emperor.

Though literary critics debate whether Mishima was primarily a "political" writer or an artist writing for art's sake, the tumultuous political context of his Japan makes it difficult to conceive Mishima as not being influenced by his contemporary environment. In *Confessions of a Mask* he comments that as a young boy he was deeply affected by the sight of soldiers marching by his house gate, titillated by the scent of their sweat, the physical manifestation of their patriotism. His later works, such as the short story "Patriotism" (1966), which dramatizes the NiNi Roku incident and the double *seppeku* of a fictional high-ranking military officer and his wife, and his creation of the *Tatenokai* certainly attest to Mishima's overt political commitment towards the end of his life. But this is not to say that he favored political critique over aesthetic development and exploration. It would probably be more accurate to say that for Mishima the political and the aesthetic were not mutually exclusive domains. Rather, for Mishima political and aesthetic concerns were inextricably intertwined and they emerged in his works in varying proportions at different stages of his personal and literary development.

The Meiji Restoration and the Fall of the Samurai

A descendent of the Tokugawa family, Mishima spent much of his childhood and adult life interested in samurai philosophy and lore. His commitment to reviving Emperor worship may have had less to do with extreme right-wing political beliefs than was a

manifestation of his desire to return to the simpler days of feudal Japan where vassals and lords lived under mutual obligation. Mishima's understanding of samurai culture and government was highly romanticized as though he envisioned the members of the rigidly stratified class system as living in "harmony"—the vassals offering unconditional service to the ruling class in exchange for absolute protection—he paid little attention to the oppression and exploitation that the agricultural vassals were subject to under the samurai class's tyrannical military rule.

In 1869 the samurai class was officially removed from power by the newly ascended Meiji government and forbidden to carry swords. In 1853, American Naval officer Matthew Perry coerced Japan to open their trade ports to the West through military force and intimidation. Like in other Asian countries, the infiltration of western social, economic, and political structures resulted in profound economic and social disruptions in Japan. But unlike their Asian neighbors, and witnessing the violent defeat and devastation of these surrounding countries, Meiji Japan more willfully adopted western ideas and practices rather than struggle through escalating military conflict. Their aim was to one day supersede the West by "out-westernizing" them.

This strategy has made Japan one of the foremost economic powers of the world today, but also resulted in national spiritual and psychological confusion that still resonates. Was Japan its own nation, or a mere lackey of the West? Citizens were also disturbed by the destruction of traditional values and culture in favor of the adoption of western, moneymaking oriented practices. This confusion redoubled when the terms of surrender in World War II placed Japan under military supervision and regulation by America. Mishima viewed the negative effects of westernization as a direct result of the disenfranchisement of the samurai class and envisioned the revival of samurai philosophy as a salve to what he perceived as the degradation of Japanese culture, tradition, and conservative mores under modernizing, western influences.

Bunburyodo: The Dual Way of Art and Action

Before the Meiji Restoration, the ruling military elite of Japan were the samurai. The collaboration of politics and aesthetics is the central concept of *bunburyodo*, "the dual way of art and action," a samurai ethic that Mishima chose to adhere to as part of his personal philosophy. To enhance their physical fitness and military prowess, the samurai were expected to cultivate literary and artistic interests. Already an artist, Mishima embraced *bunburyodo* by developing himself physically an d training for patriotic "action."

Also central to samurai philosophy was the requirement to commit *hara-kiri* or *seppuku*, ritual suicide by disembowelment in the face of dishonor. (*Hara-kiri* and *seppuku* describe the same process but some Japanese dislike the graphic nature of the former term, literally meaning "belly cut"). When Mishima realized that the Japanese public did not take seriously his call to resurrect Emperor worship and renounce the American written Constitution, he committed suicide in this way, fulfilling the ultimate commitment to samurai philosophy.

Critical Overview

"Swaddling Clothes" first appeared in English in 1966 in *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories,* translated by American scholars of Japanese literature Edward Seidensticker, Donald Keene, Ivan Morris and Geoffrey Sargent. The collection includes nine short stories and one modern Noh play. Already internationally renowned, Mishima received much praise in the United States for the collection, particularly for its honest, however unsettling, depictions of modern Japanese life. Robert Trumbull in the May 1, 1966 *New York Times Book Review* praised the stories for their sharp "sociological study" and John Wain comments in the May 30, 1966 *Newsweek* : "His new collection . . . is Mishima at his very best—cool and urbane, mixing East and West, impassively shuffling and relating the feudal past to the consumer present." "Swaddling Clothes" did not receive as much attention as some of the other stories and was often bypassed for discussions of "Three Million Yen," "Patriotism," and "Onnagata." "Swaddling Clothes" addresses similar themes as the three stories that received more public attention, but does so more subtly. For instance, "Three Million Yen" tells the story of a young Japanese couple who desire material luxuries. They seem to carry on a conventional life of a wealth and status conscious couple, but they are actually hiring themselves out for private sex shows in order to make money. "Onnagata" addresses the homosexual life of traditional Kabuki performers who play women (the title of the story is the name of the actors of this genre), and "Patriotism" recounts the story of an officer embroiled in the NiNi Roku incident and his double *seppuku* with his wife, which is described in gory and painstaking detail. All three stories offer a critique of Japan under the modernizing influence of the west but through sensational and spectacular content, both for the western and Japanese reader. "Swaddling Clothes" also provides this kind of critique but without the eye-popping content of suicide, homosexuality, and prostitution. Perhaps the several reviewers indifference to or criticism of the story (Robert Smith in the *Arizona Quarterly*, 1966 calls it "slight") is indicative of the modern popular taste for sensational and fantastic stories. Ironically, this is precisely the kind of cultural degradation that Mishima challenges in "Swaddling Clothes" and several of the other stories in this collection.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Yoonmee Chang is a Ph.D. candidate in English and American literature at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following essay, she discusses the gender and class oppression inherent in Mishima's romanticized desire to return to traditional Japanese social and political values in "Swaddling Clothes."

"It is neither freedom nor democracy. It is Japan."—Yukio Mishima In the minutes before his suicide, Yukio Mishima concluded his public address to the Japanese "Self Defense Force," or the *Jieitai*, with the following challenge, printed in the 1971 *Japan Interpreter* as "An Appeal": "Is it right to protect life only to let the soul die? What kind of an army is it that has no higher value than life? Right now we will showthat there is a value higher than reverence for life . . . let us rise together even now, and let us die together." The "we" that Mishima speaks of is himself and his ultra-nationalist civilian army, the *Tatenokai*, and the "higher value" that they seek to preserve "is neither freedom nor democracy. It is Japan. Japan, the country whose history and traditions we love."

Mishima's response to his own rhetoric is telling: Japan, or *his* ideal of it, is not equivalent with "freedom" and "democracy." As Mishima became increasingly "political" towards the end of his life, dedicating his literature to overt political critique and involving himself in political "action," for example creating the high-profile and controversial *Tatenokai*, a civilian militia committed to reviving the absolute power of the Emperor, and finally committing *seppuku* in the name of the Emperor, Mishima was shattering in his disdain for western social, political, economic, and intellectual influence on post-World War II Japan. In his tetralogy *The Sea of Fertility* he calls the "West European spirit [Seio seishin]" a "poison" that has not only "denigrated" the noble Japanese spirit, but has "blighted" and "polluted" the natural environment as well, like a factory "operating day and night," excreting a "poisonous discharge." The paradox of Japan after World War II is that despite its unprecedented national reconstruction and emergence as a global economic superpower, this success was only enabled by an adoption of western ideology and practices that were more or less militarily enforced by the careful monitoring of the United States and the regulation of the country under the terms of its surrender. Japan was occupied by the United States military from its surrender to 1952 and forced to adopt a U.S. written Constitution that eradicated the institution of *kokutai*, or divine right of the Emperor, establishing a western model of democratic government where the Emperor served as a mere human figurehead. The new Constitution also prohibited Japan from having an active, offensive military, allowing them only a limited "Self-Defense Force" (the *Jieitai*). Mishima called this post-war period the "age of languid peace," writing an article published in the 1970 *Journal of Social and Political Ideas in Japan* entitled "An Ideology of an Age of Languid Peace." Western involvement and influence in Japan had ushered in economic success and radical modernization of a previously agricultural society, but at what cost?

