

FICTION THROUGH THE AGES

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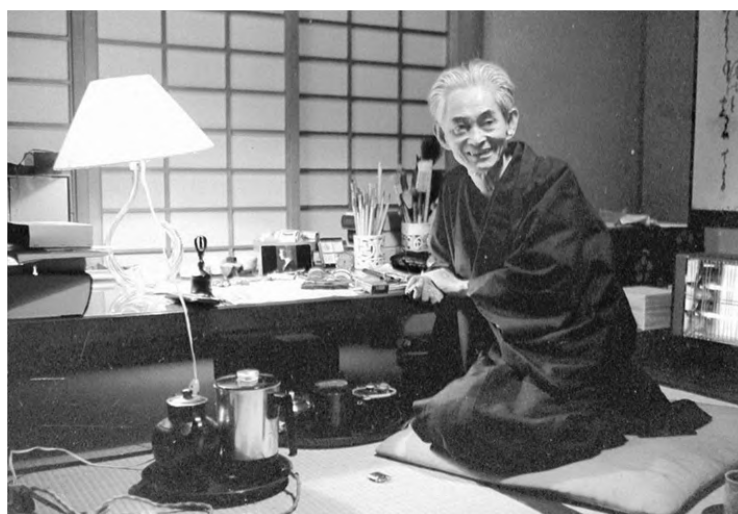
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WHAT IS A NATIONAL WRITER? ON YASUNARI KAWABATA: FOCUSING ON “THOUSAND CRANES”

Today I will talk about a Japanese writer Yasunari Kawabata (1899–1972) and his novel “Thousand Cranes” (1949) which is used as a material of “Foreign Literature” at Ukrainian schools.

The theoretical topic of my lecture will be “What is a national writer?” As the first Japanese Nobel Prize winning author, Kawabata once played a prominent role as a national writer and is still regarded as one of the most important writers who helped create modern Japanese literature. But what is a national writer? What is s/he expected to create? What conditions does s/he have to meet to be regarded “national”? And lastly why do we need a national writer? I think these questions will be relevant for many countries including Ukraine.

My speech will consist of three parts: 1) introduction, 2) the general features of Kawabata’s literary works, 3) “Thousand Cranes” as the novel by a national writer.



Introduction: Who Is Kawabata?

Yasunari Kawabata was born in 1899 in Osaka, an economic and cultural center of Western Japan. His father, a doctor, died when he was one year old and his mother died when he was two. The young Yasunari was raised by his grandparents. In his works Kawabata often referred to the motif of orphanhood throughout his life.

Kawabata made his literary debut while he studied at the University of Tokyo. He then was regarded as a main member of a young writers’ group called “Neo-sensualism,” a version of modernist writing which aimed at defamiliarizing descriptions of “reality” by way of making a new combination of subjectivity and objectivity. The most famous works by Kawabata

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before World War II are a short story “Dancer in Izu” (1926) and a series of short stories “Snow Country” (1937 [1st ed.]), both of which were repeatedly made into movies and TV dramas.

After the War, Kawabata wrote several works focusing on Japanese traditional beauty, which are regarded as the main reason for his being awarded the Nobel Prize in 1968. The novel “Thousand Cranes” (1952) also belongs to the works of this period.

In parallel with the theme of Japanese traditional beauty, Kawabata continued to deepen another central theme of his creation – sexuality. The novella “House of Sleeping Beauties” (1961) caused a sensation in that Kawabata blatantly themed the sexuality of old men in both fantastic and realistic modes. One can see that Thousand Cranes is the combination of the above two themes as the beauty of precious old Japanese tea bowls symbolizes there such sexual love as defies social norms and personal ethics.

Kawabata committed suicide in 1972 at the age of 73 without leaving a will. It has been said that he had been suffering from sleeping pill addiction and psychological depression.

General Features of Kawabata’s Literary Works

Now I will summarize the general features of Kawabata’s literary works from the viewpoint of conditions of the creation of a national writer.

1) Depiction of People

To depict folk people is a central task of modern national literature. Let me explain why. Every country which has started modernization has to deal with many projects, the most basic of which is nation building. The humanities such as historical studies, linguistics, folklore, literature, and arts are required to show what the nation is, that is, what we are as the nation’s citizens. When and how was it born, what has it achieved in its history, how is it different from others, what mission it has in world history and so on – these questions play a driving force of nation building in each respective country.

