Thirst for Love Short Guide

Thirst for Love by Yukio Mishima

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Characters

Thirst for Love is the story of a young widow, Etsuko Sugimoto, who becomes the mistress of her father-inlaw, Yakichi Sugimoto. While living at his estate, Etsuko becomes infatuated with a young farmhand, Saburo, whom she kills when he tries to make the advances to her she seemed to be inviting. The work is complicated by a long flashback to the last illness of her husband, with typhoid fever from drinking polluted water, and her tireless efforts to keep Ryosuke Sugimoto alive so that he could continue to suffer the unassuageable thirsts of that ailment. That was her revenge for the torments his infidelities had caused her in the earlier years of their marriage. She, like the hero of Confessions of a Mask (1949), is a person twisted by her past who glimpses for a time, under the influence of sexual desire, something that seems like a way out of confusion. In the earlier work, readers are not told whether that young hero will find out that his way out is an illusion; there is no doubt that the heroine of Thirst for Love was happier with the illusion of loving her young farm hand than with the actuality of his amorous approach.

Minor characters include Saburo, the hired man; Miyo, the hired girl, pregnant with Saburo's child; Kensuke and Chieko Sugimoto, Etsuko's brother-inlaw and sister-in-law, who live in the same dwelling with the rest of the characters and have their own interpretations of what is going on.

Social Concerns/Themes

In spite of the fact that Mishima associated with Japan's wealthy and titled people, particularly when he was a student, he seems to have held them in contempt. His presentation of the old man in this book — a company president now retired as a farmer — shines with that contempt. To some extent his attitude toward Japanese women was similarly unfriendly. In this work, therefore, he indulges in some sharp social satire of the men and women of station in Japanese society.

The rather ignorant young man in the story, with his wholesome, earthbound values, seems to come off much better, particularly when he takes part in a wild country festival, an event in Japanese culture that Mishima always treated with reverence.

The principal theme of the novel is expressed in the ironic title. The love the woman endures from her fatherin-law is like water to a person dying of typhoid fever: He longs for it, but it does him no good — perhaps even aggravates his torment, just as it was the cause of it at the beginning. Her love for the young farmer is the same thing in a twisted way: She longs for it but rejects it violently when it is offered to her.

Techniques

The use of symbolism in the title, with its relation to typhoid fever, is deft and unobtrusive. The technique by which the book begins (with Etsuko purchasing a pomelo to place on her husband's grave in the busy Osaka terminal) permits the reader to observe Etsuko carefully before he is apprised of her predicament. The exciting festival scenes, lighted by blazing bamboo trunks, underscore the fur y of Etsuko's passion for Saburo.

Adaptations

Thirst for Love was produced by Kazu Otsuka in 1967 and directed by Izen Kurahara. The film does not follow the plot of the novel very closely, but the essentials are there: the brooding sexual frustration of the heroine, the prying of the relatives around her, the virile strength of the young man she is fascinated by.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion (1959) was made into the film The Conflagration (Enjo) in 1958, directed by Kon Ichikawa. It emphasizes the protagonist's disgust at his father's weakness and his mother's sexual infidelities as the root causes of his deviation.

Ichikawa has considered it the film he enjoyed most.

The story "Patriotism" was made into the film Rite of Love and Death in 1965. It was directed by Mishima himself, with the assistance of Masaki Domoto. First shown in Paris with French subtitles in September of 1965, it was runner-up for the Grand Prix at the Tours Film Festival held in January of 1966. It established box office records when it started appearing in Japan in April of the same year. The plot follows the story all too closely.

The story is a shocker; the film is worse.

Related Titles

Confessions of a Mask Mishima rejected conventional morality and the precept that literature should serve a redeeming social purpose. Even so it is difficul t for any of the Japanese to ignore the deep Confucian indoctrination their society exerts.

On the surface the theme of Confessions of a Mask (1949), a somewhat autobiographical novel, is self-centered and rebellious. Underneath that surface there is a note of censure of the protagonist for his inability to marry and raise a family as his parents expect and, above all, for the lies that permitted him to dodge the draft and his opportunity to die for his country.

Before he died Mishima himself would, however tardily, marry, father a family, and die shouting the name of the Emperor.

Confessions of a Mask is written in first person presenting the childhood and adolescence of a man with a history like the author's: brought up by a doting grandmother who did not allow him to play with boys his age, who seemed to be attempting to shut his mother out of his life, who surrounded him with adult female company and, when he was old enough, introduced him to the world of classical Japanese theater — the Noh, the Bunraku, and, most important, the Kabuki, all of them with male actors and reciters portraying female roles. Confessions of a Mask is engrossed with the problems of that child when he grows to manhood and tries to play a male role with women and in the war going on at that time.

He seems to resolve his confusions in an infatuation with men: young, athletic, muscled, rank with the odors of exertion and even excrement.