In his short story "Swaddling Clothes" (1955), Mishima focuses on the personal and public degradation of morality under western influence and dramatizes a yearning to return to traditional Japa-nese ethics and values. The tradition that Mishima longed for

was rooted in *bushi*, or the samurai warrior spirit that preserved honor and loyalty to the Emperor at the cost of death. Though "Swaddling Clothes" does not specifically invoke *bushi*, implicit in its critique of western imported modernization is Mishima's desire to return to the "simpler" feudal days of the Tokugawa period where vassals and lords lived under "mutual dependency." But the short story does not address the exploitation and oppression of women and the "lower class" sanctioned and even required by the samurai-ruled feudal system. I will analyze "Swaddling Clothes" in this context, foregrounding such problems and inadequacies of the "traditional," samurai-based ethic, problems that Mishima largely ignores in his romantic presentation of *bushi* and Emperor worship.

The introduction of western ideas and practices in Japan pre-dated the nation's surrender in World War II by almost a century. In 1853, American Commodore Matthew Perry forcibly opened Japanese trade ports to the west, and in 1868 the newly ascended Meiji government effectively eradicated the feudal organization of Japanese society in favor of a more western, industrial model, stripping the samurai class of its military and political power and outlawing the public carrying of swords. The Meiji plan was to ultimately supersede the west by "out-westernizing" them, but in the process they precipitated a national spiritual confusion. Having previously adhered to a philosophy of racial and cultural superiority centered around the figure of the divine Emperor (a political and psychological system of organization that some historians and critics liken to the fascist governments of Hitler and Mussolini), the Japanese people were forced to re-evaluate themselves in the Meiji's apparent admission that western practices were superior.

Conservatives and Traditionalists like Mishima challenged this strategy of "out-westernizing" the west, but Mishima took his attack a few steps further. Economic success and the perceived advantages of democracy may be temporarily satisfying, but could never satiate the spiritual needs of a "real" Japanese. According to Mishima, a "real" Japanese was one who lived according to *bushi*, favoring danger, honor, and aggressive military protection of the nation to "languid peace." Mishima blamed western imported democracy for national spiritual humiliation and complacency and believed that "real" Japanese should always be perched for patriotic war. In "An Age of Languid Peace" Mishima writes: "[I]f there is ever to be an ideology which enables the people to live in spiritual satisfaction in an age of languid peace, and if such an ideology is ever to attract the masses of the people, it will not be an ideology based on the kind of pacifism that has been bandied about in this country since the end of World War II. An ideology that is to provide spiritual satisfaction must contain the kind of dangerous allure for which men are willing to die. In the same article he writes: "Democratic freedom may be an effective instrument to cajole the impulse of death into a state of temporary dormancy, but it does not have the power to eradicate it or render it permanently ineffective." The "impulse to death" that Mishima speaks of is embodied by the "warrior spirit" of the previously ruling samurai class, and he believed that the way to expunge Japan of western influences was to return to this indigenous and uniquely Japanese *bushi* ethic, resurrecting an era of honorable spiritual satisfaction led by modern day warriors thirsting to die for their country.

Mishima personally embraced the warrior samurai ethic, particularly *bunburyodo*, the "dual way of art and action," or in the Confucian based Yang-ming philosophy *chiko goitsu.* Following this ethic, he complemented his politically incendiary literature (art) with steps towards military aggression against the Japanese who supported western style democracy (action). During his lifetime, Mishima embarked on a rigorous physical program of bodybuilding, intensively trained in *kendo* (Japanese fencing), and in 1968 founded the *Tatenokai*, an Emperor worshipping group of modern-day "warriors" geared for fatal action and, as the "incident" of November 25, 1970 attests, even suicide in the face of the "dishonorable" national adoption of western ideas. Though he trained with the *Jieitai* and maintained a close relationship with its leaders, in his final speech, Mishima reproached the Self-Defense Army for its complacent adherence to the Constitution, which in his eyes amounted to a loss of *bushi*. In "An Appeal," he called the *Jieitai* a "gigantic arsenal without a soul" and castigated, "Has the spirit of the Self-Defense Force completely putrefied? Where has its *bushi* spirit gone?"

Importantly, Mishima viewed westernization and loss of samurai ethics as the "feminization" of Japan. In "An Appeal," his call that the *Jieitai* prove themselves to be samurai-centered "real" Japanese was also a call for them to be "real" *men*. In his essay on *Hagakure*, a samurai literary classic of the Tokugawa period, Mishima deplores this feminization/westernization that began even before the Meiji period with its legal prohibition of sword-carrying—a symbolic, western-induced castration—and that exploded in the post-war era: We are constantly being told of the feminization of Japanese males today—it is inevitably seen as the result of the influence of American democracy, "ladies first," and so forth—but this phenomenon, too, is not unknown in our past. When, breaking away from the rough-and-tumble masculinity of a nation at war, the Tokugawa *bakufu* had securely established its hegemony as a peaceful regime, the feminization of Japanese males immediately began. In this quote, Mishima equates peace, democracy, and westernization with feminization and desires the opposing "masculine" values: war, absolute rule of and loyalty to the Emperor, and return to militarily aggressive samurai ethics. But this quote is revealing less for its agitating political content, than for its implication that the status of "female" is damaging and degrading and should be rejected, abhorred, and reversed to the more desirable "masculine" condition.

A similar "message" is hidden in "Swaddling Clothes." Underpinning the author's romantic desire to return to traditional values is a critical disrespect for women. Both the joke and irrecoverable scandal of the story is the birth of the nurse's illegitimate baby. Toshiko's husband treats the nurse like a crass animal, and describes her as such: "We rushed in and found her squatting on the floor . . . moaning like a cow . . . yelling like a stuck pig." He is also more concerned about his house than the nurse as he nonchalantly remarks: "Well, I didn't waste any time. I rescued our good rug from floor . . . By the time the doctor . . . arrived, the baby had already been born. But our sitting room was a pretty shambles!" "The incident" provides much mirth for his friends who encourage Toshiko's husband's "flamboyant" and raucously humorous recount with their "bursts" of laughter and mocking guffaws. The nurse is reduced to the butt of the men's joke and Toshiko, as the only woman in the group, is horrified by their insensitivity.

Significantly, the social transgression that the men mockingly disdain the nurse for is a *sexual* transgression. The men laugh at "the incident," but they also consider it inappropriate and scandalous that she had sex outside of marriage. Without questioning the standards on which they base their condemnation, they automatically consider the nurse's involvement in sex outside of marriage as a social transgression and blame and ridicule her for it. The burden of the situation falls on the nurse as a woman, while the father of the baby is not criticized for his role in "the incident" and is barely mentioned in the story.

Though Toshiko is more sensitive to and agonized by "the incident," she indirectly supports the men's view that the nurse has committed a social/ sexual "transgression" and is deserving of blame. As the only character in the story who dedicates thought to "the incident" beyond mockery and scorn, Toshiko is the only one who might possibly provide any sensitive and alternative perspective of the nurse's situation. When she rewraps the baby in a clean piece of flannel, replacing the newspaper "swaddling clothes" that the also disdainful doctor wrapped him in, Toshiko appears to espouse a more open-minded understanding of the nurse's situation—the conditions of which the reader is never told. But her sympathy is limited. Toshiko may be anguished by the callous treatment of the baby, but she never questions the wholesale condemnation of the nurse for having sex outside of marriage. In fact, she is in accord with her husband and his friends, that the nurse's actions are properly scandalous and reproachable, repeatedly characterizing the situation as "shameful."

