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Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: Veiled Criticism Through Extreme Entertainment

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Veiled Criticism Through Extreme Entertainment

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Abstract

This thesis examines the writings of Meiji novelists living during a time of transition. Their writings became known as part of a genre called Erotic Grotesque Nonsense. The genre became defined as engaging in extremes to entertain an audience captivated by the eroticism, grotesque, or even the nonsensical nature of the stories being told. The thesis discovers there is a pressing social commentary on the tumultuous transition to modernity hidden within these works. The traditions established during the Tokugawa era starting from 1603 and lasting until 1867 came under pressure with the start of the Meiji era in 1868. Each chapter showcases how these Meiji novelists attempted to memorialize these traditions and comment on the state of Japan in transition. The study concludes with a redefining of this genre as more than simply entertainment. Erotic Grotesque Nonsense is a testament to the resolve of these writers to memorialize traditional Japan as a victim of modernity that won't be easily forgotten.

Keywords: Japan, mimetic, modern, modernity, Tokugawa, tradition, household, novel

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Chapter I: Introduction

1. Series of Losses for the Sake of Modernity

The Meiji era is widely known as the period of Japan embracing modernization. The fall of the Tokugawa shogunate marked a turning point and Japan was faced with the realization that the status quo would crumble to the looming threat of Western imperial powers. Japan decided to learn from these imperial powers and invigorate its weak foundation to be one of the strong powers.[1] During this transformation period, Japan stressed the importance of this modernization movement as means of survival.

The common assumption by outside observers was this modernization process was seamless.[2] This was a false assumption born out of ignorance. The genre of writing known as Erotic Grotesque Nonsense was a way to mourn. While there was entertainment value to be found in extremes ranging from erotic relationships to nonsensical humor, writers were voicing their discontent with modernity. What gave these writers the right to critique? According to Mori Ogai, "To aspire to become an accomplished critic, one must be in constant contact with the field to be evaluated. No, let me be more emphatic. One must be a person with an imitate knowledge of the field."[3] As Mori Ogai puts it, you can only truly criticize something if you know it well. Only modern men born out of this modernity can truly judge it for what it is. For Japan, it was a series of losses.

[1] Brett L. Walker, *A Concise History of Japan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 160.
[2] Andrew Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan: From Tokugawa Times to the Present*, 4th edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 61.
[3] Ōgai Mori, *Not a Song Like Any Other: An Anthology of Writings by Mori Ogai*, ed. J. Thomas Rimer (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2004), 8.

This is where genre of Erotic Grotesque Nonsense holds its true purpose. This thesis seeks to prove that Erotic Grotesque Nonsense was a genre that used a two-layer critique mechanism for modernity. Societal criticism was the first layer, which portrayed fictional stories of modernity run amok as cautionary tales. The second layer was the fierce debate among these modern intellectuals through a literary technique known as mimetic criticism. Mimicry was used as an indicator of who they were responding to and allowed them to contest that their work in accurate or not realistic. As Mori Ogai notes, "There were, in the realm of the novel, writers known by such pen names as Rohan, Koyo, Kanson, Ryoku'u and Bimyo; and in the realm of literary criticism, Shoyo, Ogai, and others."[4] It was only through this criticism process that the writers could assess where Japan stood in the modernity process. Authors would say, for example, that the ship we cherished is sinking, but we can at the very least call it a submarine. Japan may rise again with its traditional identity intact, but if it doesn't, we can memorialize the losses so tradition is not completely forgotten.

2. Historical Background

A period of modernization is a transformation from the traditional over a set period of time. Tradition in the context of society is a way of life that people have become accustomed to. The length of time spent adhering to a set routine or order is what allows it to become a tradition. What is traditional Japan for these Erotic Grotesque Nonsense writers? The answer for this lies in the Tokugawa era, starting from 1603 and lasting until 1868. According to Morton and Olenik, "At length, at the end of the sixteenth century Japan became unified and pacified in a much more definite and complete sense . . . This unification ushered in the most peaceful and homogeneous

[4] Mori, 6.

period in Japanese history, the Tokugawa Shogunate, lasting also for 250 years."[5] The Tokugawa era represented order established over the course of 250 years. The establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate was the first sense of a stable and unified Japan. According to Hobsbawm, "'Invented tradition' is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."[6] The long period of 250 years of repetition allowed the order to be cemented as a new invented tradition. The Erotic Grotesque Nonsense writers that will be mentioned in this study had parents who grew up in this traditional period. A few of them, like Mori Ogai, were born during the Tokugawa era.

The Tokugawa shogunate that was the governing body during this period worked tirelessly to establish order in Japan following the turbulent Sengoku period starting from 1467 and lasting until 1567. The Tokugawa shogunate managed to achieve the establishment of a sense of order, but society could not immediately forget 100 years of strife and civil war. According to Walker, "The Warring States lords may have denuded Japan's hillsides in their sixteenth-century quest for military supremacy, but by the seventeenth century the political landscape had become far more orderly than the natural one."[7] The peace established by Tokugawa was forced and society was vulnerable to plunging back into the chaotic era that had become natural. The Tokugawa shogunate realized that they needed to put in place safeguards to

[5] W. Scott Morton and J. Kenneth Olenik, *Japan: Its History and Culture*, 4th Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2004), 101.
[6] E. J. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition*, Canto Classics, 2012, 1, https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107295636.
[7] Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, 125.

prevent the fall into disorder. These safeguards brought an uneasy order that was fraught with tension.

The first method used by the Tokugawa shogunate was establishing a philosophical order. The Tokugawa era marked a full embrace of Neo-Confucianism. According to Walker, "Neo-Confucian ideologies made manifest in the status system, created social divisions between samurai and others and determined the contours of Japan's cities."[8] People in this Tokugawa order all had a clear role to fulfill. This division of people went beyond just separating samurai from the common folk. It actually seeped into the household. This can be seen in the life of Hatoyama Haruko who grew up in the Tokugawa era as the youngest of seven children. According to Sally A. Hastings,

> In keeping with the custom in the domain in which her father was a samurai, Haruko's family maintained a strong tradition of 'honoring men and despising women.' Her mother deferred to her father, and the children did the same. Within the household, her mother was busy with a variety of tasks: raising silkworms, spinning, weaving, and sewing. Haruko learned these skills at her mother's side.[9]

Hatoyama Haruko's household was merely following the established order of the time period. Women were seen as deferring to men and put in charge of managing the housework. The education of women was focused on fulfilling the role of maintaining the household. Mothers would pass these skills to their daughters.

The embrace of Neo-Confucianism did create a problem. The most honorable members of society were the samurai and they found themselves in a contradiction brought on by the

[8] Walker, 126.
[9] Sally A. Hastings, "Hatoyama Haruko: Ambition Woman," in *The Human Tradition in Modern Japan*, ed. Anne Walthall (Wilmington, Del: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 82.

relentless pursuit of achieving order. The samurai class was seen as the paragon of order due to their high standing and preserving honor through their deeds. It was this role of preserving honor that ran afoul of Tokugawa's societal order. This was clearly displayed through the story of Asano Nagano:

> In the famous 'Ako vendetta', fictionalized in Chushingura (The treasury of loyal retainers, 1748) and celebrated in kabuki plays, the lord of Ako domain, Asano Naganori (1675-1701), slashed court etiquette master Kira Yoshinaka (1641-1703) with a dagger in the Edo castle compound in 1701 after the latter called him a country bumpkin. After the insult to Asano and his ancestral lands, attacking Kira made sense according to samurai codes of honour, particularly given the history between the two men. The public law of the shoguns, however, forbade drawing a sword in the castle, and the bakufu ordered Asano to commit suicide and forfeit his lands, making his retainers ronin, or master-less samurai.[10]

This story shows how the most honorable member of Tokugawa society fulfilled his role by punishing someone who insulted his high position and ancestral lands. The samurai was punished for fulfilling his role. If he did not act against the person, he couldn't call himself a samurai. This contradiction shows how unnatural this Tokugawa enforced order was. This is a fictional story written during the Tokugawa period. It is an example of a Tokugawa era writer showing unease with the order established in the period. It is reminiscent of the Erotic Grotesque Nonsense writers voicing their unease with the transition to modernity starting in the Meiji Period. This similarity highlights that there is a tradition of writers being at the forefront of voicing societal ills through their fictional stories.

The infamous control measure known as the isolation policy of the Tokugawa period was meant to reassert control and keep outside influence at bay. There was a fear that Western influence was spreading rapidly in the country and foreign religions like Christianity were

[10] Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, 127.

viewed as the culprit. According to Morton and Olenik, "The strong impulse to preserve the country exactly as it was explained in part the mounting persecution of the Christian church in Japan, viewed with ever-increasing suspicion as the agent of foreign powers."[11] The Tokugawa shogunate was sensitive to anything that might create instability. Status quo needed to preserve at all costs. The government attempted to reign in this disruptive force, which resulted in the Shimabara Rebellion.

Even though the Tokugawa shogunate managed to squash the rebellion, the outbreak of rebellion confirmed lingering fear that the country was slipping back to the chaotic era of civil war. Tokugawa shogunate decided to adopt a closed border policy that blocked most foreigners from trading with Japan and restricted citizens from engaging in trade overseas.[12] This measure was meant to reassert control both within and outside the country to protect the nation from forces that may further disrupt the established order. This control measure set the stage for the appearance of Commodore Perry. The rationale for Commodore Perry's visit was based on this control measure.

The reason the Americans appeared in Edo Bay in 1853 was due to trade. According to Gordon, "In 1853, Commodore Matthew Perry of the United States arrived in Japan as the most determined carrier yet of this simple message: Agree to trade in peace, or suffer the consequences in war."[13] This is an example of gunboat diplomacy, but it doesn't take away from the fact that economic expansion was the goal. A nation that isolates itself from the world impedes global trade. Americans were in a state of desperation due to a lack of resources, hence the veiled threat. According to Gordon, "With Atlantic waters nearly exhausted, American

[11] Morton and Olenik, *Japan*, 121.
[12] Morton and Olenik, 123.
[13] Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 50.

whalers had been venturing far across the Pacific. The growing American economy needed whale oil both for lighting and as an industrial lubricant."[14] While the Americans viewed the visit as economic expansion, Japan viewed the visit as a crisis of legitimacy.

The appearance of Commodore Perry was the straw that broke the camel's back for Japan and exposed how Tokugawa shogunate policies left the country vulnerable. The appearance of Commodore Perry's black ship was an ominous sign that all was not well. According to Morton and Olenik, "In a short time the common people began swarming out in small boats to view the strange warships . . .Those in authority were deeply concerned. They were impressed by steam propulsion, and they knew enough about artillery to realize the greatly superior fire power of American vessels."[15] The fact that the Americans could just appear unchallenged in the bay showed that the Tokugawa shogunate's isolation edict did not have enough strength to stop global forces. The appearance of the American ships showed how dated the Japanese boats were in comparison. Steam propulsion was a new technological advancement born out of uninterrupted global trade, but Japan missed the technological advancement due to the isolation policy of the Tokugawa shogunate.

The last and most important reason behind the Meiji Revolution was the unequal treaties imposed by the U.S. and other Western imperialist countries. As Gordon observes,

> These 'unequal treaties' were humiliating in theory and in practice. It is true, and worth mentioning, that the Americans accepted Japanese insistence that opium trade be outlawed, and the British did not object. Had opium entered Japan freely, it might have changed the subsequent course of Japanese history in significant ways. Nonetheless, the treaties imposed a semicolonial status upon Japan. Political and economically, Japan become legally subordinate to foreign governments. Over the next few decades, petty insults were heaped one upon the other.[16]

[14] Gordon, 50.
[15] Morton and Olenik, *Japan*, 139.
[16] Gordon, *A Modern History of Japan*, 51.

