

Yukio Mishima

“It is the nature of authority to fear purity more than any sort of corruption.”

—Yukio Mishima, *Runaway Horses*, 1969.

BY JESSICA TEISCH

YUKIO MISHIMA (1925-1970) PLANNED HIS LIFE to a final act of protest, living each day as if he were one of his novel's protagonists. One of the most widely acclaimed and translated Japanese authors of the twentieth century, Mishima penned more than 100 works, including novels, short stories, poetry, essays, screenplays, and modern, Kabuki, and Noh dramas. Although nominated for the Nobel Prize three times, the honor always eluded him. His spectacularly staged ritual suicide (*seppuku*, or *hara-kiri*) in front of the Japanese army in 1970 dramatized his life's leitmotif: his protest against modern Japan's materialistic, spiritually barren core. With a varied style marked by its beautiful, elusive prose, Mishima's works opened up understanding of Japanese culture to the West. His own tumultuous life, full of poses and guises, also metaphorically linked Japan's traditional past and its transition to a modern era.

Mishima wrote as Japan was transforming from an insular archipelago into a global military and economic force. The turbulent Shōwa period of Emperor Hirohito's long reign (1926-1989) witnessed crippling economic

Where to Start

THE SEA OF FERTILITY tetralogy, which spans the twentieth century, from the dying aristocracy past World War II, is considered Mishima's masterpiece. For a semi-autobiographical early piece that delves deep inside the psyche of a homosexual youth, try the sexually explicit **CONFESSIONS OF A MASK**. **THE TEMPLE OF THE GOLDEN PAVILION** portrays a young man obsessed with beauty and religion. ■



depression, war against China, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and surrender to the Allies following the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. After World War II, constitutional party democracy replaced imperialism, and Japan rose as the world's second economic superpower. However, the Shōwa period's "enlightened peace" also brought social dislocation and an assault on traditional Japanese culture.

Mishima criticized Japan's spiritual decline and new preoccupation with Western materialism. He warned that Western modernization would create an "inorganic, empty, neutralized" nation, yet believed that traditional culture still played an important—if less acknowledged—role in modern life. In his life and works, Mishima rekindled the *bushido*, or "way of the samurai," and embraced its strict ethical codes: truth, nobility, mental and physical discipline, and loyalty to the Emperor. Yet even as he lamented the dichotomy between traditional Japanese values and the spiritual emptiness of modern life, he courted Western art and literature, dressed in European clothes and lived in a Western-style house.

Born as Kimitake Hiraoka in Tokyo in 1925 (he later took the pen name Yukio Mishima, which means "one who chronicles reason"), Mishima was raised by his aristocratic grandmother, who stifled his childhood friendships but cultivated his interest in literature, Noh drama, and poetry at an early age. During World War II, Mishima, who failed to qualify for military service due to an army surgeon's misdiagnosis of pleurisy, worked in a naval arsenal and published poetry, short stories, and essays. According to biographers, his "cheating" of a possible wartime death imbued him with complex feelings about the glory of both life and death—nihilistic and Zen Buddhist philosophies that later appeared in his work. After the war, Mishima studied law and then took a job in the finance ministry. In 1948, he retired from the government in order to concentrate on his writing.

His first major novel, *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), shocked Japanese readers with its modern portrayal of homosexuality. (In 1958, despite his own homosexuality, Mishima entered into an arranged marriage to the daughter of a famous traditional painter, as the samurai custom required continuation of the family line; they had two children.) *Confessions* and Mishima's other novels, poetry, and Kabuki plays would be widely translated during his lifetime. In 1952, after a trip to Greece and Italy, Mishima became obsessed with body building. By the late 1950s, he was practicing *kendo* (the art of samurai swordsmanship) and competing in state and world championships. Captivated by male beauty and perhaps anticipating his own death, Mishima often posed in photographs as St. Sebastian shot to death with arrows, a samurai committing *hara-kiri*, or a drowned sailor.