In addition, Toshiko characterizes the birthing scene as one of violence, remembering it through images of "bloodstains" and describing it as a grisly "scene fit for a butcher shop." But this is not to say that all female reproduction in "Swaddling Clothes" is cast in a negative light. In contrast, Toshiko's own reproduction (she herself has had a son) is implicitly "pure" and appropriate because she is married. The implication is that while reproduction within the confines of marriage are sanctioned and not commented upon, births outside of marriage because of their social unconventionality are necessarily violent, grotesque and disruptive. This is emphasized by the representation of Toshiko's pristine baby, involuntarily exposed to the scene, "scared out of his wits and crying at the top of his lungs," as if he is also protesting the nurse's social/ sexual "transgression."

Most importantly, the nurse is represented as a voiceless, passive character, given no opportunity to defend her situation. Was she raped? Was she deserted by the father of the child? Given no sympathetic personal information about the nurse, the reader is encouraged to agree with Toshiko and her husband's censure of the nurse. In this way, the general structure of the story automatically assumes that sex outside of marriage, regardless of the conditions surrounding the situation, is unquestionably condemnable. Furthermore, while the "unethical" nurse and Toshiko's husband, with his "garish" American style clothing and "unhomely" western style house, both represent a departure from traditional values, only the nurse suffers damaging consequences for her actions. Unlike the nurse, Toshiko's husband does not suffer any scorn or reproach for his acceptance of "degraded" western values. To the contrary, he appears to be complacent and successful, "dashing" off from one meeting to the next to fulfill the

needs of his exciting and successful acting career. In this way, though "Swaddling Clothes" laments the loss of traditional values, the burden and the consequences of that loss falls on the women in the story.

Toshiko is also "punished" for participating in non-traditional behavior. The impropriety of her as a young, married woman taking a nighttime stroll alone around the Imperial Palace park grounds is vindicated by her assault at the end of the story. As in the case of the nurse, the moral seems to be, "If only women would adhere to conventional female behavior, no matter how oppressive, they wouldn't suffer." This is not to say that Toshiko is a progressive character who desires more freedom for women. In fact, she is the main proponent of returning to tradition and conservatism in the story, as she is the only one who bemoans the modernization and loss of moral values of her husband and the nurse.

As mentioned before, Toshiko unequivocally considers the nurse's situation as "shameful." She also envisions the illegitimate baby's future as hopeless, destined for poverty and crime. She imagines that the baby will grow up to be a "desolate, hopeless, poverty-stricken . . . lonely rat . . . He'll be wandering through the streets by himself, cursing his father, loathing his mother." She can think of no other future for the child as she says "What else could happen to a baby who has had such a birth?" According to Toshiko, the nurse's baby has no chance of becoming a "respectable citizen" because of external circumstances and unfair social judgments over which he never had control.

By envisioning the future of the illegitimate baby as inflexibly grim and hopeless, Toshiko supports a stratified class system that ranks people not according to ability and merit, but by inheritance and ossified social judgment. Though "Swaddling Clothes" laments the loss of Japanese tradition and values, one tradition that has apparently survived is the rigid demarcation of people by class. The basis of the samurai-led feudal system hinges on such class division—everyone knows his or her "place" in society and acts accordingly. Members of the ruling class were wont to call this organization "mutual dependency" (agricultural vassals provide labor and service to their lords on rented land, while the lords provide unconditional military protection and maintain the well-being of the nation), but from the perspective of vassals, such a system oppressively maintained their poverty and economic dependence and shut out all possibilities for class mobility. Like the nurse's baby, anyone born into "ignoble" or low class circumstances, despite any superior ability or philanthropic intention he or she might have, had no opportunity to move beyond this assigned station. By imagining the future of the nurse's baby as an inevitable outgrowth of his "shameful" birth and perceiving the violent, criminal homeless youth as an immediate manifestation of the baby in twenty years, Toshiko does not challenge and implicitly accepts the class system that discriminates and judges people along oppressive criteria.

In this way, Toshiko's sympathy for the baby and somewhat "sensitive" contemplation of "the incident" is incomplete and tinged with insincerity: she only contemplates the degradation of society from an insulated and safe upper-class perspective. Her life has been one of privilege, as she comments about life with her husband: "their life together was in some way too easy, too painless." She is somewhat discomfited by her material

ease as she begins the above sentence: "[S]he leaned back in the seat, oppressed by the knowledge." Here again, Toshiko is on the verge of questioning her complacent lifestyle, but her ensuing characterization of the illegitimate baby as "a lonely rat" overrides such nascent and partial attempts to contemplate the existing social structure. Finally when the homeless youth attacks her, she is not surprised as the narrator comments: "She did not feel in the least afraid and made no effort to free herself. In a flash the thought had struck her. Ah, so the twenty years have already gone by!" In other words, Toshiko more or less expects the violent behavior of the homeless youth towards her as a delicate, young, upper-class woman. In this way, Toshiko reinforces the notion, brought up earlier by the image of the nurse's "shameful" grown up child "savagely stabbing" her own "fine, carefully educated" son, that upper and lower classes are irrevocably divided and their interaction inevitably results in violence.

Mishima himself was born into an upper-class family of government officials and his grandmother was a descendent by marriage of the Tokugawa family. George Brandes likens Mishima to Nietzsche in that he was an "aristocratic radical" that is, a member of the social and intellectual elite that prescribed revolutionary philosophy from the safety and comfort of their class privilege. Some critics dismiss Mishima as a dilettante of political philosophy, unconcerned with the actual welfare of the "masses" and dispensing revolutionary theory as mere, and misguided, intellectual exercise. The samurai ethic that he sought to revive, supports this analysis of Mishima. Whether or not his chosen political aims were "serious," those aims sustained the oppression of the lower classes. Nietzsche described the masses as "the inferior species" and an animalistic "herd." Continuing the comparison to Nietzsche, Roy Starrs writes: "[Nietzsche] . . . like Mishima . . . felt an instinctive antipathy towards democracy, liberalism, socialism or any other form of 'humanism' which sought to elevate the 'masses' over the elite." From this perspective, Mishima's rejection of western imported democracy and "humanism" in favor of the dictatorial rule of the divine Emperor under the leadership of the samurai can be seen as a desire to preserve class privilege. Thus, it is not surprising that in "Swaddling Clothes" the oppression of still existing class stratification is not challenged, and even reinforced by the protagonist Toshiko.

It is not possible in the scope of this short essay to comprehensively analyze the political implications of Mishima's "Swaddling Clothes" or to present rebuttals to the counter-arguments of the perspective that I have offered here. I have merely attempted to point out some of the inadequacies and problems of the Emperor-centered, samurai-led society that Mishima supported, particularly for women and the "lower" class. Mishima remains a controversial figure of Japanese literature. Had it not been for his shocking suicide in 1970, historians and critics might have dismissed him as a daydreaming romantic who was above all an artist, but an unrealistic and ineffective political philosopher. The inadequacies I have pointed out of a *bushi*-centered society support this view. Ironically "the incident" the narrator and Toshiko so deplores in "Swaddling Clothes" is reminiscent of the name given to Mishima's public *seppuku*, dubbed in history as the "Mishima incident." Perhaps Mishima was not as oppressively reactionary as his choice of political philosophy implies. Above all, Mishima wanted political transformation and change, seeking to challenge an existing power structure, though unfortunately choosing a more oppressive alternative. At any rate, both

"incidents" shocked their contemporary societies into self-reexamination. In this way, Mishima and the nurse of "Swaddling Clothes" are more similar than he probably ever imagined they could be.