Commodore Perry's visit with the gunboats showcasing technological superiority brought a sense of inadequacy to stand up to a foreign force. The unequal treaties were a second slap in the face in the form of powerlessness to control what a foreign entity could do within borders and how they could interact with your nation. The visit marked a humiliating loss of sovereignty for Japan. It was the loss of sovereignty that struck a nerve for the Meiji architects. The treaties served as a unifier through a shared sense of humiliation and trampling of sovereignty. According to Walker, "In response to 'unequal treaties' and fueled by radical politics of imperial nationalism, Japan began embarking on radically new forms of state building in the Meiji years . . ."[17] The architects of the Meiji government wanted to reclaim the sovereignty Japan lost. A transition to modernity was a means to that end.

While the avenging of this humiliation became the main motivator, reality forced the early Meiji architects to first focus on building up Japan. According to Walker, "The radical imperial nationalism of the early nineteenth century surrendered to a *realpolitik* engagement with the US and Europe, in which modernization became the preoccupation of Japanese politics, culture, and society."[18] There was a sense that Japan needed to first reach the level of the powers that did them wrong. This meant acknowledging the past policies of the Tokugawa era that left the country in a weakened state. We see acknowledgment of this in the Charter Oath of 1868. According to Walker, "The Charter Oath of April 1868 laid out the basic framework for the new regime. Although the first four tenets – 'deliberative assemblies', universal male suffrage, the abandonment of the evil customs of the past', and open access to entrepreneurial

[17] Walker, *A Concise History of Japan*, 158.
[18] Walker, 159.

opportunities . . .”[19] This pledge to abandon evil customs of the past was a reference to past Tokugawa policies and traditions. The abandonment of the past goes even further to traditions. This is most prominent in regards to women during the Meiji era.

As mentioned previously, Hatoyama Haruko grew up during the Tokugawa era in a traditional samurai household that respected the Confucian tenet that everyone has specific roles in society. Her household lived by the tenet of ‘honoring men and despising women.’ During the Tokugawa era, she was left with only one option for knowledge and was limited to her mother as her only teacher. Lessons only focused on learning household tasks. This was the traditional role of women. The Meiji modernization disrupted this tradition. As Sally Hastings writes, “Her mother’s instruction was supplemented by lessons from local teachers of the Chinese classics, who were all the more available because of the upheavals of the Meiji Restoration.”[20] Women’s education greatly expanded beyond just household tasks and even a girl could learn about the Chinese classics.

The expansion of education for women came from Japan’s pursuit to learn from Western imperial powers. According to Hastings, “Exclusively female schools, such as Takebashi, were an innovation of the new Meiji era, and Haruko’s enrollment foreshadowed her leadership in the separate sphere of women only educational institutions . . . Her tutelage under American faculty members was her first experience with female teachers.”[21] The Meiji modernization effort redefined the tradition of women only having a limited education under their mothers. The modernization effort pushed by the Meiji architects greatly expanded her opportunities and eroded the Tokugawa tradition. This is a point of contention due to Japan being forced to

[19] Walker, 160.
[20] Hastings, "Hatoyama Haruko: Ambitious Woman," 82.
[21] Hastings, 83.

contemplate how much tradition can be eroded for the sake of modernity. There is a significant risk of losing the traditions that define a nation's identity if this is done carelessly How far did the pursuit of modernization erode tradition? This is what Erotic Grotesque Nonsense found contention in and its writers were compelled to seek an answer.

3. What is Erotic Grotesque Nonsense? What is mimesis?

Erotic Grotesque Nonsense is not the original term for this important literary genre. The original term coined by Noble Prize-winning writer Kawabata Yasunari, was eroticism, nonsense, speed, and humor. He first used this term to describe a play that he saw in Asakusa in 1929:

> Kawabata himself eschewed the screen in favor of the stage, in particular the Asakusa revue, a dance and comedy show with erotic undertones first performed in 1929 by the Casino Folies (Kashino Fori). He described this performance as composed of 'eroticism and nonsense and speed, and humor in the vein of the topical cartoon, the jazz song, legs.'[22]

Asakusa was a physical representation of eroticism, nonsense, speed, and humor. The entertainment provided in this Tokyo district was a melting pot of these four attributes. Famed Meiji writer Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, who will be discussed at length in this study, also comments on Asakusa and highlights its speed attribute. In his forward to *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, Donald Richie states, "Tanizaki Jun'ichiro wrote of the 'innumerable classes of visitor and types of entertainment and its constant and peerless richness preserved even as it furiously changes . . . swelling and clashing in confusion and then fusing into harmony."[23] Asakusa wasn't stagnant; it

[22] Yasunari Kawabata and Donald Richie, Foreword to *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, trans. Alisa Freedman, First edition (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), xviii.
[23] Kawabata and Richie, ix.

was always changing. This constantly evolving nature represents the speed aspect of a city that never sleeps and the inherently fast pace of modernity.

The Meiji era writers did make known their displeasure with this physical manifestation of modernity. There was an ugliness to the overabundance of eroticism, grotesqueness, speed, and humor. Tanizaki Jun'ichiro, in an unfinished novel titled *The Mermaid (Kojin)*, also alludes to this inherent ugliness. According to Richie, "The hero of Tanizaki's unfinished novel is simultaneously repelled and attracted by it. He confides that he is drawn to Asakusa because, finding Tokyo ugly, he wants to 'experience this ugliness in its purest state."[24] There was a morbid curiosity for authors in this movement to see modernity running amok in physical form. There was a sense that it should be completely rejected, but there was also an attractive quality due to how unfiltered it was.

Kawabata Yasunari wrote a book titled *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* to chronicle this symbol of modernity in Japan, the Asakusa district. *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* wastes no time in showcasing the presence of eroticism, nonsense, speed, and humor. At the very beginning of the novel, the reader is presented with what is considered a normal sight in Asakusa:

> Just at the neck of the gourd-shaped pond there is this little island, wisteria-trellised bridges extending from either bank. There, next to the fatsia bush under the weeping willow in front of the Tachibana fish stew shop, a large man is standing, eating the wheat crackers that have been thrown to the carp in the pond. Ankle-deep, he rakes them in with this bamboo pole some two meters long. Then he stands up straight and nosily munches the crackers.[25]

[24] Kawabata and Richie, xiv.

[25] Kawabata and Richie, Yasunari Kawabata and Donald Richie, The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa, trans. Alisa Freedman, First edition (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2005), 8.

A man is so stricken with hunger that he is willing to eat the leftovers of fish. It is a grotesque scene in the sense of how unsanitary it is to eat those crackers. The humiliation the man must be enduring due to people watching this spectacle and choosing not to help him adds to the unsettling feeling of abandonment and the immoral nature of modernity.

The next line quickly clarifies the extent of the humiliation: "-What a nut. He ought to pay the carp a commission. And everyone on my side of the pond laughs."[26] The nonsensical humor comes in the form of a joke at the man's expense. The entire scene is absurd, but the joke gives a sense that this was a realistic and commonplace occurrence for its modern inhabitants. This one scene embodies the nonsensical, humorous, and grotesque aspects of modernity. It is also the embodiment of the shameful aspect of modernity.

The novel also showcases eroticism in Asakusa. The reader is presented with a character named Oshin the *gokaiya*. A *gokaiya* is a woman who engages in sexual exploits to make a living. The novel showcases how there is an inherent immortality to this business that transcends simply trying to make a living:

> -Someone like her, Oshin-someone who does it with guys like day laborers, cart pullers, garbage pickers, and the homeless. Most of them are kids under fourteen or fifteen or women past forty. Few of the women you'd marry end up sleeping out in the open. If they use their heads they can get by, though, like being someone's mistress, even if it's only something like six times a month.[27]

With this dialogue, the reader is presented with the reality of over-sexualization in a modern city. The criticism the characters have for Oshin is the fact that she does not market her sexual exploits well enough. This commercialization of sex is more unrestrained in modernity. We see a

[26] Kawabata and Richie, 8.
[27] Kawabata and Richie, 19.

Western capitalist perspective on how anything can be sold effectively. The tradition of marriage is no longer held in high regard in this new modernity and affairs are commonplace and numerous. Kawabata Yasunari wanted to show the skepticism of modernity by using Asakusa as a model. The aspect of commercialization was depicted as raw and desperate in order to fulfill the need to survive this new state of society.

It is the commercialization aspect that leads to the redefining of Erotic Grotesque Nonsense. This new interpretation was brought by Miriam Silverberg. She first begins by defining modernization for the Japanese.

> In distinguishing between *modern* and *postmodern,* and among *modernism*, *modernization*, and *modernity*, I agree in part with John Frow's distinctions. For Frow, *modernism* refers to 'a bundle of cultural practices, some of them adversarial'; *modernization* is 'an economic process with social and cultural implications'; and modernity, overlapping with the modernization process, is 'a philosophical category designating the temporality of the post-traditional world.'[28]

Modernization is a clash of tradition and economic pressures. This clash is adversarial since the need for change comes at the expense of tradition. It is the economic aspect that makes Silberberg's interpretation stand out above all others. She adds, "To these terms I add a fourth, the Japanese word *modan* (written as *modern* from hereon or as '*modan*' when emphasizing pronunciation), which, like Frow's modernization, presumes a post-traditional world not bound by national boundaries or timeless customs but informed by the open-endedness and dynamism of capitalism."[29] It is here capitalism is mentioned as a key factor in the modernization process.

[28] Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, First edition (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2009), 13.
[29] Silverberg, 13.

Previously, Western influence is vaguely mentioned as affecting Japan, but Miriam Silverberg emphasizes the importance of capitalism as a major influence.

This is evident when investigating the eroticism aspect and how it meshes with the capitalism dynamic. According to Miriam Silverberg, "And just as the Modern Girl could and can be viewed in two ways—as a middle-class consumer or as a politicized working woman—the café waitress can be studied from two dimensions. While she was commodified as an erotic object, at the same time she articulated her own sexual desires and her protests against the constraints of her workplace."[30] Men going to these cafes commonly viewed the waitress as an erotic object even though she was just working to make ends meet. She was the one ultimately in control of what services she provided and men were powerless to force her into that erotic role. The very fact that she was outside the household was a rebellion against the traditional role for women. Capitalism gave women the power to choose what services they wanted to sell. It was a role reversal to the traditional docile woman of tradition. Men could view her as an erotic object as much as they wanted, but she could decide to only serve those men a hot cup of coffee.

Another area highlighting the dynamics of capitalism is the grotesque aspect. In a reference to Asakusa, Silverberg highlights an often-overlooked product of modernity. She writes, "Asakusa grotesquerie must be defined by the tensions embodied in the coexistence of dire poverty with leisure, of resistance with surveillance, of unprecedented (capitalist and anticapitalist) attitudes with older forms of relationships, and of desperation with humor."[31] This goes back to the scene in *Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* where a man is forced to eat the leftovers of fish in a pond while onlookers make jokes at his expense. Capitalism is a matter of the haves and

[30] Silverberg, 73.
[31] Silverberg, 203.

have nots and we see this on full display in Kawabata Yasunari's novel. The grotesque aspect is the overabundance of dire poverty in plain sight, yet the well-off inhabitants choose to ignore the plight of their neighbor. Silverberg highlights how these two groups live amongst each other, but the one suffering from dire poverty still manages to become invisible in plain sight due to the dynamics of capitalism.

The last question that needs to be answered is "What is mimesis?" Mimesis as part of its own form of literary criticism is the tool that sets the stage for the battleground where intellectuals gauged modernity in Japan. It is through the use of mimicry that the authors connected their fictional works and provided criticism on how well their work reflected reality. It is important to emphasize that mimesis is not simply a one-to-one copy. Parody would be a good example of the imitation process. A parody recreates a work to a certain extent, but exaggeration is added to provides its own identity. The similarities are only meant to link both works and force a comparison. It is the same situation here, where these writers mimicked themes, characters, and even titles of previous works to draw a comparison. It still diverges enough to convey the criticism of the author to the mimicked work.