In this respect what is important to deal with is folk people, or more concretely, poor farmers and workers. They have much less chances to reap the benefits of modernization as material well-being, education, or enlightenment than the upper social classes although they actually form a large part of the nation. Gaps between classes, the rich and the poor, educated and uneducated should be relieved to achieve successful nation building. National literature is required to depict how people are living and how upper classes should be united with them toward the goal of becoming a “fully-fledged” nation.

One can see that young Kawabata consciously or unconsciously chose such a theme in works as “Dancer in Izu” and “Snow Country.” In “Dancer in Izu” the hero is a university student who has an inferiority complex about his orphanhood. He was travelling alone in the countryside called *Izu* where he by chance became close with a barnstorming small theater company. Kindness and innocence of uneducated actors and actresses, especially a young girl whom he particularly liked, soothed his heart so that he regained confidence and parted with them to go back to Tokyo to continue his studies. This short story is one of Kawabata’s most famous works. It was made into movies and TV dramas many times and gave him nationwide

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popularity. In my opinion, it is the plot model “an intelligent individual meets the people and learns something very important” which helped to make this short story a work of national literature.

What is distinctive about Kawabata is that he often tended to depict people such as travelling entertainers, *geisha* in country towns or urban poor rather than village peasants, who had been a more orthodox object of description in national literature. But urbanization and population mobility accelerated by modernization created new groups of the people in cities and towns whom Kawabata depicted. In this respect he anticipated a new stage in the development of national literature in Japan.

Meanwhile, as we will see with “Thousand Cranes,” he depicted folk people much less after World War II while he chose more often heroes and heroines from the middle class. I suppose it has to do with the theme of war.

2) Theme of War

Kawabata did not serve in World War II and seldom depicted frontline battles or air raids on cities themselves. But the theme of the war played a crucial role in his literary creation. For example, he often described war widows. In the novel “The Sound of the Mountain” a war widow having an affair with the heroine’s husband says that if they should give her back her killed husband, she also would return a man to his wife (Kawabata, 1969–1974, v. 8, p. 347).

The more important subject with the theme of the war is the connection with the dead. In a short story “Sasanqua” Kawabata thought about children who had not been born because of the war and concluded: “While pitying them and my own life which flowed away during the war, I wondered if they might be reborn into something someday” (Kawabata, 1969–1974, v. 6, p. 353). In “Thousand Cranes” this subject is given a somewhat different expression in the hero’s reflection: “Perhaps you might be mistaken if you worry about the dead too much as much as if you criticize them. The dead do not impose morals on the living” (Kawabata, 1969–1974, v. 8, p. 73).

Another important motif related to the theme of the war is the return to national traditional beauty. In an essay written in 1949 when Kawabata was 50 years old, he wrote: “It would not be farfetched for me to regard my life after the war as the rest of it and feel as if it is not my own but an appearance of the tradition of Japanese beauty.” (Kawabata, 1969–1974, v. 14, p. 14). In the novels written after the war Kawabata often made use of traditional motifs such as the tea ceremony (“Thousand Cranes”), traditional Noh masks (“The Sound of the Mountain”), Kyoto’s culture (“The Old Capital”) possibly because he wanted to show that Japan still had something to save despite the huge damage of the war.

On the other hand, Kawabata also depicts new social trends in Japan after the war in a rather positive tone. For example, in the novel “Day and Moon” (1952–53) the hero, an old man who lost his two sons during the war, heard the news that some students tried to hand over a political appeal to the Emperor himself when he visited University of Kyoto and had the impression that it was not someone else’s problem. A new attitude towards the Emperor as a human being but not a living god was one of the most important cultural and social changes after the war, which both the hero and Kawabata himself accepted calmly and positively.

Thus, Kawabata’s works after the war are characterized by the theme of the war and several

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subjects related to it, which helped give him the status of a national writer who was expected to show a new image of national identity and a new path of the country. As was noted earlier, Kawabata's works were made into movies and TV dramas so many times that his image of a new Japan which was democratized while keeping its traditional values was supported by many people.