Source: Yoonmee Chang, "An Overview of 'Swaddling Clothes'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the folowing essay, Girard analyzes the character of Toshiko in "Swaddling Clothes."

In the story "Swaddling Clothes," Yukio Mishima presents an intriguing picture of how a rich, young mother's obsession over her new baby can lead to violence, destruction, and death. At first glance, "Swaddling Clothes" seems much like Robert J. Smith reported in the *Arizona Quarterly,* in 1966. At that time, Smith called it a "very slight piece," but he also said that it is powerful in its content. Mishima, a modern Japanese writer, has only had one of his twenty volumes of short stories translated into English. Western culture knows Mishima mainly from his thought-provoking novels; however, the collection known as *Death in Midsummer and Other Stories* contains ten stories which promote thoughtful, as well as emotional, responses. "Swaddling Clothes" combines many elements in its quick telling and offers a picture that haunts the reader long after the final word has been read.

The story begins with the third person narrator giving the reader an impression of Toshiko's husband. Toshiko is the protagonist and the story revolves around her thoughts, hopes, and fears. Toshiko's husband is a handsome actor and appears to be very busy. As an actor, he is popular and very Westernized. He takes little notice of Toshiko and everything he wears, does, says, and even the way he smokes his cigarettes, points to a man who constantly feeds his own ego. Toshiko is often an afterthought as the narrator points out: "Even tonight he had to dash off to an appointment, leaving her to go home alone by taxi." The narrator continues to raise some doubts about Toshiko and her expectations by calling her "foolish" if she expected her husband to spend time with her.

However, Toshiko is not foolish; she is feeling abandoned by her husband and feeling slightly invisible. As a person of slight stature, Toshiko had felt the admiration of friends and acquaintances, while growing up, because she epitomized how a gentile Japanese woman should look. While pregnant, she attracted much attention for a couple of reasons. For one, it has always been an unspoken rule that a pregnant woman, no matter the culture, is someone to be noticed, fawned over, and smiled over. For another, Toshiko suddenly, for several months, had more girth and weight to her slight frame than she had ever had before in her life. Now that the baby was born, the baby got the attention and she became virtually invisible. The reader is assured of this because the narrator says, "she looked more like a transparent picture than a creature of flesh and blood." Her husband was aware that she was there, but he could look right through her and see only his son and anything that revolved around the baby.

Most of the story takes place in the form of a flashback. Toshiko is riding in a taxi, alone, on her way home. Her husband has sent her home alone while he goes off to a business meeting. It is curious to note that while her husband is the actor in the family, Toshiko is much more dramatic and imaginative. Toshiko's husband, who remains unnamed throughout the story, is shown to be more businesslike and more concerned with image than imagination. His home is decorated with Western-style furniture and he

wears an American style suit and a "rather garish tweed coat." Toshiko is "shocked" and "dumbfounded" that her husband would discuss and make light of the shameful situation which had happened in their sitting room where their nurse gave birth to an illegitimate baby boy. He even lets his friends know that he was so unobservant that he believed the nurse's belly was huge because of "gastric dilation," rather than pregnancy. Since Toshiko had recently been pregnant, it is reasonable to assume that he should have been able to tell a pregnant woman when he saw one. One can only guess that he might not have been the best of actors because of this inability to empathize with his wife and his insensitivity to the nurse and her giving birth under embarrassing circumstances. He does not appear to be a well-trained student of human nature or the human condition.

Toshiko has the ability to immerse herself in the plight of others. She is more traditionally Japa-nese, as is the nurse who is able to hide her pregnancy behind her kimono. It is entirely possible that Toshiko's husband could not detect the pregnancy because he had removed himself too far from traditional Japanese values. Toshiko finds his behavior, joking about the birth, horrifying and becomes locked into the loss of face that she, the nurse, and, ultimately, the bastard child have suffered. To her husband, it is an interesting anecdote, but Toshiko cannot help projecting the future outcome.

The reader is never given any insight into what the nurse might have felt or even her reasons for concealing her pregnancy. If Toshiko knows, she does not say. She does continue to picture, with great clarity, the image of the newborn baby boy wrapped in bloodstained newspapers. It is this image which haunts her and drives her actions once her husband sends her home in the taxi. She remembers what had taken place after her husband had left the house. He barely waited until the doctor arrived and then he left, leaving Toshiko to handle the aftermath and to join him later.

What upset Toshiko the most about the situation was that the doctor had so little regard for the baby that instead of wrapping him properly, the doctor wrapped the baby in newspaper, much as one would wrap up the evening's garbage. Toshiko recalls the birth of her own baby, and while she does not tell the readers about it, it can be presumed that she had the best care, as did her infant son. He would have been gently cleaned, wrapped in soft clothes and laid to rest in a proper cradle. The nurse's son was left lying on the wooden floor in bloody paper.

Toshiko did not tell her husband that she wrapped the infant in a clean piece of swaddling for fear that he would berate her and call her a sentimental fool for caring about an illegitimate child when her own child was in the next room. He would want her to only think of how to properly care for her own child and to make sure that the nurse she hired would be suitable. This was not something Toshiko could easily dismiss. She continued to wonder what would happen to the child and how his future would be entwined with that of her own son.

While still at the restaurant, Toshiko recalls that even the new mother had not witnessed the shame of her baby lying on the floor in bloody paper. She even remarks that the baby, himself, would never know unless she told him someday. Dwelling on the

negative, she feels that somehow the stigma of this lowly birth will humiliate him and follow him for the remainder of his life, even though he knows nothing about it. She thinks that if she is able to tell him, someday, that she picked him up out of the newspapers and gently wrapped him in proper swaddling and laid him on a soft chair, it might somehow change his life.

As the taxi wends its way through the city, Toshiko sees scraps of paper everywhere. The theater she passes is dotted with phony cherry blossom scraps of paper. When she gets to the Imperial Palace and the park bordering it, she notices the paper lanterns which shed no light. There is only darkness in the water and the sky. The light comes from the multitude of cherry blossoms on the trees, which look little different than the phony cherry blossoms by the theatre. There are also harsh electric light bulbs, in several colors, which cast a strange hue on the whiteness of the cherry blossoms and give an unreal quality.

She is in the park past ten o'clock and trash is strewn everywhere, while most of the people have departed. As she walks through the park, she kicks aside the wastepaper, as others do, and thinks back to the newspaper and the baby. She loses touch with reality as she drifts through her thoughts and projects twenty years into the future. She notices the dark shadows and fears that the illegitimate child will grow up to resent her child's prosperity and privilege. She dramatizes the scenario and places the poor child in a vagabond, uneducated future and feels that child will blame his ignominious birth on his plight. Somehow, she conjectures, he will know that her son was the one who was in the cradle in the next room while he was born on a bare wooden floor and wrapped in bloody paper. In his despair, she pictures him taking revenge on her unsuspecting child.

When Toshiko spies the newspapers spread over the young vagrant on the park bench, she has completely lost herself in her self-imposed role of savior to her child and possible savior to the young bastard. She, in her mind, has traveled the twenty years into the future and sees the same child with bloody, matted hair, wrapped in newspapers. The young vagrant has dirty, matted hair, but she can only reach out to touch him as she felt compelled to touch the newborn and wrap him in proper swaddling. Even in her final moments, Toshiko sees that she has intervened in the whimsy of fate and saved her son by her own sacrifice. She has played her role perfectly and need not be afraid of the consequences.

Source: Theresa M. Girard, "An Overview of 'Swaddling Clothes'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #3

Kendall Johnson is completing his Ph.D. in literature at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following essay, he considers the sacrificial plight of Toshiko in "Swaddling Clothes" by exploring Mishima's focus on newspapers.