Mimetic criticism is the incorporation of the imitative quality and uses the similarities to draw a comparison. "The word 'mimetic' comes from the Greek word 'mimesis,' the act of imitation. The mimetic theory of literary criticism places primary importance on how well a literary work imitates life."[32] The criticism would be the level of divergence from the mimicked work that stands out to the reader. This is done to send a message of disagreement. The new work is therefore declaring itself to be the true representation of reality. Within the context of

[32] "Mimetic Theory of Literary Criticism," Pen and the Pad, accessed October 14, 2022, https://penandthepad.com/mimetic-theory-literary-criticism-5761846.html.

modernity in Japan, the author is declaring that the new work is the true representation of the current state of modernization project in Japan. The previous work is considered obsolete with the appearance of this new work.

Rene Girard is one the foremost experts on mimetic theory. He explains, "According to Girard, our best novelists are then also our best critics, because they 'apprehend intuitively and concretely, through the medium of their art, if not formally, the system in which they were first imprisoned together with their contemporaries.'"[33] This statement echoes what Mori Ogai comments on in terms of what he believes makes a great critic. Only those who engage with the field can criticize it properly. This study marks the first unveiling of how Japanese writers effectively used mimetic criticism as a gauge of the modernity project in Japan, but also as a tool for debate among writers participating in the genre known as Erotic Grotesque Nonsense. It is appropriate to start this study by looking into Mori Ogai's *Maihime The Dancing Girl* as the first case into the debate over eroticism.

[33] Pierpaolo Antonello and Heather Webb, *Mimesis, Desire, and the Novel : Rene Girard and Literary Criticism*, Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2015), xii, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=sso&db=e000xna&AN=1194639&site=eds-live&custid=s8475574.

Chapter II: Eroticism: Loss of Head of Household

Eroticism can be characterized in many ways. The most important aspect of eroticism is the connection. Eroticism is an extreme version of this connection in the form of obsession. The obsession to form a relationship is what drives people to impulsive decisions based on desire. Traditional Japan in the Tokugawa era was heavily influenced by the Confucian ideals of roles defining the household. It explicitly defines the connections that people have in the household. There was a hierarchy where the father sat at the top of the household and the mother would be below him and his son. Hatoyama Haruko's experience describes this as men having primacy and women as secondary supportive figures. Mori Ogai and Jun'ichiro Tanizaki attempt to grapple with how this tradition held against the obsessive impulses brought by modernity. The two stories that will be presented show how obsessive desire affected the traditional household.

1. Mori Ogai's *Maihime The Dancing Girl* (1890)

Mori Ogai was quick to tell his readers that he was the first to fall in battle. In his view, he was the vanguard for Japanese literature which was taken down by young upstarts in this literary battle. According to Mori Ogai, "Yes, Ogai has accepted his fate and given up the ghost. But do not misunderstand me, gentlemen. I do not despise you for having taken up arms in arraying yourselves against me."[34] An uninformed outsider may view this as a man who fell off his rocker and imagines himself as a soldier. However, Mori Ogai's words are valid and give insight into the contentious world of Japanese literature. He truly was a mighty soldier with a pen as his weapon at the forefront of the debate on Japanese modernity with his novel titled *Maihime*

[34] Mori, *Not a Song Like Any Other*, 16.

The Dancing Girl, which was published in 1890. This novel explores eroticism in terms of relationships early on in the Meiji era.

The novel starts by introducing the main character, who is a nameless young man in his teens: "It is now five years since the hopes I cherished for so long were fulfilled and I received orders to go to Europe."[35] It is immediately evident that this is taking place in the Meiji era and Tokugawa era policies of isolation are not in effect. The fact that this character received orders indicates that he is a soldier awaiting deployment. He says, "I was then given orders to travel to Europe and study matters connected with my particular section."[36] Further clarification is given to the reader that these orders were not for war deployment and it was meant to learn from Europe. This is entirely consistent with Meiji policies to learn from the Western imperial powers. It is important to note how earnest this young man was studying at home in Japan. He notes, "Thanks to a very strict education at home since childhood, my studies lacked nothing, despite the fact that I lost my father at an early age."[37] This indicates that there was an established tradition that education was the priority.

This is reminiscent of Hatoyama Haruko's upbringing in the Tokugawa era. The story mentions how this young man's studies were able to progress despite not having his father around. It indicates that normally the father would play the role of the teacher for his son. As stated earlier in the introduction, Hatoyama Haruko relied on her mother for her education. This is traditional since young men and women needed their parents to show them their established roles in society. This story has a traditional starting point and the initial sign of modernity is the

[35] Ōgai Mori, *Youth and Other Stories*, ed. J. Thomas Rimer, 1st edition (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994), 8.
[36] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 9.
[37] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 9.

fact that the young man wants to study abroad. He is thrilled to get the opportunity to go to Europe.

After receiving these orders, the young man leaves for Europe and arrives in Berlin. He notes, "I had a vague hope of accomplishing great feats and was used to working hard under pressure. But suddenly here I was, standing in the middle of this most modern of European capitals."[38] He is amazed at the sight of a modern European capital. He is also getting a first-hand experience of modernity at its peak and Japan seems behind in comparison. He says, "I had already obtained official permission to enter Berlin University and so I enrolled to study politics whenever my duties might permit."[39] The novel thus continues to emphasize the importance of education. This young man is earnest in his studies despite being in a new region. It really shows how deeply ingrained the tradition of prioritizing education is in him and how leaving his home does not diminish it immediately.

We see over time that this tradition is gradually diminished as he spends more time in the modern city:

> Some three years passed in this way like a dream. But there is always a time when, come what may, one's true nature reveals itself. I had obeyed my father's dying words and had done what my mother had taught me. From the beginning I had studied willingly, proud to hear myself praised as an infant prodigy, and later I had labored unremittingly in the happy knowledge that my department head was pleased with my excellent work. But all that time I had been a mere passive, mechanical being with no real awareness of myself.[40]

It is becoming clear that the three years spent in the modern capital of a Western imperial power have eroded the long-held tradition he brought from home. We see even the Confucian ideal of

[38] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 9.
[39] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 10.
[40] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 10.

filial piety of obeying parents come under skepticism as a wasted effort. It is at this point that the diligent young man at the start of the novel becomes disillusioned with his path in life. It can be said that this is where Mori Ogai is writing a cautionary tale that even long-established traditions can be eroded over time by spending time in a foreign modern capital. The traditions of filial piety and even education seem nonsensical. This admission by the young man is a criticism of Japan's traditions as being archaic. The modern foreign capital is influencing this young man.

It is after this questioning of tradition that the disillusioned young man encounters the young girl in Berlin who will become his new focus:

> Just as I was walking past I noticed a young girl sobbing against the closed door of the church. She must have been about sixteen or seventeen. Her light golden hair flowed down from under the scarf around her head, and her dress was spotless clean. Surprised by my footsteps, she turned around. Only a poet could really do her justice. Her eyes were blue and clear, but filled with a wistful sadness. They were shaded by long eyelashes which half hid her tears. Why was it that in one glance over her shoulder she pierced the defenses of my heart?[41]

Their first encounter was filled with a description of her appearance. There is even an admission that he can only focus on her. One glance is enough to evoke feelings of love at first sight. This is where the eroticism becomes apparent in the sense that the young man's disillusionment with tradition has culminated in an obsession with this foreign girl.

Even though this is the first encounter, it soon becomes evident that this young man is overwhelmed by his obsession. He thinks, "Perhaps it was because of some profound grief that she was standing there in tears oblivious to all else. The coward in me was overcome by compassion and sympathy, and without thinking I went to her side."[42] There is not even

[41] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 12.
[42] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 12.

hesitation in approaching her despite the fact he is a foreigner. It wouldn't be unusual to rush to the aid of a fellow countrywoman. The time he has spent in Berlin has allowed him to view himself as part of that society. The girl in distress is not a stranger in his view, but just a fellow member of society in need of help. His obsession came at the cost of his livelihood as news spreads of his fascination with this young girl. He explains, "My superior was in any case resentful that I was neglecting my proper studies, and so he eventually told the Legation to abolish my post and terminate my employment."[43] The obsession with this young girl is making him lose what he has worked hard for through his traditional studies. As mentioned earlier, the dream of traveling to Europe and engaging in studying abroad has lost all meaning to him. The foreign girl is his only focus.

The novel does offer more information on this young girl named Elise. Mori Ogai reveals the dark aspect of this modern European city in her backstory:

> At the age of fifteen she had answered an advertisement by a dancing master and had learned that disreputable trade. When she had finished the course, she went to the Viktoria Theater and was now the second dancer of the group. But the life of a dancer is precarious. As the writer Hackländer has said, they are today's slaves, tied by a poor wage and driven hard with rehearsals in the daytime and performances at night. In the theater dressing room they can make up and dress themselves in beautiful clothes; but outside they often do not have enough clothes or food for themselves and life is very hard for those who have to support their parents or families.[44]

Berlin stands at the peak of modernity in Western imperial power and it could not escape the portrayal of the haves and have nots similar to Asakusa in Japan's situation. The haves and have not situation is defined by the disparity in wealth. The dancing girls appear to be well off with

[43] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 14.
[44] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 14.

opulent clothes during the performance, but no one questions what happens after the curtain is drawn. Modernity has a problem of severe poverty in society that can't be resolved even with employment. It exacerbates the problem with employment acting as a form of slavery due to low wages and lack of social mobility. Society just learns to live with the social stagnation and lack of opportunity in plain view. As modern cities, Germany and Asakusa treat it as a fact of life.

Even as the young man's life is spiraling downward, he cannot break his obsession with the dancing girl named Elise. He adds, "The most important decision of my life lay before me. It was a time of real crisis. Some perhaps may criticize my behavior, but my affection for Elise had been strong ever since our first meeting, and now I could read in her expression sympathy for my misfortune and sadness at the prospect of parting."[45] The focus on Elise is so intense that he cannot think of his position in this dire situation. It is only when she cannot hide her pity for him that he gets some sense of his plight. His world revolves around her to the point that he can be viewed as the dependent in the household. He is not making his own decisions since they are all based on Elise.

The young man is still incredibly fortunate since a friend named Aizawa Kenkichi comes to his aid. He explains that he, "persuaded the editor of a certain newspaper to make me their foreign correspondent, so I could stay in Berlin and send back reports on various topics such as politics and the arts."[46] It is important to note that Kenkichi is a fellow countryman. It would be normal for someone to assume that he would change his ways and regain control of his predicament, but this does not happen.

[45] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 15.
[46] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 15.

It is important to remember the overabundance of eroticism that consumes him. He is still deeply infatuated with Elise. He observes, "I neglected my studies. When she came home from the theater, Elise would sit in a chair and sew, and I would write my articles on the table by her side, using the faint light of the lamp hanging from the ceiling."[47] This young man is still completely taken by this dancing girl. Even his saving grace of almost being forced out of Berlin is neglected, he could not make a decision for his life due to his all-consuming affection for this dancing girl. The irony is that he has become the passive mechanical being that he complained about in his rant about the pointlessness of Japan's honored traditions.

The pivotal moment of this novel is when this young man is offered a chance to return to Japan. His work is recognized by a high-ranking official. It is important to note how his work was made possible by the education that was ingrained in him since childhood. Even as he remains deeply obsessed with Elise, the tradition of education is still opening opportunities for him. He notes, "When I arrived, the count greeted me warmly and thanked me for my work in Russia. He then asked me whether I felt like returning to Japan with him."[48] The assumption would be that he would refuse the offer due to his obsession with Elise is pregnant with his child. This scene does harken back to his rant about his transformation into a passive machine due to obeying tradition. The praise from the count is similar to the praise he would get for his educational prowess. He explains, "If I did not take this chance, I might lose not only my homeland but also the very means by which I might retrieve my good name."[49] It is at this moment that the young man breaks away from the overabundance of eroticism. He chooses country and his own reputational advancement over his obsession with Elise.

[47] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 16.
[48] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 22.
[49] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 23.