In 1968, Mishima organized a small private army, the Shield Society, or *Tate No Kai*, from a group of students he met in Self-Defense Force training. Dedicated to the revival of the samurai knightly code of honor (and ready to fight in the case of a leftist uprising), the members were seen as

patriots by some, right-wing fanatics by others. After two years of training, on November 25, 1970—just after delivering the final volume of his masterwork, *The Sea of Fertility*, to his publisher—Mishima, 45, enacted a final act of defiance against his nation's spoiled dignity. Arriving with four of his cadets at military headquarters in Tokyo, he read a manifesto in front of 1,000 servicemen. He called for the "spineless" Japan to revive its old heroic ideals, overthrow the democratically-elected government, bring back the emperor—and save Japan. Met with jeers, Mishima committed *seppuku* and was ritually beheaded by his cadets.

In his time and ours

Mishima's theatrical death often overshadows his literary stature. Most critics, both Japanese and Western, consider him to be one of the twentieth century's greatest writers in his extraordinary, frightening creativity, and he achieved wealth and fame during his lifetime. Others dismiss Mishima's work as nihilistic and egocentric and accuse him of showy exhibitionism. Certainly, Mishima—despite his universal themes of love and beauty, life and death, tradition and modernization—is something of an acquired taste. While novels like *The Sound of Waves* contain scenes of haunting beauty, others embrace graphic homoeroticism; *Confessions of a Mask*, for example, recounts many of Mishima's sadistic fantasies.

Mishima's work experienced a commercial boom in the 1950s with novels like *The Sound of Waves* and *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* and his popular plays, all of which were staged during his lifetime. Although respected by both intellectuals of the right and left, from both the prewar and postwar generations, his literary reputation began to slip in Japan in the 1960s though it thrived elsewhere as translations became widely available. *The Sea of Fertility* quartet reinvigorated Mishima's flagging reputation. At the time of his suicide, his literary reputation had reached an international peak.

Mishima's dramatic death reignited debate over his work. Critics began to scrutinize his life, attitudes, and unusual forms of political and social protest. Some saw his death as blatant criticism of Japan's Westernized direction. Others believed that Mishima had lacked clear motives in his attempt to revive the *bushido*. "Who is this Mishima, then?" asked *The New York Times* (8/2/70). "A Japanese Norman Mailer flexing a samurai-style *machismo*? A kind of Zen man-for-all-seasons? A dangerous reactionary militarist, as some left-wing critics charge? A poseur desperate for celebrity?" Mishima attributed these pretexts as services of his art—even if critics disagreed. Most concur, however, that Japan has not yet been ready to face Mishima's astute, if severe, indictment of modern Japanese society. "Let us remember that the central reality must be sought in the writer's work: it is what the writer chose to write, or was compelled to write, that finally matters. And certainly Mishima's carefully premeditated death is part of his work" (Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mishima: A Vision of the Void*,

1980). With that life-ending final act, Mishima became the embodiment of the heroic ideals captured in his literature.

MAJOR WORKS

Confessions of a Mask (1949; trans. 1958)



Mishima wrote the autobiographical and sexually explicit *Confessions* as he became preoccupied with body building. It immediately topped Japan's bestseller lists. Now considered one of his finest novels and a classic of modern Japanese fiction, it established Mishima as a promising new writer and presaged his themes of sexuality, violence, and death.

THE STORY: Kochan, a high-school student living in a rigid post-war Japanese society, lusts over the ideal form of masculine beauty. Discovering that he's homosexual, he must learn to live with the idea that he differs from other young men—and, in an attempt to have society accept him, hide behind a mask of proper etiquette. Only violent, sadistic fantasies provide some measure of freedom.

"This book will increase American awareness of his skill; but it will also, I imagine, arouse in many readers as much distaste as respect. ... In *Confessions of a Mask* a literary artist of delicate sensibility and startling candor has chosen to write for the few rather than the many."

BEN RAY REDMAN, NEW YORK TIMES, 9/14/58.