At the end of Yukio Mishima's story, the forest of the Imperial Palace stands "pitch dark and utterly silent" as Toshiko's "slender wrist" is "seized" by "a powerful hand." The hand belongs to a man at whom Toshiko attempts to look while he lies sleeping beneath layers of newspaper in the palace park. Although Toshiko seems to be the victim of impending violence—a violence all the more disturbing for not being explicitly mentioned—she neither attempts to free herself from the hand nor "[feels] in the least afraid." Toshiko's equanimity is distressingly ironic, heightening the sense of doomed isolation in her seizure. By staging the assault in the shadows of the Imperial Place, Mishima draws an analogy between a helpless Toshiko and an embattled past of authentic Japanese culture. While the seizing hand literally belongs to the man sleeping underneath the newspapers, it figuratively represents the historical demands made on Japan in the aftermath of World War II.

Toshiko's disaffection with her life runs parallel to Mishima's critique of the westernization of Japanese culture. He embeds this critique throughout the story, setting up an opposition between the natural and enduring against the artificial and disposable. Central to this opposition are the metaphors of the cherry blossom and the newspaper. Through the newspaper, or *Shinbungami*, Mishima ties together Toshika's sad reflections, his critiques of westernization and his anxiety regarding the continuity of Japanese national identity after the War.

Newspapers are sold to communicate news to people who live in the same community. As Benedict Anderson discusses in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, national identity is not an *a priori* category but is produced through the work of collective imagination. In order to feel part of a community, an individual must believe that there are others who share their interests, beliefs, points of view, and traditions. This identification of an individual with a community occurs despite the fact that an individual never expects to know, to meet, or even to see everyone who is part of the national community. How, then, is the common ground of national identity established? In addition to public rituals such as elections, holidays and parades, mass media, including television, movies, and newspapers, provides a way of connecting individuals together in a common imaginary space.

To the reader, a newspaper presents stories that are unrelated to each other, skipping among politics, entertainment, and local information. The newspaper collects these unrelated stories and presents them as "news"—information that is important and which everyone should know. The magic of newspapers is in creating a general feeling of association through a reading process that each individual experiences in isolation. During rush hour in a city, newspapers are bought by individuals who open a pristine, folded copy while sitting next to people on a bus or subway. Instead of talking to one

another, people read the newspaper; through a solitary process in which many individuals sporadically participate, people feel connected to their fellow citizens. In this way, newspapers facilitate a process through which individuals can feel as though they share a common ground with other anonymous citizens.

The newspaper also promotes a general feeling that the nation is moving forward. Every day a new paper comes out. Stories are always fresh and tomorrow guarantees a new edition of "news." The date on a newspaper marks a specific moment in a continuous slide into the future. Each edition expects the reader to leave yesterday's headlines behind in lieu of the next set of information. There is a certain optimism to this march of days toward a perpetual tomorrow, an optimism that Mishima regards as unreliable and even deceitful when considering the authentic tradition of national Japanese culture.

While newspapers seem to be everywhere in the story, they are most visible as debased swaddling clothes, trash that floats through the palace park, and blankets for the story's threatening vagabond. Mishima's use of newspapers seems to convey a deep skepticism about the future of Japan. The "news" in 1955 when Mishima's story was published would have entailed the restructuring of Japanese government, society, and culture—in short the entire Japanese nation—after World War II. From 1945 to 1952 Japan was occupied by the United States. During this time, the Empire was replaced with an American-style democracy. The Emperor was forced to abdicate his authority as divine ruler in the *ninen singen*, an announcement broadcast over the radio and emblazoned on headlines worldwide.

The very form of the newspaper is linked to elements of western influence that Mishima considered to have corrupted an ideal Japan. After the American Naval Commodore Matthew Perry forcibly opened Japanese ports in 1853, Japan dealt with this assault by strategically adopting western social structures. The Meiji government of 1868 forged this policy of westernization, eventually making the samurai ethic obsolete. Fundamental to this reorganization was the introduction of a "reading-system" that, according to Anderson, made the "development of mass literacy through schools and print easy and uncontroversial." Before the push toward mass literacy, people living in separate regions of the country spoke Japanese differently, making communication between regions very difficult. Mass literacy allowed for widespread communication across geographical space, a prerequisite for the development of a westernized national economy.

While mass literacy is seemingly beneficial, Mishima's use of newspapers connotes criticism of the pressure from the west that made such literacy necessary. For Mishima, the newspaper is a sign of compromised and artificial Japanese culture. Not only are newspapers manufactured through the liquidation of living trees, but production of thousands and thousands of copies requires assembly-line coordination of printing, cutting, folding, bundling, and dissemination processes. In Mishima's story, the historical background in which literacy and the newspaper developed tends to make the "news" look more like propaganda that distracts the Japa-nese people from their true imperial heritage.

In the story, the newspaper concentrates Toshiko's sense of isolation in a modernized world of anonymous taxis and artificial-paper or bulb-lit cherry blossoms. When the doctor wraps the nurse's newborn baby in a newspaper, one imagines not only the visceral image of smeared newspaper ink mixing with the mother's blood but also the enveloping of the child in the news of the country. Toshiko's reflex to swaddle the baby in cotton linen is not merely an issue of comfort but also illustrates her need to keep the hard facts of life from tainting the baby's first few moments. However, the taint of the real world proves indelible. Despite Toshiko's attempt to salvage the baby into the purity of linen, she is haunted by what she regards as his inescapable doom in a world were he can only become "desolate, hopeless, poverty-stricken . . . a lonely rat."

Despite feeling threatened by the nurse's illegitimate child, Toshiko identifies with the baby and eventually with the vagrant in the park. Her cityscape resonates with fear of penetrative violence as "pinpricks of light" project from the "blocks of tall office buildings." Mishima casts Toshiko as a body in pain, echoing the nurse who screams like a "stuck pig" as she gives birth on the floor, and her infant, who lies "on the parquet floor . . . in bloodstained newspapers." Toshiko derives a "certain satisfaction" from her gloomy thoughts as she "[tortures] herself with them without cease." She writhes in mental anguish "on the back seat of the Taxi," "oppressed by the knowledge" that her life with her husband "was in some way too easy, too painless." The odd use of the preposition "on" (people usually are "in" the back seat not "on" it) makes Toshiko into a displayed incarnation of anguish for the reader. As Toshiko contemplates the unforgettable sight of "the baby, wrapped in stained newspaper" in a "scene fit for a butchershop," she moves toward a decision that puts her in harm's way. Her macabre vision of the nurse's son "savagely [stabbing her son] with a knife" foreshadows her own possible fate.

Toshiko's identification with the nurse and her son as well as Toshiko's willingness to substitute herself as a potential victim of the nurse's baby is not based on sound logic. While Toshiko's feelings attest to the rigidity of social class in post-war Japan, they seem hyperbolic, operating as a vehicle through which she can acknowledge her own loneliness. As she is seized without struggle in the palace park, Toshiko becomes the "stuck pig" on Mishima's sacrificial altar. What would the next day's newspaper report about her fate? Her demise is a spectacle for the reader to see and vicariously ponder.

Mishima creates a general sense of doom by probing the isolation Toshiko feels as the wife of a husband who is not a responsible man. Mishima's story vilifies the westernized husband for not paying more attention to his wife. Toshiko's husband personifies compromised Japanese culture, diluted by the encroachment of western products (furniture), attitudes (his flamboyant, callous story-telling), professions (he is an "attractive" actor) and tastes (his "garish" suit and "jazz"). When he puts his wife in a cab to send her home alone, she is left to her "unsettling fancies" which, without her husband's guidance, lead her to the "Abyss of the Thousand Birds." Mishima implies that Toshiko's seizure is the logical consequence of a delinquent husband who neglects his duty. When Toshiko is finally stranded, she is struck by the thought, "Ah, so twenty years have already gone by!" She stands in for her son, facing the imagined attacker. But the logic of her sacrifice is uncertain. Will the nurse's son actually become the

violent threat Toshiko believes he will inevitably be? Are the "soiled newspaper swaddling clothes" really the baby's "symbol of his entire life"? Even if we trust Toshiko's impressions, is her demise in the palace park really a substitute for her son facing the "dirty rat" and being "stabbed again and again"?