It can be said that he is no longer a machine and now makes decisions for himself only. His decision-making process is no longer Elise driven. Sadly, the decision has a devastating effect on Elise when she learns of his choice to depart: "She cried out my name, abused me, tore her hair, and bit the coverlet."[50] The hysteria that this girl exhibits showcases the impact of his departure. The young man still decides to leave for Japan even after witnessing this sad scene. It would be fair to say that she is truly a victim of his actions. She is unfortunately stuck with bearing the weight of his actions.

This story shows the way tradition still manages to win in the end. No matter how much disdain the young man has for his traditional ingrained education from Japan, it still frees him from being trapped with the foreign girl. The mechanical puppet breaks from his obsession and chooses country over foreign modernity. Foreign modernity is in the form of the option to abandon his country and live in a modern foreign capital with his foreign wife. He chooses to give it up in the end because Japan is more important. It becomes apparent that Elise is no longer the figurative head of the household. She no longer influences his decision-making process. This is very traditional in the sense that men ultimately held the final say in Confucian tradition as the head of the household. The Tokugawa era emphasis on roles viewed this as the proper order in social interactions.

2. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's *Naomi* (1925)

Naomi was written by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki in 1925. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki is one of the most celebrated authors from the Meiji era. It might not be noticeable by the title, but *Naomi* actually shares close similarities to Mori Ogai's *Maihime The Dancing Girl*. A female character is the

[50] Mori, Youth and Other Stories, 24.

main focus of the novel once again, but this character has a proper name. This is significant in the sense that this character holds more importance and cannot be simply defined by her profession or role. This novel is the first response to the previous work as a statement of the current state of Japanese modernity in 1925.

The work begins by introducing the reader to Kawai Joji, who will end up developing an obsession with Naomi. He immediately begins by describing her:

> Why I, a man of twenty-eight, had my eye on a child like that, I don't understand, but at first I was probably attracted by her name. Everyone called her 'Nao-chan.' When I asked about it one day, I learned that her real name was *Naomi*, written with three Chinese characters. The name excited my curiosity. A splendid name, I thought; written in Roman letters, it could be a Western name. I began to pay special attention to her. Strangely enough, once I knew that she had such a sophisticated name, she began to take on an intelligent, Western look. I started to think what a shame it would be to let her go on as a hostess in a place like that.[51]

Kawai Joji can't even properly explain why he is truly attracted to her at the first encounter. This is a sign of the overabundance of eroticism. He is not properly contemplating his actions and is in a trance over this young girl. He ultimately decides that it is her Western-sounding name that drew his attention. This bears a remarkable similarity to the young man in *Maihime The Dancing Girl*. The uniquely Western physical attributes of blue eyes and golden hair of Elise are what caught the young Japanese man's attention in the previous work. It is a similar situation here since the name carrying Western attributes catches this character's attention. We even see a similar damsel in distress attribute that compels both men to attempt to save their new obsession.

[51] Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *Naomi*, Reprint edition (Vintage, 2001), 4.

It should be noted that the setting of this story holds great importance. Joji explains, "At the time, she was a hostess at a place called Café Diamond, near the Kaminari Gate of the Asakusa Kannon Temple. She was only in her fifteenth year and had just started working when I met her."[52] It is important to highlight that this was taking place in Asakusa, which is what Tanizaki describes as the place to find the peak of ugliness. It is also where Kawabata Yasunari coined the term "erotic, speed, humor, and nonsense" after viewing a dance performance. Asakusa is the peak of modernity in Japan and it is also the setting for this novel. It is a similar setting to Mori Ogai's work, which used the modern foreign capital of Berlin to represent the peak of modernity in a Western imperial power that Japan is trying to emulate.

Kawai Joji's attraction to the Western attributes of Naomi through her name is similar to the young man's attraction to Elise in *Maihime The Dancing Girl*. The novel spends a considerable amount of time focusing on Naomi's Western attributes. Joji notes, "In fact, Naomi resembled the motion-picture actress Mary Pickford: there was definitely something Western about her appearance."[53] Mary Pickford is a Canadian American screen and stage actress, so the comparison with her is a way to cement the fact that Naomi is Western in her appearance. There is another attribute of Mary Pickford's that further highlights the link between these two dancing girls. According to an article about Pickford:

> At eight she went on tour, and within 10 years she was playing on Broadway. She made her New York debut in David Belasco's The Warrens of Virginia in December 1907. Belasco suggested that she change her name to Mary Pickford. At age 14 she had already learned more about stagecraft than many older actors, and her winsome face, framed by a mass of golden curls, made her appeal virtually irresistible.[54]

[52] Tanizaki, 4.
[53] Tanizaki, 4.
[54] "Mary Pickford | Biography, Movies, House, & Facts | Britannica," accessed October 12, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-Pickford.

This short snippet of Mary Pickford's life shows how her golden hair was a prominent feature. This is similar to Elise since Mary Pickford was a prominent stage performer on Broadway. This bears a remarkable similarity to Elise's occupation in the previous novel. Significantly, Jun'ichiro Tanizaki chose to use this person in particular as a way to describe Naomi.

There are even more similarities between Kawai Joji in this novel and the young man in Mori Ogai's novel. He explains, "After finishing middle school I came to Tokyo, where I enrolled in the higher technical school at Kuramae."[55] He is someone who prioritized his education and made a conscious decision to pursue it. We see this focus on self-advancement being evident in his career. He notes, "I was an exemplary office worker: frugal, earnest, conventional to a fault, even colorless, I did my work everyday without the slightest complaint or discontent. In the office, 'Kawai Joji' was known as a 'gentleman.'"[56] These two men bear similar characteristics of being highly educated and searching for ways to improve themselves. They are both earnest and highly respected early in their respective novels. This is very traditional in the sense that men were able to pursue education in this way.

Unfortunately, there is also a shared quality of straying from the proper path. Joji explains, "My original plan, then, was simply to take charge of the child and look after her. On the one hand, I was motivated by sympathy for her. On the other, I wanted to introduce some variety into my humdrum, monotonous daily existence."[57] The idea of the proper path of being highly educated and achieving a stable career was viewed as boring by both the young man in

[55] Tanizaki, *Naomi*, 5.
[56] Tanizaki, 5.
[57] Tanizaki, 6.

the previous story and Joji in this work. The introduction of a girl was a way to escape the monotony and an obsession is formed to support her in both works.

This novel diverges from the previous work when, surprisingly, Naomi starts to take the lead, which puts her in contrast to Elise. Naomi is the one who chooses where Kawai Joji will live in their new arrangement despite Kawai Joji being the one who takes custody of her. He notes, "To help cultivate her base, I asked Naomi's opinion on almost everything we bought. I used her ideas whenever I could."[58] Naomi is assuming a leadership role that Elise in the previous novel never took upon herself. Despite the young man's obsessive love for Elise in *Maihime The Dancing Girl*, the young man's decisions were passively influenced by her, but she never made the decisions herself. However, this novel shows a remarkable scene where Naomi is literally and not just figuratively holding the reins. Joji observes, "Once I played horse and crawled around the room with her on my back. 'Giddaap, giddap!' she cried. For reins, she made me hold a towel in my mouth." Kawai Joji's plan to cultivate her into a proper wife is quickly becoming Naomi cultivating him to be a servant or even a horse.

This is made more evident as the novel progress as Kawai Joji and Naomi make their intent to marry more apparent and public. He tells her, "I don't just love you, I worship you. You're my treasure. You're a diamond that I found and polished. I'll buy anything that'll make you beautiful. I'll give you my whole salary."[59] This is an example of the overabundance of eroticism in the sense that love has turned into worship. Kawai Joji is way too invested in this relationship to the point that he is giving everything to Naomi. The reaction to this plea is indictive of who is really in control of this household. She responds, "That's all right, you don't

[58] Tanizaki, 19.
[59] Tanizaki, 35.

need to. My English and music lessons are more important."[60] Naomi is not sacrificing everything for Kawai Joji and this is in complete contrast to the previous work. Naomi is not even showing affection and even prioritizes English and music lessons over Joji's pleas. It is as if in her mind Kawai Joji is simply a means to an end and not the goal.

This role reversal becomes even more apparent when Kawai Joji and Naomi contemplate whether or not to go to a café in Ginza for dancing. She says, "Let's go, then I'll dance with you. . . . Oh, please come with me. . . . There's a good boy, Joji, there's a good boy."[61] The way Naomi speaks to Kawai Joji is as if she is talking to a pet. It captures how Kawai Joji has fully lost control of the situation. When it is revealed that Naomi has been cheating with her many friends, Kawai Joji is faced with a decision. He initially chooses to kick her out and regain control of his life. This is reminiscent of the young man in Mori Ogai's work regaining control of his life and only thinking of his wellbeing. However, this novel does not conclude at this point and Tanizaki makes clear that tradition will not win in this reflection on the current state of modernity in Japan. *Naomi* marks a stunning contrast to the conclusion of Mori Ogai's *Maihime The Dancing Girl*.

It quickly becomes apparent that Kawai Joji has lost this battle with Naomi. He cannot regain control. He notes, "What a mistake! I've let an extraordinary woman get away. Distraught, I stamped my feet in frustration."[62] The departure of Naomi solidifies that Joji can no longer live without her and his obsession is unbreakable. The novel ends with Naomi and Kawai bound together in a strange relationship of Kawai Joji being subservient to Naomi. He explains, "Needless to say, there have been new friends since Eustace, but I've grown so docile that it

[60] Tanizaki, 36.
[61] Tanizaki, 70.
[62] Tanizaki, 176.

surprises even me. It seems that once a person has a terrifying experience, the experience becomes an obsession that never goes away."[63] Kawai Joji's experience of Naomi's departure has a profound effect on him. He is ultimately stuck with the weight of her actions. He has to accept that Naomi will not accept a traditional monogamous relationship with him. He can only watch helplessly as Naomi does whatever she wants. This marks a complete role reversal of the man of the household having the final say. This new arrangement now establishes the woman as being in control and the man of the household's only purpose is to clean up after her. The man is no longer the one making the decisions and he is lost in a sea of confusion and humiliation. The traditional position of head of the household being exclusive to males has been broken. It is now about honoring the woman and despising the man.

3. Summary

Mori Ogai's *Maihime The Dancing Girl* still managed to convey that tradition wins in the end. The nameless young man in the novel starts with ingrained traditions of Confucian ideals of filial piety and the importance of education. The time he spends in the modern foreign capital of Berlin has a dramatic effect on him. He questions the traditions he brought from Japan and gets lost in an obsession with a dancing girl named Elise. Despite all of this temptation to accept modern life in a foreign capital, it is tradition that frees him from entrapment. His fellow countryman emphasizes the importance of regaining control and returning to Japan. It is his ingrained education that allows his work to catch the notice of an official that allows him to return home. He quickly abandons the modern foreign capital and leaves his foreign wife behind. She is left baring the weight of the decision he made as head of the household.

[63] Tanizaki, 236.

The mechanical puppet breaks with his obsession and chooses his traditional country over foreign modernity. It becomes apparent that Elise is no longer the head of the household. She can no longer influence his decision-making process. This is very traditional in the sense that men ultimately held the final say in Confucian-inspired tradition as the head of the household. The young man manages to regain order by reaffirming this established hierarchy. The decision to return to Japan is his choice to abandon the foreign household inspired by modernity and return home to a more traditional lifestyle. The reputation he lost can be repaired by simply returning home. He is not allowing the Tokugawa era emphasis on roles to disappear since this is viewed as the proper order in social interactions.

Naomi, published in 1925, marks a dramatic shift from Mori Ogai's 1890 story. This story shows that modernity has finally eroded the tradition that the man in the household ultimately has the final say and a woman cannot overrule his decisions. Tanizaki's novel was a response to Mori Ogai's and updates the record as the best representation of the current state of modernity in Japan. Women were now rebellious and men could no longer take their traditional position as head of household for granted. Naomi is the dancing girl who succeeds in assuming the position of head of the household. This marks a loss of the traditional roles within the household and modernity has successfully disrupted the social order established during the Tokugawa period.