"Mishima gives us intimate details of adolescence so frank that they would prove embarrassing if not under the control of a singularly gifted writer. ... The universality of his theme, and the honesty with which Mishima approaches it, make this book easier for the foreigner to appreciate ..."

S. E. MARTIN, NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE BOOK REVIEW, 11/16/58.

THE BOTTOM LINE: This is a classic novel about sexual agony and pretense.

The Sound of Waves (1954, trans. 1956)



The first of Mishima's works to be translated into English, this novel reflected Mishima's belief in traditional Japanese values and the simple life; his hero and heroine reflect a cultural ideal of life lost to modern Japan. Mishima adapted the plot from the Greek pastoral romance *Daphnis and Chloe*.

THE STORY: On the remote fishing village on Uta-jima (Song Island), Shinji, a young fisherman, falls in love with Hatsue, a pearl diver and daughter of the village's wealthiest man. They must keep their affair secret, but how will Shinji eventually prove himself worthy of Hatsue's love and survive the village gossip?

Reviving Traditional Japanese Theater

MISHIMA WAS AS PROLIFIC A PLAYWRIGHT as he was a novelist, and he synthesized traditional Japanese theater and contemporary Western themes. Many of his plays fall into the category of Noh drama, the official performance art associated with the military government and Shogunate court during the Edo period (1603-1867). Often compared with Greek drama, Noh is a highly stylized, ritualistic drama involving dance, rhythm, music, and poetry. Traditionally performed before nobles, Noh derived from celebratory rituals enacted at Buddhist temples, and played to themes of love and death. A chorus sang the story as mostly male actors (typed as gods, warriors, beautiful women, mad people, or supernatural beings) wore masks. During the Meiji era (1868-1912), Noh died out, but slowly flourished again as private troupes revived it.

Mishima wrote the first successful modern Noh plays, injecting new life into the art form by merging traditional Japanese material, usually supporting Buddhist themes, with Western elements. In *The Lady Aoi* (1956), derived from the 11th-century classic novel, *The Tale of Genji*, which was adapted by a 14th-century Noh dramatist, the traditional role of priest becomes a modern-day nurse who talks about sexual repression. In *The Damask Drum* (1955), an elderly caretaker falls in love with a young lawyer—with heartbreaking results. In each of his plays, Mishima takes traditional stories and imbues them with modern psychological and symbolic analyses. Noh, if not the most popular form of entertainment, is still considered one of the world's most important dramatic art forms. ■

"The Japanese scene against which this novel is set is beautiful and exotic, but the two teenage lovers who move through the story are much too delicately aware of their own loveliness and sensitivity and honesty, much too aware of their own youth." NEW YORKER, 9/22/56.

"*The Sound of Waves* reads like a piece of routine commercial fiction to me." KENNETH REXROTH, NATION, 9/8/56.

"His story is a maturely conceived idyl, that captures the purity and candor of youthful desire. ... The colorful setting is an enchantment, but the basic appeal is universal. *The Sound of Waves* is altogether a joyous and lovely thing."

EDMUND FULLER, NEW YORK TIMES, 8/19/56.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A touching story of first love.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion (1956; trans. 1959)

YOMIURI PRIZE from Yomiuri Newspaper Company for best novel



Mishima's previous novels had ensured him wide acclaim throughout Japan, but *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* established his international reputation. As his fourth book to be published in the United States, the novel made Mishima the best-represented Japanese novelist outside of Japan. Based on a true story of a frustrated, young Buddhist monk who burned the temple of Kyoto in 1950 (after it had survived World War II), the novel examines obsessions with beauty.

THE STORY: Mizoguchi, whose mother's betrayal of his father scarred him as a youth, develops a stutter and is an outcast. He eventually becomes an acolyte at a famous temple in Kyoto, but its beauty slowly starts to devour him. As long as the temple exists, Mizoguchi can attain no peace.

"Read simply as the story of the man who burned a famous building, it is constantly absorbing. But additional layers of meaning seem to reveal themselves, different for each reader." DONALD KEENE, NEW YORK TIMES, 5/31/59.