These questions illustrate the class biases of Toshiko's sentiments and the inconsistency of Mishima's authentic Japanese culture. Mishima's ideal version of a Japanese past is not without troubling implications. First, in critiquing an optimism for future Japanese identity he relies on a static idea of the past, a frozen image that is as pure as it is inaccessible. The contemporary Japan he targets for is also frozen as characters are able neither to learn from the past nor to communicate with each other. The vagabond's threatening hand is a one-dimensional stereotype, never acknowledging human specificity, complexity or sensitivity. While Toshiko's "unsettling fancies" evoke a more generous past when the poor were provided for by responsible nobility, Toshika's insight into the nurse's illegitimate son and her intuition of doom in the final scene vilifies the poor as inherently violent.

Second, Mishima's idea of a consecrated Japanese culture implies strict limitations on how men and women can act. The samurai warrior ethic builds men into glorified images of action, strength and stoicism but squelches more complex, human emotions. In using Toshiko and the nurse as analogs of cultural purity he neglects developing their individual characters. Women in this story seem to be fundamental victims and prey to the "powerful hand" of history. Mishima's characterization of Toshiko seems to be a "transparent picture" through which he can project his anxiety regarding the state and history of Japanese national identity. He leaves the reader with questions regarding the future state of Japanese culture that might have been more effectively approached through a more flexible opinion regarding the place of women and men in society.

Source: Kendall Johnson, "History Wrapped in Newspapers: The Seizure of Toshiko," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Wolf looks at the theme of isolation from a external world that is cruel and unsympathetic in Yukio Mishima's writing.

Death in Midsummer is almost a microcosm of Mishima's whole work, representing most of his major styles except for the polemic and the directly confessional. Together, the stories suggest both where he was broad in his concerns and limited by his obsessions.

Death in Midsummer must be surprising to those familiar with Mishima only through headlines. ["Death in Midsummer,"] which opens the collection, is quite unrelated to nationalism, fascism, homosexuality, or seppuku. Rather, it is an elegy on the death of the innocent, and a study of the psychology of mourning. The main character, Tomoko, is the mother of two young children who are drowned in a commonplace incident at a resort. Mishima's method is one with many affinities but no equivalents. The narration is a controlled Tolstoyan analysis, phase by phase, of his character's evolving perceptions, proceeding to an epiphany that is left as ambiguous as a Zen koan or haiku, and that is therefore utterly *un*-Tolstoyan. There is also something rather like Poe or Dostoevsky in the extraordinary lucidity of the descriptions, coupled with the intense hysteria of the passions described. Yet although the passions are hysterical, the person who suffers them is fundamentally sound, and not at all like a character out of Dostoevsky or Poe. Tomoko's irrational state is simply normal for one in her circumstances.

In "Death in Midsummer," the whole process if mourning is described as an unfolding of ironies and contradictions. Tomoko's grief is both hysterical and normal. Her recovery, which she feels is shameful, is perfectly natural. Her quest for meaning is both inevitable and futile. And to enrich the irony, the narrator places her ordeal in cosmic perspective: the children, who mean so much to their mother, mean nothing to Nature; they are swept away by a chance wave and not a sign is left on ocean, beach, or sky. The grief, the shame, the hunger for meaning, all define Tomoko as human; yet all are as irrational and futile as they are unavoidable. Tomoko's personal loss confronts her with something even more terrible: the void itself. Yet despite the void, as despite her grief, she goes on living, protected from destruction by the limitations of her intelligence, limitations not merely specific to her but essential to the species.

For all their outward diversity, the majority of Mishima's sympathetic characters come down to a type much like Tomoko: an individual entranced by inner conflicts, isolated from an exterior world as unconsciously cruel as it is beautiful. Yet it is the diversity that is more immediately obvious. At first sight, few works would seem less alike than "Death in Midsummer," with its bourgeois setting, chaste tone, and unsophisticated protagonist, and so extravagant a period piece as "The Priest of Shiga Temple and His Love." Yet the latter piece too is ultimately reducible to a series of internal perceptions and riddling contradictions.

The story is told in prose of great elaborateness and beauty. An aged monk of famed sanctity falls in love at first sight with a Grand Concubine from the Heian court. Just as his whole life to that point has represented the renunciation of this world for the next, hers has represented the empty enjoyment of the present:

The Great Priest was not young enough . . . to believe that this new feeling was simply a trick that his flesh had played on him . . . [She] was nothing other than the present world, which until then had been in repose . . . It was as if he had been standing by the highway . . . with his hands firmly covering his ears, and had watched two great oxcarts rumble past each other. All of a sudden he had removed his hands....

But her response works at cross-purposes to his; as he seeks this world through her, she seeks the next through him. When they finally meet, it is in silence and tears. They feel some enormous event has occurred, but what it is is never made explicit, and no doubt it differs for each character, as it does for each reader. Religion and sensuality are both—and perhaps equally—triumphs of the spirit and follies of the flesh; but above all they are achievements and also deceptions of the imagination. Therefore, Mishima makes the Grand Priest's meeting with his love at once a consummation and an anticlimax, and as solitary an event as his return to his monastic cell.

For in "The Priest and His Love," as in "Death in Midsummer," the great struggles of the characters are not so much internalized as fundamentally internal. The characters live in worlds subjective to the point of isolation. Unable to share either values or feelings, they have nothing to go on but their own impulses and intuitions. Inner states may be set off by something outside the self, like the death of the children or the first glimpse of the Grand Concubine; but from that point on they assume an autonomous life and logic. The *moment* in Mishima tends to have such enormous consequences, because it so often represents a forced awakening from an innocence that is really a kind of unreflecting solipsism. In "Death in Midsummer," Tomoko is literally napping at the moment her children drown; and the Great Priest has figuratively closed his senses to the present world.

Toshiko, heroine of the brief but powerful "Swaddling Clothes," suffers a very similar awakening. When a low-ranking servant in her household unexpectedly gives birth to an illegitimate child, wealthy young Toshiko is shocked into pity and a kind of responsibility. She is aware for the first time of the injustice of the social order, and foresees a time when the despised infant must take revenge against her own pampered baby. This awakening, however, leads to nothing practical. Rather than offering material help, she is impelled toward a masochistic expiation. Deliberately going into the park at night, she invites assault by a young vagrant whom she identifies with the person the newborn outcast must become. Toshiko's sacrifice is both symbolically appropriate and fundamentally hysterical, a psychotic *acting out* rather than a purposeful *act.* Like that of Dostoevsky, and of Tolstoy in his last phase, Mishima's power seems largely a product of his own desperate sincerity, which is of a kind that can find no outlet in the world of action. Such passion creates grand, symbolic gestures, and characters and situations that seem to demand them—in art if not in life.

The incompatibility of emotion and aesthetic beauty is one of the several themes of "Onnagata." The drama critic, Masuyama, is fascinated by the art of the Kabuki female impersonator, Mangiku. Mangiku's femininity is greater than any woman's, just as his theatrical roles are more grandly passionate than life. But his only place is on stage, in that bastard world "born of the illicit union between dream and reality." When Mangiku takes his impersonation out of the theater and into the real world, he immediately disgraces himself and disillusions Masuyama.

With one exception, the rest of the stories in *Death in Midsummer* satirize the contemporary scene. "The Pearl" describes a club of housewives with nothing to do but manipulate each other. "The Three Million Yen" tells how a young married couple saves for middle-class possessions by giving sex shows for audiences like the housewives in "The Pearl." "The Seven Bridges" concerns a group of geishas, whose playful approach to a rite of their profession soon exposes their ugly selfishness. "Thermos Bottles" follows a smug businessman through his discovery that his perfect egoism has made him expendable to everyone. These modern types have neither beauty nor feeling to recommend them. They recognize nothing capable of transcending or ennobling the self, except possibly money.