Chapter III: Grotesque: Loss of Natural Senses

The grotesque is commonly described as being associated with the distorted or unsightly. "Distorted" is meant in the sense of something unnatural. The unnatural quality comes from the distortion in the sense that it misleads the viewer or even defies expectations. It is this distortion that Edgar Allan Poe and Edogawa Rampo tackle in their respective works. Edgar Allan Poe showcases how defying expectations can create a grotesque scene. When a person looks at an object from a distorted viewpoint, it creates false expectations. The shattering of these expectations creates an unsightly object that the viewer is overwhelmed by due to the viewer becoming accustomed to a distorted viewpoint. Edogawa Rampo challenges this with his work by showcasing that the grotesque comes from an overabundance of clarity. The overapplication of clarity blurs the line between the reality and fantasy. It is through this premise that Edogawa Rampo speaks to the societal ills of overindulging in modern objects that surpass what the natural senses are capable of.

1. Edgar Allan Poe's "The Spectacles" (1844)

American writer Edgar Allan Poe is well known for his rendition of the grotesque. He published a story in 1844 titled "The Spectacles" that gives insight into the importance of a modern item called glasses. It may seem strange to focus on an American writer in this context, but it is important since Edogawa Rampo seems to take exception to this particular story. There are signs of mimesis criticism being used to convey disagreement. However, we must first examine Poe's story to understand what sparked disagreement from a Japanese writer.

The story begins with the introduction of the main character, a young man named Simpson. It is the physical description of this young man that is of importance:

> As to personal endowments, I am by no means deficient. On the contrary, I believe that I am well made, and possess what nine tenths of the world would call handsome face. In height I am five feet eleven. My hair is black and curling. My nose is sufficiently good. My eyes are large and gray; and although, in fact, they are weak to a very inconvenient degree, still no defect in this regard would be suspected from their appearance. The weakness itself, however, has always much annoyed me, and I have resorted to every remedy-short of wearing glasses.[64]

It is immediately evident that this character is quite confident. He describes himself as rather attractive and only has one defect, which is his eyes, and he possesses an unusual refusal to wear glasses to fix his only defect. The fact he mentions that he tried every method except for wearing glasses shows that there is a stubborn reluctance. There is also a bit of arrogance as indicated by the degree to which he describes himself in such vivid detail and that his self-described attractiveness would be understood by the vast majority of the world.

It needs to be stressed that it is highly unusual that such a detailed description is being given by someone who has bad eyesight. It brings into question the reliability of this character's descriptions. It makes the character appear to be unreliable and his account is suspicious. The next scene is when the main character and his friend Mr. Talbot decide to attend an opera. He writes, "For two hours my companion, who was a musical *fanatico,* gave his undivided attention to the stage; and, in the meantime, I amused myself by observing the audience, which consisted, in chief part, of the very *elite* of the city."[65] It is here we get the additional information that the main character Mr. Simpson and his friend Mr. Talbot are of high status. The description that the elite of the city are among the audience and they are able to take part hints that they may hold substantial status as well.

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[64] Edgar Allan Poe, *The Complete Tales & Poems of Edger Allan Poe (Knickerbocker Classics)* (New York: Race Point Publishing, 2014), 614.
[65] Poe, 614.

The key part of this story is when Mr. Simpson notices something as he is observing the audience. It is important to note that Mr. Simpson is still not wearing his glasses since he mentions how much he hates wearing them in his self-description earlier:

> If I live a thousand years I can never forget the intense emotion with which I regard this figure. It as that of a female, the most exquisite I had ever beheld. The face was so far turned toward the stage that, for some minutes, I could not obtain a view of it, -but the form was divine; no other word can sufficiently express its magnificent proportion, -and even the term *divine*; no other word can sufficiently express its magnificent proportion, -and even the term 'divine' seems ridiculously feeble as I write it.[66]

It has to be mentioned how bizarre it is to once again get such a detailed description from someone who refuses to wear glasses for his bad eyesight. There is even an admission that he cannot get a proper view of the woman's face, but he doesn't hesitate to describe it as divine. These moments only confirm the suspicion that the main character is not credible. The only clear thing in this situation is love at first sight even if his sight is questionable.

The next pivotal scene is the first meeting between Mr. Simpson and his love at first sight, who is named Madame Lalande. It is important to note that Mr. Simpson never views her properly since the initial scene of viewing her in the audience at the opera theatre. He is so consumed by the divine but questionable sight of her that he goes to extraordinary lengths to get this meeting. He is so infatuated that he memorizes her routine and sneaks into her residence:

> The better to deceive the servant in attendance, I did this with the assured air of an old and familiar acquaintance. With a presence of mind truly Parisian, she took the cue at once, and, to greet me, held out the most bewitchingly little of hands. The valet at once fell into the rear; and now, with hearts full to overflowing, we discoursed long and unreservedly of our love.[67]

[66] Poe, 614.
[67] Poe, 621.

The servant for Madame Lalande is deceived by Mr. Simpson's confident attitude that he is supposed to be there. It is similar to how Mr. Simpson is currently so obsessed with his short glance at Madame Lalande at the opera house that he commits to taking such a risk as sneaking into her residence. The servant falls victim and assumes only someone who is supposed to be at the residence would be so bold to as walk in plain sight. This story shows how much sight is taken for granted. One glance is enough to convince an individual that their assumption is correct.

Mr. Simpson finally gets his chance to speak to Madame Lalande after a myriad of failed attempts and it makes him impulsive. He chooses not to use his glasses to verify that what he saw in the opera house was correct despite having enough opportunity to do so. He notes, "As Madame Lalande spoke English even less fluently than she wrote it, our conversation was necessarily in French. In this sweet tongue, so adapted to passion, I gave loose to the impetuous enthusiasm of my nature, and, with all the eloquence I could command, besought her to consent to an immediate marriage."[68] Mr. Simpson could barely understand what she was trying to say since she spoke predominately in French; it turns out she is also a French noblewoman. He is still basing everything on the first sight of her in the opera theatre and now even his sense of hearing is being ignored.

Madame Lalande does try to reason with him despite her difficulty communicating in English. He writes, "She begged me, but with a sigh, to reconsider my proposal, and termed my love as infatuation-a will o'wisp-a fancy or fantasy of the moment-a baseless and unstable

[68] Poe, 621.

creation rather of the imagination than of the heart."[69] The unstable creation born from imagination is an accurate description of the reality of the situation. The unreliable eyesight of Mr. Simpson is encouraging his imagination to run wild and a short glance at the opera theatre is all he had. He is even ignoring her appearance at this present meeting.

Madame Lalande does make one final plea to try to allude to a problem. He notes, "She alluded to the topic of *age*. Was I aware-was I fully aware of the discrepancy between us?"[70] This is an important moment in the story where it is made clear to everyone except Mr. Simpson that the first glance at the opera house needs to be verified. Mr. Simpson is still under the enchantment of his distorted first glance and pays no attention. The next event that follows this question sets the stage for the grotesque moment. He adds, "In the present instance, Eugenie, who for a few moments past had seemed to be searching for something in her bosom, at length let fall upon the grass a miniature, which I immediately picked up and presented to her."[71] The miniature is essentially a representation of herself and she begs him to keep it. The miniature is a physical object that he can touch to verify his assumption, but he still chooses to dismiss it. Even his sense of touch cannot convince him to check, the first glance looms over him and only his flawed sight has priority. The rest of his natural senses are being ignored.

It is at this moment that Mr. Simpson finally chooses to wear glasses at the insistence of Madame Lalande:

> 'Goodness gracious me!' I exclaimed, almost at the very instant that the rim of the spectacles had settled upon my nose-'My! Goodness gracious me!- why what *can* be the matter with these glasses? And taking them quickly off, I wiped them carefully with a silk handkerchief and adjusted them again.[72]

[69] Poe, 621.
[70] Poe, 622.
[71] Poe, 622.
[72] Poe, 626.

The glasses intensify the image that is in front of him. Madame Lalande is an old lady, as she alluded to earlier when she mentioned the problem of age. The glasses magnify this reality with such extreme detail that it overwhelms him. He adds, "What, in the name of everything hideous, did this mean? Could I believe my eyes?-*could* I?-that was the question. Was that-was that-was that *rouge*? And were those-and were those-were those *wrinkles,* upon the visage of Eugenie Lalande?"[73] Madame Lalande is not a monstrous creature and it is just the intensification of her real appearance that defies Mr. Simpson's expectations and the clash of reality against the romanization of the ideal partner based on fantasy shocks him. He can only think of it as grotesque since he ignored the real sight for far too long. The unsightly being in front of him is due to his insistence to ignore her real appearance and allow fantasy to set his expectations. Mr. Simpson creates the grotesque sight with false expectations of the divine.

The miniature also holds significance. It is a representation of Madame Lalande that Mr. Simpson is given as a gift before this startling revelation. He observes, "'Eighty-two!' I ejaculated, staggering to the wall-'eighty-two hundred thousand baboons! The miniature said twenty-seven years and seven months!"[74] Unfortunately, he uses the miniature to reinforce his preconceived notion that Madame Lalande is a young woman. She says, "To be sure!- dat is so!- ver true! but den de portraite has been take for dese fifty-five year."[75] Madame Lalande reveals that the picture is authentic and was taken fifty-five years ago when she was twenty-seven. Mr. Simpson had assumed that the picture was taken recently. Madame Lalande believed that the gift of the miniature would compel Mr. Simpson to stop a moment and compare it with her image in

[73] Poe, 626.
[74] Poe, 627.
[75] Poe, 627.

front of him. The outdated representation of Madame Lalande would alert him that something is wrong. Mr. Simpson instead chooses to use the miniature to reinforce his flawed first impression and not check the image of the woman in front of him.

The story ends with the explanation that this is all an elaborate plot to teach Mr. Simpson a lesson about refusing to wear glasses. The narrative concludes with this admission of the foolhardiness of not wearing the modern item known as glasses. He writes, "Nevertheless, I am *not* the husband of my great, great, grandmother; and this is a reflection which affords me infinite relief . . . In conclusion: I am done forever with *billets doux*, and am never met without SPECTACLES."[76] The moral of the story is not to allow yourself to be so arrogant and foolhardy to believe you can ignore an inherent weakness. Mr. Simpson has a problem with eyesight and glasses are a remedy readily available to fix it. This modern object's ability to magnify reality with such vivid detail can free you from delusion when your natural senses fail you. It is foolish to hesitate to use this modern object.

2. Edogawa Rampo's "The Traveler with Pasted Rag Picture" (1929)

Edogawa Rampo, one of the most prominent Meiji era writers, is closely associated with the grotesque aspect of the genre. Edogawa Rampo is actually penname for Hirai Taro, and it mimics the American author Edgar Allan Poe's name. This same mimicry is used when Edogawa Rampo engages in mimetic criticism of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Spectacles" through his story titled "The Traveler with the Pasted Rag Picture*,"* published in 1929. In order to get an understanding of Edogawa Rampo's perception of the grotesque, it is important to get an idea of what the author himself feared as unsightly. The essay written by Edogawa Rampo in 1937,

[76] Poe, 629.

titled "A Passion for Lenses," gives insight into an unusual experience that left a lasting impression on the author:

> One day as I lay there listlessly in the dark, I unexpectedly became aware that the scenery from the outdoors was being cast upon the *shoji* screen through a pinhole in the blinds. The verdant branches of a tree dense with foliage were reflected in such a way that virtually every single leaf was delineated with extreme detail and clarity. The tiles of the roof also appeared to be a different, altogether more radiant color than when seen with the naked eye.[77]

The fact that he was stuck in a dark isolated room helped to emphasize the beauty of the outside world. Even though he could only examine the outside world through a pinhole, it intensified the detail of the scene. The small opportunity to perceive the outside world heightened his natural senses. It created a perspective that a small opportunity like a pinhole could brighten up a dark room. Everything is being perceived through the natural senses.