On “Thousand Cranes”

The novel “Thousand Cranes” and its sequel “Plovers on Waves” consist of a series of short stories written from 1949 to 1953, which is a way of writing the kind of novel Kawabata was fond of. Therefore, Kawabata's novels lack a strong unity of plot while they are characterized by deep lyricism and delicate psychological description.

Let me point out some characteristics of “Thousand Cranes” in connection with general features of Kawabata's literature mentioned above.

1) Motif of Sexual Love and Traditional Culture

The plot of “Thousand Cranes” revolves around the hero named Kikuji, a young man in his mid-twenties from a wealthy family, and his love affairs with some women which are fateful and tragic. It is characteristic that sexual love is associated with traditional tea utensils which Kikuji inherited from his late father. When he looked at two bowls which his father and his lover used, he had an impression: “Forms of the bowls three or four hundred years old are healthy and do not induce any delusions. They are full of life and even sensual. /Looking at the two bowls, Kikuji remembered his father and Fumiko's mother, and felt as if he saw beautiful figures of their souls side by side” (Kawabata, 1969–1974, v. 8, p. 137).

The connection of personal life and traditional beauty is a motif which Kawabata often made use of in his works after the war. Thus, he succeeded in representing Japanese tradition not in a formal, but in a personal, lively manner more understandable to the general reader.

2) Motif of a Double

“Thousand Cranes” is characterized by some sets of a double: Madam Ota and Chikako Kurimoto, who both had been lovers of Kikuji's late father so that Kikuji himself had a complex feeling of love and enmity toward them; Yukiko and Fumiko, two young girls with whom Kikuji tries to have a peaceful and stable love relationship but in vain; and lastly Kikuji and his late father connected by Oedipus complex which evidently leads to Kikuji's love

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affair with Madam Ota who had been a lover of his father's.

As is well known, the motif of a double is popular and important in modern literature in many countries. For example, Nikolay Gogol's "Nose" is one of prototypical works of the double motif in world literature. One can say Kawabata is a writer who was fond of this motif, too.

Let me illustrate why this motif is so important in modern literature. In my opinion, it has something to do with the concept of the individual which has been essential in a modern society. But on the other hand, the concept of the individual has something vulnerable in comparison with such concepts as nation, clan or class, which had been more fundamental in a premodern society. This dilemma is more pronounced in countries which started modernization later than others. That is why the literary motif of a double has been popular especially in such countries as Japan or Ukraine because it is an expression of an anxiety about the notion of the individual who should be the only one but might also be exchangeable with others.

3) Reconciliation with the Dead

In "Thousand Cranes," the relationship between the living and the dead is important. Kikuji apparently has ambivalent feelings toward his late father as he told Madam Ota, "But what could bind you now? Perhaps, my father's ghost?" (Kawabata, 1969–1974, v. 8, p. 57). But Madam Ota committed suicide after she had a love affair with Kikuji, her ex-lover's son. Her daughter Fumiko, in whom Kikuji looked for a trace of Madam Ota, also disappears from his sight as if she had passed away. Thus, Freudian Eros and Thanatos combine living and the dead so that Kikuji gradually accepts conflicts and parting with the dead. It seems it is reconciliation, not confrontation, with the dead which Kawabata wanted to emphasize in *Thousand Cranes* and other novels written after the war.

One can imagine that Japanese as well as other nations had to make their own respective reconciliations with the dead after the war. Perhaps, they wanted to make reconciliation with the dead mainly to get some form of relief from their suffering, but it was very necessary for them in order to start a new life again. In my opinion, Kawabata's works symbolically portrayed survivors' grief for the dead and wishes for a new life, which were shared by many readers of the time.

Conclusion

One of the main tasks of national literature is to create an artistic image of the subject of nation-building. Now, we might add that another task of national literature is to create a figure, whether it is real or ideal, of reconciliation and harmony between the living and the dead who once lived and fought to build and protect the nation.

As we tried to show, Kawabata became a national writer after the war in that he tackled the latter task in some novels as "Thousand Cranes" and "The Sound of the Mountain," which were popularized in multiple media. One can say that this is how Kawabata became a national writer in Japan.

We believe that every nation has and will have such national writers, especially after great disasters, who could provide relief to the living.

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