"An impressive and beautiful book. ... Should be hailed as great news in Beat Land, where Mizoguchi may suggest new and spectacular forms of liberation." J. P. SISK, COMMONWEAL, 6/12/59.

"Despite its nominally powerful incidents, I would say that the novel is conspicuously lacking in power—and precisely because it is devoid of moral sensibility."

D. J. ENRIGHT, SPECTATOR, 10/2/59.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Considered one of the best Japanese novels to appear during its time.

Mishima, the Film

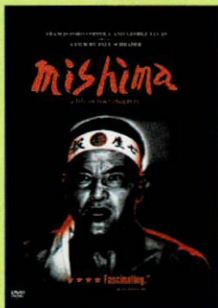
MISHIMA (1984)

Directed by Paul Schrader and produced by George Lucas and Francis Ford Coppola

Music by Philip Glass

◆ Best Artistic Contribution, Cannes Film Festival, 1985

This film depicts Mishima as a right-wing fanatic obsessed with eroticism and death, who recreated himself from a troubled boy into a samurai and patriot until the grisly end. It also reenacts scenes from his novels. ■



The Sailor Who Fell From Grace with the Sea (1965)



With this violent novel, Mishima pried into the minds of adolescent boys struggling to find their place in the world.

THE STORY: In present-day Japan, a 13-year-old boy's widowed mother has an affair with a naval officer, whom the boy at first idealizes.

The boy, leader of a local gang, soon sees the officer differently. Together, the gang members try to find objectivity in their confusing, hypocritical world with calculating acts of violence and brutality.

"[It] is obviously intended as a major work of art—as an Oriental transfiguration of the novel of the absurd, and as a cryptosociological study of the homicidal hysteria that ... lies latent in the Japanese character. Unhappily, the book turns out to be simply a diabolically skillful thriller." TIME, 11/12/65.

"The novel is profoundly, even beautifully macabre, especially in its reversal of the usual images of child and adult. In its portrayal of adult passion and its manipulation of narrative points of view, it recalls Henry James, while in its picture of childhood, and its almost allegorical approach, it reminds one of William Golding in *Lord of the Flies*."

EARL MINER, SATURDAY REVIEW, 9/18/65.

THE BOTTOM LINE: A novel about adolescence and the misleading idea of "objectivity."

THE MOVIE: 1976, directed by Lewis John Carlino and starring Sarah Miles, Kris Kristofferson, Jonathan Kahn, Margo Cunningham, and Earl Rhodes.

THE SEA OF FERTILITY TETRALOGY

Mishima delivered the final pages of this tetralogy to his publishers on November 25, 1970—the day he committed *seppuku*. The volumes, which critics consider his masterpiece, recount the tumultuous Japanese experience between 1912 and 1970. They also depict a different reincarnation of the same being.

I. Spring Snow (1968; trans. 1972)



In Tokyo's Imperial Court in 1912, immediately following the Russian-Japanese War, outsiders penetrated the ancient aristocracy for the first time, and tensions mounted between the "old" and "new" society. This first book introduces the friendship between two high school-age characters, Kiyooki Matsugae and Shigekuni Honda, as Matsugae experiences doomed love with a young girl.

"Two themes dominate the affair, the friendship, the separate path of Kiyooki's attempted progression out of himself and every social scene in the book: the decline of the aristocratic spirit from the nobly martial to the merely elegant, and the rise in it of the West. ... [W]e read *Spring Snow* for its

marvelous incidentals, graphic and philosophic, and for its scene-gazing ..." HORTENSE CALISHER, NEW YORK TIMES, 11/12/72.

II. Runaway Horses (1969; trans. 1973)



Twenty years after the death of his friend Kiyooki, Honda is now a judge. When he sees a reincarnation of Kiyooki as a violent political fanatic, Honda represents him at a trial. The novel takes place against the political fanaticism that led Japan into World War II.

"[This novel] is Mishima at less than his best. Seemingly mesmerized by the theatricality of his theme, he is too much taken in by the terrible oversimplifications his characters call reality." NEW REPUBLIC 5/5/73.