It was a similar intensification of the outside world that gave Edgogawa Rampo a grotesque sight. He adds, "Back then my father worked as a patent attorney, and he kept in his study a large magnifying lens about four or five inches in diameter for examining diagrams of intricate machinery and plans of that sort."[78] A magnifying lens is an item of modern science. It brings clarity and helps people examine things from a different perspective that goes beyond what the natural senses are capable of. It greatly depends on how it is used which determines the amount of clarity that can be attained.

The importance of how this modern item is used cannot be underestimated since misuse of this modern item can hurt the user more than it helps. He notes, "I fooled around as children

[77] Rampo Edogawa and Takayuki Tatsumi, *The Edogawa Rampo Reader*, trans. Seth Jacobowitz (Fukuoka: Kurodahan Press, 2008), 147.
[78] Edogawa and Tatsumi, 148.

are wont to do, focusing the lens to set fire to paper and other games, when I noticed a vague but monstrously large creature crawling across the wooden boards of the ceiling."[79] The grotesque sight presented to Edogawa Rampo is due to the lens's distortion of the natural senses. The monstrous object being examined with the lens is real since the lens can only project that which is there:

> The spot on the tatami was cast in a circle by the ray of light through the aperture in blinds, and by chance I had been holding the lens horizontally right over where the light streamed in. As a result, it was magnified and projected several times larger onto the ceiling. The woven strands of rushes that formed the surface of the tatami appeared as wide as the boards in the ceiling. Mostly they were yellow, but were also possessed of a greenish hue. They were projected all to clearly like a terrible nightmare or the drug induced vision of an opium fiend. Even though I knew it was a play of the lens, I felt particularly upset. I suppose most people would think it odd to feel frightened. But I was overwhelmed by its reality.[80]

The last statement about being overwhelmed by reality is extremely important. The lens only reflects reality and does not actively try to trick the user. The user can end up tricking themselves by misuse of this modern item. The monstrous creature existed as strands of the tatami intensified with too much clarity and detail by the lens. The lens is a great tool but can reveal a grotesque aspect that people are not ready for, which is the magnification of reality.

This lesson is apparent in the "Traveler with the Pasted Rag Picture" story. It is imperative to pay attention to the way this work begins its narrative:

> If this story I am about to tell was not a dream or a series of hallucinations, then that traveler with the pasted rag picture must have been mad. Or it may even be that I actually did catch a glimpse of one corner of another world as if through a magic crystal, just as a

[79] Edogawa and Tatsumi, 148.
[80] Edogawa and Tatsumi, 148.

> dream often carries one into the realms of the supernatural, or as a madman sees and hears things which we, the normal, are quite incapable of perceiving.[81]

We immediately encounter a similar problem as in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Spectacles." There is a valid suspicion that this narrator may not be credible. The narrator is openly admitting that he cannot trust his own senses and that the story that is about to be told may be factual or just fictional. The narrator even describes his recollection as possibly being the ramblings of a madman. As the narrator tries to give more detail, he admits to a contradiction. He writes, "Whenever I tell this story, those who know me well often contradict me, pointing out that I have never been to Uotsu."[82] Suspicion is warranted at this point that the narrator is unreliable.

There is once again another similarity with Poe's work. Despite the weakness of the narrator's senses and mental facilities, he is still able to provide vivid detail. He adds, "But even now that scene of the interior of the railway carriage flashes back vividly to my mind, especially the garish rag picture with its striking colors of purple and crimson, with the dark, piercing, snake-like eyes of the two figures depicted there."[83] However, this grotesque image with such clear detail comes from an unreliable narrator. At the same time, the very fact that such vivid detail is provided makes his story more credible to a certain extent. The reader is forced to enter the story with an abundance of confusion.

The narrative then moves to the main setting of the entire story, which is the train. The narrator observes, "It was exactly six o' clock in the evening when I boarded the Tokyo-bound train at Uotsu Station . . . As I stepped into the car I found only one solitary passenger snuggled

[81] Edogawa Rampo and Patricia Welch, *Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, trans. James B. Harris, 2nd edition (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2012), 199.
[82] Edogawa and Welch, 199.
[83] Edogawa and Welch, 200.

comfortably in the farthest corner."[84] The train is a symbol of modernity, and the reference to Uotsu Station indicates that this narrative is taking place in Japan. There is also the importance that the narrative is taking place as the train heads to the modern capital of Japan. It is here the narrator describes a nameless man carrying a suspicious picture. He adds, "His face was pale and thin, with features which clearly distinguished him as a man of above normal intelligence. But what impressed me most were his eyes, which seemed to gleam with an uncanny light."[85] This would be the second time that eyes are explicitly mentioned. The first is when the narrator is trying to discern whether or not his experience is real and he mentions the snake-like eyes of the figures in the pasted rag picture. Now we are presented with the eyes being the most important feature of the man carrying the picture. Edogawa Rampo is emphasizing the natural sense of sight. It is similar to how Edgar Allan Poe emphasized the eyes of Mr. Simpson.

The man carrying the picture invites the narrator to take a look at it. It is the two figures in the picture that capture the narrator's attention:

> One was a white-haired old man, garbed in a well-worn, black velvet suit of an obsolete European cut, sitting stiffly on the floor. And, strangely enough, this figure bore a striking resemblance to the old man sitting beside me. Shifting my gaze, I examined the other figure, which was that of a strikingly beautiful girl no older than seventeen or so.[86]

The realism of the scene presented in the picture amazes the narrator. The two figures appear to give the impression that they are alive. The intricate design of the figures is lifelike despite it simply being a picture. The amazement of the narrator examining the picture is enough to spark the interest of the man carrying the picture. He says, "Do you realize the truth now, my good

[84] Edogawa and Welch, 201.
[85] Edogawa and Welch, 202.
[86] Edogawa and Welch, 204.

man?"[87] This remark by the man carrying the picture is to indicate that the narrator does not realize what he is examining. Throughout this scene, Edogawa Rampo stresses the lifelike and realistic quality of the picture. The narrator is examining the picture with his natural sense of sight. The fact that the man carrying the picture questions if he has discovered the truth is important. It indicates that the narrator's natural sense of sight still brings uncertainty. Asking the question emphasizes that there is something hidden within the picture.

The man decides the narrator needs an item to fully understand what is being examined: "'Look through these,' he invited. I was reaching for the glasses when he interrupted: 'No, no, you're standing too near. Step back a little . . . There, that's better.'"[88] The glasses are the key to understanding what is hidden in the picture. It is not enough to just use them immediately since proper adjustments needed to be made to ensure the clarity of the object being examined is fully revealed. This harkens back to Edogawa Rampo's account of the adjusting lens and how fooling around with a lens can be dangerous.

It is only when the narrator makes the proper adjustments that the glasses magnify the pasted rag picture:

> Within the confines of the antique nineteenth-century binoculars which I held in my trembling hands, there vividly existed another world, entirely alien from my own. And, within this realm, there lived and breathed the gorgeous young girl, incongruously enjoying a tete-a-tete with the white-haired old man who was surely old enough to be her grandfather.[89]

The glasses reveals that the two figures are a couple. It is important to mention that the term *tete-a-tete* is of French origin and means a private conversation between two people. This is similar

[87] Edogawa and Welch, 206.
[88] Edogawa and Welch, 207.
[89] Edogawa and Welch, 207.

to the private conversation between Mr. Simpson and the French noblewoman, Madame Lalande, from Poe's "The Spectacles". These two figures are engaged in the same act. The intentional use of a French word to describe a scene that mirrors what happened in Edgar Allan Poe's novel is a clever form of mimicry.

Another similarity is the composition of the couple: A young woman with a man that would be old enough to be her grandfather. The substantial age difference is a significant detail. It is a role reversal of the couple in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Spectacles*. The picture magnified under the lens of the glasses is so realistic that the narrator describes it as another world entirely. The grotesque aspect also looms over this picture. He explains, "As I watched, speechless with wonder, it seemed that he was trying to embrace this girl who but a mere child compared to his venerable old age. But quickly I also caught another expression on his wrinkled face-a terrifying mixture of grief and agony."[90] The picture is not the happy scene that the first impression would deceive the observer into thinking. The old man is not celebrating the private conversation with his young lover. There is a hint that it is under a cruel and tragic circumstance. It is this additional detail that makes this point clear. He adds, "At this point I began to imagine I was caught up in the terrors of a nightmare, and, by sheer force of will, I pulled the binoculars down and looked down."[91] The glasses had helped to bring clarity, but at the same time, they were lure the narrator into getting trapped in the picture. The magnification of the picture presents an image that is too realistic and detailed for him to handle. It is even distorting reality for the narrator. When he viewed the picture with just his natural sense of sight, however, this did not occur.

[90] Edogawa and Welch, *Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, 208.
[91] Edogawa and Welch, 208.

The man carrying the picture then believes it is appropriate to reveal the backstory of the two pasted rags in the picture. He says, "The time of which I speak was not long ago after they had built in Asakusa Park that twelve-story tower known as the Junikai which, until its destruction in the Great Earthquake, was a marvel of architecture for all provincial visitors to the capital."[92] The backstory begins with a mention of Asakusa, which is an important symbol of modernity. As mentioned previously, it is seen as a physical representation of modernity run amok as Kawabata Yasunari makes clear in his novel *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*:

> These binoculars-yes, the ones you used-were but one example of this peculiar craze of his. He bought the binoculars at a small curio shop in Yokohama's Chinatown. I remember my brother telling me that they had once belonged to the master of some foreign ship, and that he had paid a tidy sum for them.[93]

The glasses were of foreign origin and the brother of the man carrying the pasted rag picture is quite fond of this modern object. It also made clear who the old man in the picture is. The narrator observes, "Every time he said 'my brother,' the old man either looked or pointed at the other old man in the pasted rag picture, as if to emphasize his presence there."[94] It is the next scene that gives greater clarity on how the old man in the picture ended up in such a grotesque position.

The scene starts with the brother looking through the binoculars. The brother's behavior had been so strange that he had to check to see if he was alright:

> According to him, one day about a month before, he happened to be gazing down through his binoculars from the top of the Junikai into the compound of the Kwannon Temple, when he had suddenly caught a glimpse of girl's face amidst crowds of people. She had been so beautiful, he explained-so uncannily beautiful-that he had been swept off his feet.

[92] Edogawa and Welch, 209.
[93] Edogawa and Welch, 210.
[94] Edogawa and Welch, 210.

> For him, this sudden infatuation was a new sensation, for normally he was quite indifferent to feminine charms.[95]

This is a similar scene to how Mr. Simpson fell in love with Madame Lalande. It was one glance that caused love at first sight. This is where Edogawa Rampo moves in a different direction. The brother in this case experienced the infatuation with the help of binoculars. The brother becomes similarly crazed and tries a myriad of attempts to reach the girl. It is how the glasses are used that makes a stark contrast.

The brother does reach the girl but finds out that she is only a doll in a picture. It is at this moment that the brother makes an unusual request for the glasses to be misused so he can circumvent this obstacle. He explains, "As soon as I looked at my brother through the wrong end of the binoculars, I found him reduced in size to a mere two feet, and seemingly standing about six meters away."[96] The binoculars that help spark the distorted love at first sight is now trapping the brother into the picture. The misuse of this modern item is effectively distorting reality. These characters have lost the ability to discern reality with their natural senses.

3. Summary

Edogawa Rampo uses mimesis criticism to great effect. "The Traveler with the Pasted Rag Picture" is remarkably similar to "The Spectacles" by Edgar Allan Poe. The glasses in Poe's allow the user to escape entrapment and the main character is silly to not trust this modern object. Edogawa Rampo's work differs to say the glasses are the means to entrapment. It is a

[95] Edogawa and Welch, 213.
[96] Edogawa and Welch, 217.

dangerous object belonging to modernity that distorts reality. It is not just the binoculars since the narrator nearly got trapped by using the glasses to view the picture.