How different from these, almost another species, are the Lieutenant and Reiko in "Patriotism," as poetically idealized as their foils are satirically denigrated. "Patriotism" is an imaginative reconstruction of an actual double suicide performed by a young married couple trapped in a conflict of loyalties during the insurrection of 1936. The work is, in every sense, "highly wrought," a kind of heroic epic, or even opera, in prose. As charged with splendor and glory, with sensuality and death as *Tristan and Isolde,* it expresses the same striving after transcendence. The young couple's heedless sincerity endows them with the grandeur of figures in legend; or rather, it almost so endows them. But it is one thing to accept heroic gestures from personages at the dawn of history, acting upon archetypal situations, and another to accept them from twentieth-century persons committed to the wrong side of issues. Ironically, "Patriotism" succeeds for most readers only to the extent that Mishima's stylistic genius overbalances the theme he is apparently celebrating.

Every story in *Death in Midsummer* is rich in ironies, but perhaps the supreme irony is that the martyred lovers of "Patriotism" are the only truly happy characters in the whole volume. They alone are free from both triviality and alienation. They alone are in communion with each other and with the world. Their acceptance of a transcendent principle endows their emotions with beauty and meaning and permits them to live and die both serenely and intensely. Had they martyred themselves to almost any other ideal, it would be easier for liberal readers to sympathize and understand. For what is being celebrated in "Patriotism" is not thirties-style militarism per se, but the self-realizing force of idealism and the bliss of martyrdom. The specific principle is less the cause than the occasion.

Mishima's fiction is fiction, not polemics or propaganda. It is true that a good deal of what he wrote conveys an open or implicit criticism of modern society. True, he traced much of the inauthenticity of modern Japanese society to the rejection of tradition that

followed defeat in the Pacific war. It is even true that in his last years he became a spokesman for a kind of right-wing reaction, and ultimately martyred himself for that cause. But it is also true that practically nothing in *Death in Midsummer,* except possibly "Patriotism," reasonably lends itself to a right-wing, or even political, interpretation. And only one story in all ten, "Onnagata," is even remotely concerned with homosexuality. Mishima, of course, did write polemics and confessions, but only on a few occasions did he disguise them as fiction.

That Mishima could conceive no better solution for Japan than to revive its past was less a misfortune for him as an artist than as a man. It so happened that the desperate sincerity, disciplined violence, and paradoxical gentleness of the samurai tradition had affinities with fundamental traits of his own nature: his discipline as artist and athlete, his sadomasochism as a sexual being, his despair as a Japanese, his emotionality as a person. These affini-ties were destructive to him as a man because they encouraged his tendency to hysteria. But the effect on his work was probably beneficial. Since Mishima universalized his private experience when he wrote, the passions and issues that concerned him personally were rarely allowed to intrude into his fictional universe. Within the limits of his sensibility, he could be an objective and dispassionate artist. Many of his characters do not resemble him at all, but are specimens of types held up for examination. Those in whom he did invest himself are far less likely to share his opinions and habits than his loneliness, his alienation, and his passionate integrity. In other words, the dovetailing of influences that produced hysteria in his life created intensity in his art, just as it did with Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Poe.

Mishima died attempting a double impossibility: to inspire Japan to reject the present and return to the past, and to make himself over into a man of the past, a samurai. When so futile a gesture is made in life, it can only appear as madness. But when it occurs in art, as in "Swaddling Clothes" or "The Priest and His Love," then it takes on quite another meaning. We seek in art, after all, what we cannot have in a sane life: an unfettered expression of our feelings, wishes, fears, impulses, intentions; a direct confrontation with our human condition in all its madness and cruelty, its contradictions and tragic joys. Mishima declared that he wished to make a poem of his own life. That aspiration is the great romantic quest after the impossible, which in life must always lead to destruction but which is the source of the sublime in art. As an artist, Mishima may have been limited by his own obsessions, but he still gives a great deal of what we go to literature for. Because he kept his own opinions out, his characters and their situations transcend the time and place of their creation. Compared to that accomplishment, the success or failure of the rest of his life must fade into its relative insignificance.

Source: Barbara Wolf, "Mishima in Microcosm," in *The American Scholar,* Vol. 45, Winter, 1975, pp. 848-52.

Topics for Further Study

Investigate the history and progression of western influence in Japan and other Asian countries. Try to find sources that speak from the point of view of the Asian citizens whose lives were radically altered by the infiltration of their countries by western economic, social and political systems. In each specific case, what were the motivations of the western countries in exploring and penetrating Asia? In your opinion, has this "globalization" mutually benefited both western countries and Asia, or has it harmed either party? In "Swaddling Clothes" western influence is portrayed in a negative light. Using your historical research, argue for or against Mishima's critical view of westernization and modernization.

Toshiko is portrayed as a somewhat contradictory character. She primarily wants to hold on to and revive traditional Japanese ethics and mores, but she also challenges those values. For instance, she walks around the park at night despite the impropriety of this action and she sympathetically wraps the nurse's baby in a new piece of flannel when both her husband and the doctor have dismissed the event as ignoble, grotesque and scandalous. How do these contradictory actions modify the characterization of Toshiko as a conservative proponent of tradition? Though she is disheartened by the modernization around her, is there a different kind of change and social transformation that she might support?

"Swaddling Clothes" portrays the nurse's conception and birth of a baby out of wedlock negatively. In a sense, the nurse is an example of a modern day working-class, single mother. Given the contemporary debate over single motherhood especially in impoverished rural and urban environments, is the nurse's situation entirely condemnable? What are the modern social, economic, political and racial factors that lock contemporary single mothers and their children into oppressive situations? Is Toshiko's characterization of the illegitimate baby growing up to be "a lonely rat" fair and accurate? Is a baby born in "ignoble" circumstances forever bound to a lowly position in society? Use contemporary articles from magazines and newspapers to support your point of view.

As a story contrasting the purity of tradition to the contamination of modern influences, "Swaddling Clothes" "punishes" those who dare to step outside of traditional boundaries. The nurse and her child are cast as eternally shameful and worthy of mockery, and Toshiko in one daring moment of impropriety is attacked and possibly killed. In contrast, Toshiko's husband and his male friends have embraced modern life, yet they do not suffer any consequences. On the contrary, they appear to continue carousing and thoroughly enjoy themselves in a modern style. Why does the burden of preserving culture fall on women? Using anthropological or sociological sources that focus on change in traditional societies, explore the assumed gender roles of such cultures. What customs and traditions are men and women expected to fulfill and carry on? In which cases are either women or men disproportionately responsible for preserving culture?

The ending of "Swaddling Clothes" is intentionally left ambiguous. In your interpretation, what happens to Toshiko? Is she raped? Murdered? Both? Might she have survived and even retaliated against her attacker? Given the highly symbolic nature of the story, what are the implications of these various endings? For instance, since Toshiko symbolizes the preservation of traditional values, would her survival of the attack imply that these values can persevere? If she doesn't survive, does the story cast an incontrovertible pall on the possibilities of such preservation?

Look for other fictional or autobiographical works that employ a fragmented narrative style. How does the disruption of the progressive, linear narrative enhance or obscure the thematic content of these works? Identify other non-traditional narrative styles. What kind of "message" might the author be sending by using unconventional narrative styles?

Compare and Contrast

1868: Ascendancy of Meiji government, characterized by adoption of western economic, social, and political practices. The Meiji period is traditionally marked as the beginning of Japanese westernization, modernization, and industrialization. Meiji leaders justify this radical social transformation by professing its goals are to ultimately "out-westernize" and supersede the west. The samurai class is removed from power and public sword-carrying is outlawed.