III. Temple of Dawn (1970; trans. 1973)



In 1952, Honda, now a private attorney, sets off for Thailand to settle a dispute. In an attempt to visit the family of high-school acquaintances, he meets a seven-year-old Thai princess—considered crazy for her belief that she's a reincarnated Japanese.

"Compared to ... novels one and two, *Temple of Dawn* illustrates the law of diminishing returns. Part travelogue ... part introduction to eastern religions ... part picture of post-World War II Japan ... *Temple* lacks a central focus, a ruling

passion, a strong line of plot."

VICTOR HOWES, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, 11/28/73.

IV. Decay of the Angel (1971; trans. 1974)



Honda, now in his late 70s, widowed, wealthy, and childless, befriends a 16-year-old boy whom he recognizes as Kiyooki's reincarnation—and a villainous struggle begins. This book brings together the previous installments' themes, including the decay of Japan's samurai ideal, the value of Zen Buddhist philosophy, and the moral dissolution of the modern era. As Honda ruminates on the memory of his departed friend, he realizes that this memory—and all experiences surrounding it—mean nothing.

"Most amazingly, Mishima vindicates those questionable strategies of the earlier volumes, finally twisting the frayed threads of themes and the split hairs of metaphysics into a rope to hang the reader on. ... *The Decay of the Angel* is a death rattle in prose. ... With Honda, the reader has lived through four lifetimes of scandal."

ALAN FRIEDMAN, NEW YORK TIMES, 5/12/74

THE BOTTOM LINE: Together, the four novels recount a perverse, scandalous, and above all epic story of a century when Japan transformed into a modern, sterile society. ■

Selected Other Works

* Discussed in Major Works

* **CONFESSIONS OF A MASK (1949)**

THIRST FOR LOVE (1950)

A young widow, her father-in-law, and a servant share an obsessive love—representing, to Mishima, the decline of Japan's traditional culture.

FORBIDDEN COLORS (1951)

In this dark tale, an elderly man uses a beautiful gay youth as a tool of revenge on the women who rejected him.

DEATH IN MIDSUMMER AND OTHER STORIES (1952)

The collection, a powerful look into human psychology, contains "Death in Midsummer," "Thermos Bottle," "Three Million Yen," "Patriotism," and other stories about absurd, tragic circumstances.

* **THE SOUND OF WAVES (1954)**

FIVE MODERN NO PLAYS (1956)

These plays, which preserve the haunting, spiritual style of classical Noh, delve into Mishima's own obsessions with beauty, death, and the Japanese soul.

* **THE TEMPLE OF THE GOLDEN PAVILION (1956)**

PATRIOTISM (1960)

This story involves a young army officer and his wife, who, after a failed military coup in the 1930s, perform *seppuku* to vindicate their honor and traditional beliefs.

AFTER THE BANQUET (1960)

In a rethinking of the role of the traditional Japanese wife, a wealthy, middle-aged woman vows to use her money to help her husband win public office.

* **THE SAILOR WHO FELL FROM GRACE WITH THE SEA (1963)**

SILK AND INSIGHT (1964)

In this work of historical fiction, Mishima examines a labor strike in a Japanese silk factory in 1950s.

* **THE SEA OF FERTILITY TETRALOGY (1965-70)**

DEATH IN MIDSUMMER (1966)

This collection of 10 short stories centers on family tragedy and honor.

THE WAY OF SAMURAI (1967)

A collection of Mishima's commentary, with powerful illustrations.

MY FRIEND HITLER (1968)

A collection of plays and essays on dramaturgy.

SUN AND STEEL (1968)

This memoir chronicles Mishima's interest in bodybuilding and the martial arts, from a "decadent youth" to a man.

ACTS OF WORSHIP: SEVEN STORIES (1989)

In the title story, a housemaid comes to understand a professor's sadness. Other stories speak of loneliness, suicide, pride, egotism, and human psychology. ■