Edogawa Rampo was stating his view that modernity is not something to be completely trusted. It harkens back to his lived experience that even though this modern item is easy to find in Japan's current state of modernity it is something to be wary of. Japan may have lost the battle with modernity since these items are abundant in Japan now and people have grown accustomed to these technological advancements. However, it is still ultimately a distortion of reality. People should not completely abandon their natural senses in exchange for the convenience of modern items. People will lose their ability to discern reality with just their natural senses due to being overly dependent. Edogawa Rampo makes clear this loss has already happened. His story is meant to voice the damage that has been done.

Chapter IV: Nonsense: Loss of Purpose

Nonsense is commonly seen as something fanciful. The fanciful aspect comes from a sense that the premise is so outlandish or overimaginative that it can be defined as comical. Natsume Soseki and Jun'ichiro Tanizaki examine societal ills with a comedic tone as a way of disarming readers. Natsume Soseki's talking cat in *I Am A Cat* serves as a vessel to provide biting commentary on the modern society he and his readers were living in. The cat as the talking observer pulls no punches in criticizing the inhabitants of the household living their day-to-day lives in a society embracing modernization. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's silent cat in "A Cat, A Man, and Two Women" serves as a vessel to show the fragility of personal relations. The cat is a silent observer and an active participant as a homewrecker testing the relationship of the inhabitants of the household.

Both works ask the serious question of what is an individual's purpose in life in the context of modernity. Is it defined by birth or through relationships? It is only through this comedic and outlandish premise that this question can be posed to the reader and not be taken as a personal attack. Both authors challenge the reader to examine their place in modernity.

1. Natsume Soseki's *I Am A Cat* (1906)

Natsume Soseki is one of the most well-known writers of the Meiji period. Natsume Soseki is actually the penname of Natsume Kin'nosuke. Natsume Soseki's *I Am A Cat* was first published in 1906 and its immense popularity led to the creation of multiple installments. This novel is a unique blend of a nonsensical premise with biting criticism of the people living in Meiji era facing the sweeping change of modernity. It is through this premise that Natsume Soseki examines modernity in Japan with the cat acting as his vessel.

The way the novel begins is unique in how it introduces the main character. It says, "I AM A CAT. As yet I have no name. I've no idea where I was born."[97] The only definite detail about the main character is that it is a cat. There is no indication of its gender and it is a stray. This gives the main character the unique characteristic of being completely detached from the world that it is about to judge. It has no name that gives away its temperament or even its gender. There are no fond and tragic memories of an owner. The cat starts as an unbiased observer.

The cat does have a few encounters with humans, but they are brief enough that no real judgment is made since the cat was only a newborn kitten. It is only when the cat encounters the human who will be its master that the reader is given its first case of judgment. He explains, "My master seldom comes face-to-face with me. I hear he is a schoolteacher . . . The others in the house think that he is terribly hard-working. He himself pretends to be hard-working. But actually he works less hard than any of them think."[98] The assumption would be that the cat would be gracious to the human who decides to provide shelter. This is not the case and the cat does not sugarcoat its judgment of the human. It is remarkable that Natsume Soseki, who is a prominent intellectual, would give such biting commentary.

The assumption might be the cat is only focusing on this particular human and it is not making a biting judgment of the entire profession. This assumption is immediately proven false:

> There are times when even I, a mere cat, can put two thoughts together. 'Teachers have it easy. If you are born a human, it's nest to become a teacher, why, even a cat could teach.' However, according to the master, there's nothing harder than a teacher's life and every time his friends come round to see him, he grumbles on and on.[99]

[97] Soseki Natsume, *I Am a Cat*, trans. Aiko Ito and Graeme Wilson, New edition (Boston, Mass: Tuttle Publishing, 2001), 3.
[98] Natsume, 5.
[99] Natsume, 5.

It becomes clear that the cat is in fact judging the entire profession. Teachers constantly boast of their earnest work and contribution to society, but this cat is dismissing it as nothing more than frivolous theatre. The significance of this is that the Meiji era built its foundation on the idea of learning from the stronger powers to raise Japan's status in the world. This cat is dismissing the educators who are supposed to lead this effort as pretenders with unwarranted arrogance.

The relationship the cat has with the schoolteacher is significant. Why would the cat get the impression that teachers have it easy and pretend to work hard? It becomes clear that it is the daily routine of a schoolteacher that offends the cat. He writes, "After eating a great deal, he takes some taka-diastase for his stomach and, after that, he opens a book. When he has read a few pages, he becomes sleepy. He drools onto the book. This is the routine religiously observed each evening."[100] This is where the humor of the novel becomes apparent. The routine described is harmless, but the lack of effort is what annoys the cat. If this is applied in a broad sense, teachers in his view are not putting their all into their craft. The emphasis on education as a fruitless endeavor since educators are not earnest in their work. The modernity built on education is a bit of a farce.

The next important passage is a judgment by the cat that people are always seeking the most modern remedies despite the traditional ones proving to be the most effective. He adds, "I conclude that the best remedy for a stomach ailment is *sake* at suppertime. Taka-diastase just won't do. Whatever claims are made for it, it's just no good. That which lacks effect will continue to lack effect."[101] This is a diary entry that the schoolteacher writes following a night out with his former pupil. The night out produces a skepticism of modern medicine. The cat's

[100] Natsume, 5.
[101] Natsume, 26.

comment that this is simply part of human nature brings into question modern advancements in medicine. He writes, "Such entries are perhaps most characteristic of human mores."[102] It is as if to say that people are fickle and they don't have to patience for medicine to take effect. They seek quick remedies instead of sticking with the tried-and-true traditional method.

The list of complaints over the many attempts is long, but it does offer further insight into how easily something can be passed as modern medicine in modern society:

> The other day, Mr. X claimed that going without one's breakfast helped the stomach. So I took no breakfast for two or three days but the only effect was to make my stomach grumble. Mr. Y strongly advised me to refrain from eating pickles. According to him, all disorders of the stomach originate in pickles. His thesis was that abstinence from pickles so dessicates the sources of all stomach trouble, that a complete cure must follow. For at least a week no pickle crossed my lips, but, since that banishment produced no noticeable effect, I have resumed consuming them. According to Mr. Z, the one true remedy is ventral message.[103]

This passage does highlight how during the transition to modernity in Japan that there was an inundation of new cures and medicinal techniques. They were from intellectuals who deemed that their new medicinal technique was the best. This schoolteacher's routine of initially attempting to trust the new modern medicine recommendations is representative of a problem with modernity in the cat's view. Each failure only adds to the skepticism. Traditional medicine still keeps getting ignored due to its slow curing effect despite its proven effectiveness.

In the next scene, the cat decides to judge a group of scholars, including the schoolteacher, who are engaged in discussing Japanese and Chinese literature. It is at this moment that the cat judges the friendship shared by the three men. He explains, "The urge to compete and their anxiety to win are revealed flickeringly in their everyday conversation, and

[102] Natsume, 26.
[103] Natsume, 27.

only a hair's breadth separates them from the Philistines who they spend their idle days denouncing."[104] The cat views their friendship as merely being a pretense for the sport of gamesmanship. They are always trying to inflate their ego by trying to prove that among the scholars in the group only one is intellectually superior. Even normal conservations are just opportunities to prove superiority. Interestingly, this judgment is being made on experts in literature. The battle is reminiscent of this study's attempt to examine a writing genre being used to claim what is the proper reflection of modernity among writers.

One of the most important moments in the novel is the change the cat is noticing. The cat starts the novel as a cat with no name and no owner. The first line of the novel starts with the statement that the narrator is a cat and that is the only definite detail offered. As the novel progress, however, events move the cat closer to what is being judged. He adds, "The more that humans show me sympathy, the more inclined I am to forget that I am a cat. Feeling that I am now closer to humans than to cats, the idea of rallying my own race in an effort to wrest supremacy from the bipeds no longer has the least appeal."[105] The sense of superiority and detachment that the cat had at the beginning is gradually dissipating. The time that the cat spends with humans is having the effect of making it difficult to acknowledge a detachment from the modern society being judged.

When considering who wrote this, these words hold even greater meaning. Natsume Soseki is an intellectual who is adept at writing and became a celebrated novelist. He is an expert in literature and a product of modern education. If the cat is merely a vessel to judge modernity, this admission by the cat of being unable to detach oneself from what is being judged shows the

[104] Natsume, 66.
[105] Natsume, 70.

author making an admission of his own on the difficulty of detachment from modernity. He writes of the cat, "Moreover, I have developed, indeed evolved, to such an extent that there are now times when I think of myself as just another human in the human world; which I find very encouraging."[106] The concept of developing or evolving is synonymous with modernization. It is to say that a man born in a modern world will have to admit at some point that he is indeed a modern man.

It is with this admission that it is important to move to the ending that Natsume Soseki chose for this beloved series. The ending was deemed controversial for how abrupt it was and how such a beloved character was handled. As mentioned earlier, *I Am A Cat* is a series of novels that was adored by the Japanese public. Natsume Soseki chose to abruptly end the series and this came as a surprise to the audience. The cat was not given a proper send-off befitting of its popularity.

The final scene starts with the cat experiencing depression with the realization of the fate of mankind:

> My master, sooner or later, will die of his dyspepsia. Old man Goldfield is already doomed by his greed. The autumn leaves have the mostly fallen. All that has life must lose it. Since there seems so little point in living, perhaps those who die young are the only creatures wise. If one heeds the sages who assembled here today, mankind has already been sentenced itself to extinction by suicide. If we don't watch out, even cats may find their individualities developing along the lethal crushing pattern of forecast for these two-legged loons. It is an appalling prospect. Depression weighs upon me. Perhaps a sip of Sampei's beer would cheer me up.[107]

This may seem like pointless ramblings, but there is actually great meaning in these words. Dyspepsia is a reference to the schoolteacher's stomach issue that was presented early in the

[106] Natsume, 70.
[107] Natsume, 467.

series as part of an introduction to the cat's master. This indicates that the condition continues throughout the series and this monologue taking place at the end of the series shows it remains.

The schoolteacher attempted to cure his stomach issue with many modern methods. But ultimately settled on sake as the preferred method since all other methods proved futile. He also did not have the patience to allow the traditional method to cure the ailment. The cat is also viewing alcohol as the remedy for his depression. The rant on the futility of attempting to change one's doomed fate in life is reminiscent of the schoolteacher's attempts to cure his stomach issue. As mentioned previously, the cat made an admission earlier that he viewed himself as developing and becoming part of the world of humans. It took a very human approach to cure its depression with alcohol. It has become deeply attached to the modern world that it was meant to judge. It was even becoming human in its actions.

The death of the cat once again harkens back to this futility argument. The cat, drunk from the beer, falls into a jar. This marks the end of the beloved series which surprises the Japanese audience and even the publisher of this series:

> While this was going on and despite the constant pain, I found myself reasoning that I'm only in agony because I want to escape from the jar. Now, much as I'd like to get out it's obvious that I can't: my extended front leg is scarcely three inches long and even if I could hoist my body with its outstretched fore-paws up above the surface, I still could never hook my claws over the rim. Accordingly, since it's blindingly clear that I can't get out, it's equally clear that it's senseless to persist in my efforts to do so. Only my own senseless persistence is causing my ghastly suffering. How very stupid. How very, very stupid deliberately to prolong the agonies of this torture.[108]

The cat dies in the jar because of being physically unable to escape since the body of a cat has its limits and the alcohol has disoriented its senses. It is only when this realization occurs that the

[108] Natsume, 470.

cat relents. The reason the cat is in this predicament is the cat chose to do a human action and attempted to enjoy alcohol. There is a phrase in English that aptly describes this situation. Drunk on hubris is a phrase that means a person allowing their ego to get the best of them.

The cat started the series as a being that was detached from the world and did not even have a name. The only discernable truth was that this entity was a cat. There was an air of superiority to the cat's judgment of humans. As the novel progress, the cat states that it must also be human in its view. The conclusion of the series shows that the cat is engaged in folly with this view. The cat is a cat and nothing is going to change this fact. The drinking of alcohol was symbolic of allowing its ego to run amok. When considering the cat as a vessel for the author, the idea of criticizing modern society may have been a pointless endeavor. The author was a man of modernity and it was pointless to try to view himself as detached from it. The battle was already lost.

2. Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's *A Cat, A Man & Two Women* (1935)

A Cat, A Man & Two Women was written by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki and published in 1935. The start of the story gives the impression that it has nothing to do with cats due to its introduction lacking a talking cat. It stands in stark contrast to Natsume Soseki's *I Am A Cat* novel. Instead, the novel starts with a letter addressed to a woman named Fukuko with a passionate plea.

The name of the author of the letter is not clear at this moment, but it becomes apparent that Fukuko is receiving a plea from her current lover's ex-wife. She writes, "There's just one thing I want from you. And of course by that I don't mean I want you to return him to me. No, it's something much, more trivial than that. It's Lily I want. From what Mr. Tsukamoto says, he

wouldn't mind giving her to me, but you keep saying no."[109] The assumption is that Lily is a child that he may have had with this unknown sender. The request would then be an ex-wife trying to regain custody and repair a household that has been broken up due to a squabble between husband and wife.

As the letter continues with the passionate plea, it becomes apparent who Lily is and her importance in the narrative. She explains, "But anyway, do be careful, Fukuko dear. Don't think 'Oh, it's just a cat,' or you may find yourself losing out to it in the end."[110] The story makes clear in its introduction that Lily is a cat and this has such great importance that even a warning is given to not underestimate it. This introduction is similar to how Natsume Soseki's novel begins by establishing that the cat is the central character of the narrative. The important difference is that this cat has a name and apparently starts the story with an owner. This character is not detached from the story as an observer and is firmly embedded in the narrative. It also cannot judge events since it cannot speak for itself.

There is still a nonsensical premise since the ex-wife is warning the current lover that the cat may hold greater importance than her. The ex-wife is not even asking for the husband to come back and instead wants the cat. The story continues after the letter is read by Fukuko with an opening scene describing Lily as a way to dispel any lingering doubt:

> Fukuko stored all this away and began to observe Shozo and Lily's behavior more carefully. She watched Shozo enjoying his sake, with a dish of marinated horse mackerel to go with it. He took a sip, then put the small cup down and said 'Lily!' Picking up a fish with his chopsticks, he held it high in the air. Lily had been standing on her hind legs with her forepaws resting on the edge of the oval dining table and staring, motionless, at the fish lying on the plate in front of her master.[111]

[109] Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, *A Cat, A Man, and Two Women*, trans. Paul McCarthy, Illustrated edition (New Directions, 2015), 4.
[110] Tanizaki, 5.
[111] Tanizaki, 5.

It is clear at this point that Lily is a cat that was treasured by her master named Shozo. Shozo would be the current lover of Fukuko and the ex-husband of the anonymous sender of the letter.

As the narrative continues it becomes more apparent what Lily's role was in this household. Fukuko, in response to the anonymous sender's letter, requests the Shozo give up the cat. She notes, "When Shozo was still living with his former wife, Shinako, he had sometimes mentioned her occasional jealousy of the cat to Fukuko, who had always made rather scornful fun of this sort of silliness."[112] It is becoming more apparent that this cat is at the root of the collapse of the previous relationship. The fact that Shozo keeps showing an overabundance of affection for this cat is becoming a problem in his current relationship. Lily is becoming a silent observer and participant in Shozo's tumultuous relationships.

As the story progresses, it becomes clear that the cat is having a similar effect on Fukuko:

> Even the very fact of Lily being present at their dinner table annoyed Fukuko, to tell the truth. Her mother-in-law was tactful enough to finish her evening meal early and then go up to the second floor, leaving Fukuko to enjoy her husband's company alone; but then that cat would sneak in and grab Shozo's attention away from her.[113]

This is a very comedic way of showing how this cat is disrupting the traditional relationship between husband and wife. The husband should be valuing his wife's company, but the cat is more important in the household. The warning from the letter at the beginning of the narrative written by Shinako is coming to fruition.

[112] Tanizaki, 8.
[113] Tanizaki, 15.

The story does give an additional description of Lily: "It was of a Western breed, with soft, silky fur; a pretty female, unusually elegant in form and features."[114] The description of the cat shows that it has come from overseas. It should be noted how the description gives the impression that a woman is being described. When considering the effect Lily is having on Shozo's relationships, it would seem like a Western woman is serving as a homewrecker and driving the other women away. It may seem silly to associate this cat with Westernism simply because it comes from a Western breed. As the story progresses, however, more tidbits are given about the cat's origin: "Lily had originally belonged to a Western-style restaurant in Kobe where Shozo was working as an apprentice."[115] The cat keeps getting associated with Western attributes throughout the story.

The cat is eventually given away to Shinako as Fukuko cannot stand it any longer. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that Shozo does value the cat more than his wives and his own mother. The novel concludes with Shozo rushing to visit the cat at Shinako's residence. He writes, "Shozo showered all sorts of loving words on her, hoping she would remember how they used to flirt with each other, and start to push him with her head, or begin to lick his face. But Lily just continued to sit there with her eyes shut, purring, no matter what he said."[116] Lily has essentially moved on and viewed his ex-wife as her new owner. Lily represented yet another woman who left Shozo.

The story may have a nonsensical premise, but it does show how fragile the tradition of marriage had become. A cat is able to observe and be the cause of Shozo's tumultuous marriage to multiple women. This novel was published in 1935 and it is telling how the only man in the

[114] Tanizaki, 15.
[115] Tanizaki, 28.
[116] Tanizaki, 98.

household found himself in such a vulnerable position. The women in the household continue to live without him and ultimately, he is left with no one. He explains, "Yes, it was-Shinako and Lily both to be pitied, But wasn't he to be pitied even more? He, who had no home to call his own?"[117] This line at the end of the story encapsulates a complete role reversal to the first story mentioned at the start of this study which was Mori Ogai's *Maihime The Dancing Girl*. The traditional position of head of the household has been completely lost. This story confirms that the transition of power is complete. Modernity has cemented this change in Japan.

3. Summary

I Am A Cat by Natsume Soseki, published in 1906, starts with a cat being portrayed as an unbiased observer of modern society. It has no name or gender and its sole purpose is to judge humanity. The cat over the course of the novel forgets what its purpose is. It becomes closely attached to that which it was supposed to examine. It then becomes disillusioned with its mission and overall purpose. The cat forgets it is even a cat and believes that it may human. The humiliating downfall of this cat serves as a major defeat in upholding tradition. The Confucian tradition of roles would state the cat simply needed to remain in its role as an unbiased observer. It becomes clear modernity had an effect and causes the cat to forget what its role was. The cat just admits the futility of trying to remain detached from modern society. It was only making its end more painful and can only find solace in accepting it had become that which it criticized with disdain. This is symbolic in the sense the cat represents the author. A man living in a modern world is a modern man. It is folly to deny this fact. The loss of tradition needs to be accepted.

[117] Tanizaki, 99.

A Cat, A Man & Two Women by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, published in 1935, mimics the cat as the central figure in the narrative. It moves away from trying to judge the entirety of humanity. It carries similarities of the cat being the central figure and an observer of the world. It even carries the similarity of the cat appearing seemingly human in the description. Tanizaki chose to refocus on personal relationships within the household. The novel still arrives at the same point of defeat. It is that of man acknowledging a loss of purpose. It serves to indicate that at this point in the modernity project that Japan suffers yet another loss of tradition and the Confucian ideal of the established tradition of roles and purpose has become meaningless. It serves as a closing chapter to the preservation of traditions from a bygone era.

Chapter V: Conclusion: Mourning What Was Lost

While it may be tempting to claim that this study has discovered every use of mimetic criticism, it would be absurd to do so. The goal of this study was simply to highlight the fact that these works should be examined in a different light. I noticed through the course of my study that there is a natural tendency to view these people as mere objects. It is important to remind everyone that writing was their life's work and they took immense pride in it. They were also people who lived in an era of transition from traditional Japanese life to a new modernity born out of influences from the west.

These authors wanted to express their view on where Japan was in this turbulent modernity project rapidly spreading nationwide. Mori Ogai's *Maihime The Dancing Girl* published in 1890 started the conversation on eroticism in terms of the state of the household. A man who gets the opportunity to travel to a modern capital in Europe is initially overwhelmed by the allure of western modernity and falls deeply in love with a young Western girl. He momentarily forgets his pursuit of education and becomes hopelessly obsessed. Despite the temptations of modernity, he chooses to return home to Japan. The Western girl Elise is left with the burden of the household which shows tradition is still holding strong in the face of modernity. The man still had the final say as head of the household and it was the woman's burden to adapt. Japan did not lose this tradition at this point.

Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's *Naomi*, published in 1925, marked a dramatic shift. While there was mimicry in the form of a man becoming obsessed with a woman having Western attributes, he never recovers, in complete contrast to the previous work. The woman named Naomi became the head of the household in the end. Kawai Joji becomes the one to hold the burden of adapting

to his new reality brought on by modernity. This marks the loss of the traditional head of household that matched Confucian ideals. Kawai Joji is unable to make decisions and loses his traditional place as the head of the household. The traditional household that Japan knew in the Tokugawa era born out of Confucian values collapsed.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Spectacles" carried a cautionary message about the dangers of arrogance and how a man can fall for entrapment due to delusion. The spectacles were shunned at every opportunity by Mr. Simpson as a grotesque item that would mar his near-perfect complexion. Madame Lalande proves how much this was pure folly. This modern item would have saved him from humiliation by bringing much needed clarity. He nearly marries his great-grandmother based on a flawed love at first sight. Edogawa Rampo's "The Traveler with the Pasted Rag Picture," published in 1929, mimicked the structure of Poe's story. A man also falls victim to love at first sight. The contrast is it becomes clear that the modern item of glasses distorts the man's view of reality. He could not distinguish between the real world and the imaginary. The narrator falls victim to the same plight. This was Edogawa Rampo's way of warning Japan to not instantly trust the modern technological advancements that were flooding in from overseas. Edogawa Rampo still admits this modernity is already in Japan. Modernity had won this battle and people had become accustomed to using these items and lost the ability to rely on just their natural senses.

I Am A Cat by Natsume Soseki, published in 1906, starts with a being with an air of superiority as being the unbiased judge of humanity in modern society. It becomes evident as the novel progresses that this judge forgets what its purpose was. The cat forgets it was a cat and even believes that it was human. The humiliating downfall of this cat was meant to symbolize that it was pointless to struggle against modernity. A modern man will still be considered part of

modernity even if he tries to distance himself from it. Modernity has already deeply ingrained itself in Japan and he was part of it. *A Cat, A Man & Two Women* by Jun'ichiro Tanizaki, published in 1935, mimics the cat as the central figure in the narrative. It moves away from trying to judge the entirety of society. It is refocused on personal relationships within the household. It still arrives at the same point of loss. Modernity has already collapsed the traditional household. Shozo had no home to return to at the end of the novel. He no longer had a purpose. The household full of women moved on and left the only male on his own with no household to call his own.

There are far more connections to draw between different novels written under the genre named Erotic Grotesque Nonsense. It would be fruitful for scholars to try to find more connections and comparisons. The writers wanted to state what was the current state of modernity in Japan. There was contention since one writer's view would become outdated and a new writer needed to update the record. Each writer's attempts to update the record through their stories was their way of memorializing themselves as a witness to the modernization project that swept through Japan. It was only by leaving a record that the tradition being lost could be remembered.

What was ultimately the point of all this? As I mentioned at the very start of the study, outside observers viewed Japan as a nation that seamlessly adapted to modernity. The common idiom is Japan managed to change without throwing the baby out with the bathwater. These authors would say that Japan was a cherished ship that sunk in a storm called modernity. It was not a seamless transition. It was a series of losses. The modernity project gradually chipped away at the traditions the authors cherished. Their stories would mourn these losses as a ship sinking in the sea. There was a faint hope the ship might return as a submarine someday.

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