1980s: High-technology "bullet train" travel is extended throughout the nation. First constructed in 1967, it is the most sophisticated form of train travel of its kind in the world. American consumer automobile production exceeded by Japanese production.

1940s: U. S. levies economic sanctions on Japan. Surprise attack on U. S.'s Pearl Harbor by Japanese airforce. United States drops atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Until this day, this is the first and only large-scale deployment of nuclear weapons on civilian populated areas during a war. Allied Occupation of Japan. Japan is forced to adopt a model of western democratic government and an American written Constitution.

1990s: After the Japanese economy becomes one of the strongest in the world, with the Japanese buying up American properties and companies in the 1980s, their economy begins to falter as their stock market drops.

1942: President F. D. Roosevelt issues Executive Order No. 9066, ordering all American residents of Japanese ancestry to be removed from the United States west coast regardless of American citizenship. They are interned inland in concentration camps to protect against "espionage" and "sabotage" to "national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities" (Executive Order No. 9066 from Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial* p. 129). A similar order is issued in Canada, removing all Japanese from British Columbia's west coast.

1976: President Gerald Ford issues Proclamation 4417, subtitle "An American Promise," officially retracting Executive Order 9066 and offering a national apology to Japanese Americans and their families who were interned during World War II. Proclamation states: "I call upon the American people to affirm with me this American Promise — that we have learned from the tragedy of that long-ago experience forever to treasure liberty and justice for each individual American, and resolve that this kind of action shall never again be repeated" (Proclamation 4417, from Daniels, p. 133).

1980s: U. S. House of Representatives votes to pay surviving internees of World War II relocation of Japanese Americans $20,000 in reparations. In 1989, President George Bush signs the 1987 vote on reparations into law.

What Do I Read Next?

Kamen no Kokuhaku [*Confessions of a Mask* (1949)] by Yukio Mishima. A widely acclaimed autobiographical novel exploring Mishima's adolescent development and young adulthood. Explores themes of homosexuality, obsession with death, interest in the male physicality of military training, and the eroticism of violence, themes which are only touched upon here but are treated at length and in detail in later works.

Kinkakuji [*Temple of the Golden Pavilion* (1956)] by Yukio Mishima. The exploration of nihilist philosophies through the story of a physically and emotionally handicapped Buddhist monk. The Temple is the central symbol of the degradation of beauty in the rapidly modernizing and western-influenced post-World War II Japan. Rather than see the Temple survive in antagonism to the crass modern world, the protagonist burns the Temple to the ground.

"Yukoku" ["Patriotism" (1966)] by Yukio Mishima. A fictionalized account of the NiNi Roku Incident (1936), a violent political upheaval instigated by a military faction who believed certain members of the government were trying to weaken the Emperor's absolute power. "Patriotism" focuses on the story of a fictional high-ranking military official who commits *seppuku* in the face of imminent dishonor. Maintaining her loyalty to her husband and the Emperor, the official's wife commits *seppuku* as well.

Death in Midsummer and Other Stories (1966) by Yukio Mishima. An American published collection of short stories including "Patriotism" and "Swaddling Clothes."

An Artist of the Floating World (1986) by Kazuo Ishiguro. An aging artist looks back upon his life as a successful national painter during and in the years leading up to World War II. His success was largely the result of patronage and support by the Imperial government. After the war, the fall of Emperor, and the devastation of national morale and commitment to the Imperial government, the artist reconsiders the terms of his success and personal artistic vision.

Remains of the Day (1988) by Kazuo Ishiguro. Similar in theme to *An Artist of the Floating World* but set in post World War I England. An English butler who has sacrificed his relationships with lovers and family reflects on his lifelong commitment to being a butler of "dignity." He gradually questions his fierce devotion to his job as he realizes he has emotionally wounded the people who love him and begins to understand that the master whom he had served unconditionally was generally regarded as a Nazi sympathizer. Winner of the 1989 Booker Prize.

Nisei Daughter (1953) by Monica Sone. An autobiographical exploration of the experiences of Japanese in America during and in the years leading up to World War II, focusing on the internment of all U. S. residents of Japanese ancestry in concentration camps. As a *nisei,* second-generation Japanese American, Sone and her siblings are born in the U. S. and have U. S. citizenship but are treated like foreigners and outcasts. Despite this discriminatory treatment, male *nisei* are expected to serve in the American

army. Sone contrasts the biased treatment against her and her family to the philosophies of democracy and freedom that America supposedly espouses.

Obasan (1981) by Joy Kogawa. As a *nisei* living in Canada, Kogawa narrates her experiences under the Canadian internment of residents of Japanese ancestry during World War II. A more scathing indictment of North American treatment of its minorities, Kogawa relates her story in poignant and painfully recounted patches and fragments.

Clay Walls (1987) by Ronyoung Kim. The story of a group of Korean American immigrants in California, who mostly left their homeland to escape the military rule of Korea by Japan (1910-1945). Offers an interesting comparison to Mishima's patriotic rejection of the United States occupation of Japan after World War II.

Further Study

Benedict, Ruth. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Studies in Patterns of Japanese Culture,* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1946.

A sociological study of Japanese culture concentrating on its dual philosophy of cultural sophistication (the "chrysanthemum") and military prowess (the "sword"). Stokes notes in his biography that Mishima read Benedict's work and praised her for calling attention to the militaristic aspect of Japan rather than focusing exclusively on the delicacy and charm of its culture and traditions as other historians and sociologists conventionally do.

Chan, Sucheng. *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History,* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1982.

A comprehensive and thorough history of Asian migration to North America. Brings to light the poverty and economic disenfranchisement precipitated in Asian countries by western infiltration and forcible opening of trade ports, belying the myth that Asians migrated voluntarily to North America in search of the "Ameri-can dream." Includes concise chronology of Asian American history and bibliography

Hosoe, Eikoh. *Barakei (Ordeal by Roses),* New York: Penguin, 1985.

A luxurious collection of photos and drawings by Hosoe, the bulk of which Mishima posed for during his program of rigorous body-building. Foreword written by Mishima.

Napier, Susan J. *Escape from the Wasteland: Romanticism and Realism in the Fiction of Mishima Yukio and Oe Kenzaburo,* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991.

A sophisticated and detailed critical analysis of Mishima's central works, their literary styles, relationship to the literary movements of Japanese Romanticism and Realism. Compares Mishima to Nobel Prize winner Oe.

Starrs, Roy. *Deadly Dialectics: Sex, Violence, and Nihilism in the World of Yukio Mishima,* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994.

A critical-historical analysis of the main themes prevalent in Mishima's works. Explores Mishima's philosophic progression from passive to active nihilism. Includes discussion of major works, links Mishima to 19th century German philosophers, particularly Nietzsche, and discusses his complex personal and literary relationship to the west.

Stokes, Henry Scott. *The Life and Death of Yukio Mishima,* New York: Noonday Press, revised, 1995.

A personalized and intimate biography of Mishima written by a close journalist friend. Recounts Mishima's early childhood through the day of his suicide and summarizes details of Mishima's central literary works. Speculates on Mishima's motivations in

forming the *Tatenokai* and staging his *seppuku*. Includes detailed chronology of Mishima's life.

Mishima Cyber Museum at www.vill.yamanakako.yamanashi.jp/bungaku/mishima/index-e.html

An informative and interesting website dedicated to the life and literary works of Mishima. Managed by the Bungakukan Planning Committee in anticipation of the construction of the Yukio Mishima Museum (Bungakukan) on Lake Yamanakaka to accompany the Takahama Kyoshi and Tokutomi Soho Museums to complete the "Lake Yamanakaka Library Grove Trio." To be completed July, 1999. Includes forum for posting questions and comments about Mishima's life and work.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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