

## Characteristics of Modern Japanese Literature

The Modernist literary movement should not be confused with the standard dictionary definition of *modern*. Modernism in literature is not about time. Rather, it defines a body of literature with certain characteristics.

Modernism in American literature spans roughly the years from 1915-1945. Notable modern American writers include Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, William Faulkner, and Katherine Anne Porter. Societal changes occurring during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century prompted these writers to break away from the previous styles of writing such as Realism and Romanticism.

“*Modanizumu*, as the term ‘modernism’ was rendered into Japanese in the late 1920s, became a powerful intellectual idea, mode of artistic expression, and source of popular fashion in Japan from approximately 1910-1940” explains William J. Tyler in his 2008 book *Modanizumu: Modernist Fiction from Japan, 1913-1938*. Like American Modernists, Japanese Modern writers also broke from traditions of the past by attempting new styles, subjects, and themes. Japanese Modern writers commented upon the lifestyle, political, and socioeconomic changes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their works were often banned as a result.

What Are the Characteristics of Modern Japanese Literature?

- Marked by a strong and intentional break with tradition and the nation-centered and group orientation values. This break included a strong reaction against established religious, political, and social views. Feminism, individualism, internationalism, liberalism, and proletarianism emerged during this period.
- Belief that the world is created in the act of perceiving it; that is, the world is what we say it is.
- There is no such thing as absolute truth. All things are relative.
- No connection with history or institutions. Their experience is that of alienation, loss, and despair.
- Championship of the individual and celebration of inner strength.
- Life is unordered and incomplete.
- Concerned with the sub-conscious. New literary forms and styles; for example, the I-Novel (first-person point of view), an autobiographical confessional type of narration, emerges in 1906.

**Author Biographies.** Note that the authors’ names below are written following the Japanese name order of family name first, given (or pen name) last. However, in the case of Mori Ogai and Shimizu Shikin, they are often referred to in Japan by just their given names or pen names, so Ogai and Shikin.

**Mori, Ogai (1862-1922).** Ogai had a rich career, first as a Japanese Army surgeon, then as a translator, and later as a novelist and poet. He was born into an elite Japanese family and was therefore afforded a quality education. He was well trained in Confucian classics, Chinese poetry, and Western thought and medicine. He also knew such foreign languages as German and Dutch.

While in the army, he lived in Germany, where he developed an interest in European literature. His writings can be divided into four phases. First, Ogai translated European plays into

Japanese. Next, he wrote mostly about his experiences. Third, from 1912-1916, he wrote historical stories. Finally, after 1916, he mainly wrote biographies of late Edo period doctors. Ogai is considered one of the great writers of modern Japan.

The short story, “The Dancing Girl,” featured in this lesson is based on his own experiences. This story was written and published in 1890, as he was just beginning his literary career.

***Shimizu Shikin (1868-1933).*** Raised in Kyoto, Shimizu Shikin was highly educated. She was active in the women’s rights movement in Japan and frequently published in magazines. Scholars credit Shikin, as she is known in Japan, as one of the first writers to adopt a new narrative style of Japanese writing in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This was the I Novel, a confessional genre in which the literary events reflect the writer’s life, all written in a first-person point of view. This writing style was popularized by Natsume Sōseki.

A pioneering woman in many respects, Shikin married for love. She travelled with her husband to Europe, later ending her writing career to be a wife and mother.

We will work with Shimizu Shikin’s story “The Broken Ring” (1891).

***Kuroshima, Denji (1898-1943).*** Kuroshima’s background resulted in a fragmented secondary education. Supposedly, he paid someone to take his entrance examinations. This allowed him to enroll in the university, where he studied Russian literature. He was drafted into the army in 1919.

Fighting against Russia greatly impacted Kuroshima and is reflected in his literary work. Upon returning from the war, he joined the Proletarian literary movement in Japan. Proletarian literature is a genre that advocates for the working class and rejects capitalism. He published narratives, short stories, and novels. The tone of Kuroshima’s work is melancholy and raw, but his works do reflect the sentiments of the humble landscape of Japanese society in a quietly heroic way. Kuroshima’s writing strongly express his rejection of using military force to achieve imperialism.

We will work with the short story “The Telegram,” which was published in 1923.