The principal characters are: first, the unnamed first-person narrator, a young man filled with sado-homosexual desires attempting to will himself into normal heterosexuality; Sonoko, the vivacious girl who is attracted to him and whom he would like to bring himself to love and marry; Omi, the muscular older boy whom the protagonist loves from afar; several muscular, also unnamed, young men whom the narrator mentally undresses and dismembers with much blood and gore; and an unnamed prostitute whose failure to arouse the narrator sexually convinces him that his homosexuality is innate and incurable.

The book begins with an epigraph quoting Dostoevski on the beauty of sodomy. Its first chapter attempts to reconstruct the young narrator's life practically from the moment of his birth, spending several pages quibbling on whether he can remember his first hours out of the womb. The successive chapters continue with the reporting of adventures involving the narrator's sadomasochistic impulses and his efforts to stifle them and channel them elsewhere even though they bring him great joy.

The most ingenious technique lies in the disguising of the autobiographical connections in the novel. It is not necessarily a confession; it is at best a masked confession, whatever that is.

Although it tells the story of a young man very much like Mishima, there are some glaring differences which Japanese scholars — schooled in autobiographical criticism — would mark. The title is used in a second sense in its implication that the narrator is playing a false part in society, which would disapprove of his real self if he showed it to them completely or even confessed all.

Japanese literature has a long tradition of confessional writing, ranging from the diaries of court ladies written a millennium ago to the I-novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and even the bowel-movement analyses of Mishima's beloved Junichiro Tanizaki (1886-1965). Mishima was also drawn to the writings of Andre Gide, Raymond Radiguet, Oscar Wilde, and Thomas Mann, which, with Guido Reni's painting of San Sebastian, would have given him many models for his developing book.

Rousseau's Confessions (1782) and various of the works of De Sade come most readily to mind when one thinks of Western titles possibly related to this work. Mishima seems also to have learned much about how to present the problems of young men in Goethe's works, notably The Sorrows of Young Werther (1774) and Wilhelm Meister (1777-1829). In Japanese literature, works of Ihara Saikaku (1642-1693) such as The Life of an Amorous Woman and particularly The Life of an Amorous Man show strong sexual-confession precedence at work even in the seventeenth century.

Forbidden Colors In 1951 and 1952, Mishima published the two parts of Forbidden Colors, which is a frank and, in some ways, scholarly sequel to Confessions of a Mask. The author took notes for it while visiting gay bars in Tokyo, always accompanied by a representative of his publisher. It is the story of a young man with homosexual inclinations who, urged by an ailing mother, is about to enter what he fears will be a disastrous marriage. He tells his troubles to a rich old author, who pays him to marry the girl and wreak revenge on certain coy women friends by leading them on sexually and disappointing them. The novel continues with narration of the progress of the marriage, including a graphic description of the birth of the couple's child; with several disastrous heterosexual encounters, as planned; and with a number of homosexual adventures, presented at times with wonder, at times with disgust, and frequently with humor. Throughout, the reader is given a running commentary on the ruses, the lore, the joys, the sadness, and the explosive bitterness of the homosexual world.

Because of the arrangements Mishima made for studying the world of the Japanese homosexual, he was able to present his material in this work at times with a degree of detachment. At times it is almost reportage. The reader is informed about how the denizens of the gay bar seek sexual partners, how restlessly they move from one lover to another, how they suffe r when favored relationships go sour. Readers become guests at a gay party, witnesses to an attack by a huge American on a small Japanese. Readers are told what it means when a rich bachelor takes a handsome young man into his household or as his guest on a trip abroad, what it means when a bachelor is said to

have forsworn marriage because a girl he loved died when they were young. Beneath all the exclamations about beauty and ecstatic unions, there is a note of dissatisfaction and despair over the fragility of homosexual love affairs.

The principal character may be a handsome young man named Yuichi, with a body "like the Apollo molded in bronze by an artist of the Peloponnesus school." Rivaling him for domination of the novel is Shunsuke Hinoki, an old author suffering from various ills of old age who counsels the young man on his marriage and, at the beginning, even on the homosexual adventures which he, the old author, has never known. Another character is Yuichi's suffering and invisible wife, Yasuko.

Then there is Mrs. Kaburagi, a flashy, immoral woman whom Shunsuke has tried unsuccessfully to seduce and Yuichi successfully attracts and frustrates. Another woman, named Kyoko, whose principal fault seems to be that she is empty-headed, is similarly treated. There are also the many homosexual lovers of Yuichi, one of whom is a captain of industry, another of whom is Mrs. Kaburagi's husband — a nobleman, in fact — Count Kaburagi.

The most striking technique lies in the presentation of the complex relationship binding the young author Yukio Mishima — still in his twenties at this time — the old author Shunsuke Hinoki, and the young man Yuichi Minami (note the initials). The confessional complexity of Confessions of a Mask seems to be at work again. It seems possible that the old author represents "Mishima the detached reporter" or perhaps "Mishima the man of experience," who is giving the young man so close to being the author himself advice on his life — which is, after all, bound closely to the novel being written — as well as the connection between his sexuality and art. The book was described in Time as portraying "posh lust."

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