Confronting Modernity in Kawabata Yasunari’s Literature

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Abstract

The works of Kawabata Yasunari and other Japanese Modernist authors are often viewed in terms of a binary between tradition and modernity. However, I propose Kawabata’s works actually critique this very viewpoint. Rather than a fear of losing out on traditional Japanese spirit, Kawabata is questioning the notion that tradition truly exists. In Kawabata’s pre-war works, characters view Japanese tradition as a refuge from the shock of modernity, but they soon come to realize it is only an illusion. After the war, Kawabata supports tradition only to better show the decline of society. In this thesis, I look at Kawabata’s pre-war works, *Snow Country*, *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, and “The Dancing Girl of Izu” to understand how he viewed the complex interaction of tradition and modernity before the war. From there, I examine Japan’s defeat in the Fifteen-Year War as the most tragic event in Kawabata’s life, and what effects of the trauma we can see in his literature. I examine his post-war works, *The Sound of the Mountain*, *Thousand Cranes*, and *The Master of Go*, under the lens of Walter Benjamin’s notion of shock, that an individual must face trauma in their everyday life due to the forces of modernity. I present the Fifteen-Year War as the dividing point, after which Kawabata’s sensibility is irrevocably changed.

Keywords: Japanese Modernism, Tradition, Modernity, Shock, Kawabata, Fifteen-Year War
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Introduction

After World War II, Japanese artist Tsuruoka Masao painted a lone and heavily deformed figure sitting alone in a room amidst a similarly disfigured landscape. The Modernist work of art is titled “Heavy Hands,” both for the enormous hands the figure can’t seem to lift and for guilt or sin imbued the figure exudes. This is evidenced by the figure’s almost fetal-like position and his blank stare, looking only at the ground. The post-war piece shows a very clear and moving depiction of some of the themes I will discuss in this thesis, primarily the powerful feelings of shock and trauma that afflicted the people of Japan following the Second World War. The figure is obviously suffering, and the mental and physical aspects are clearly intertwined. The twisted background also reveals how the artist viewed the world around him as having changed. The landscape, once recognizable, has become distorted into something else entirely. This painting is a part of the larger whole of Modernist art. Following the war, Japanese Modernist art, including film, paintings, and literature, has illustrated the struggle to come to terms with the tragedy and loss of the war. This painting poignantly illustrates a small fraction of the trauma the Japanese people faced.

Figure 1. “Heavy Hands”. Tsuruoka, Masao, 1949.
Modernism is a worldwide and interdisciplinary movement, spanning many fields, such as literature, art, film, and sciences. It began roughly at the turn of the 20th century, and primarily began in Euro-American countries as a desire to rebel against common structural forms like the novel. It is too vast a topic to fully describe in an introduction, but many famous and influential Modernists considered themselves hard working and innovative intellectuals who dealt with themes such as alienation from society, nihilism, innovation in traditional forms, and time as being non-linear. Although the movement’s end is debated, for the purpose of this thesis I will assume the perspective that Modernism exists as long as influential authors, such as Kawabata, are writing on Modernists themes. Due to the contemporary swift rise of globalization during the period, Modernism saw uniquely regional Modernist movements in peripheral nations, such as Japan.¹ These movements are arguably more important, as rebellion against oppressive structures, a core tenant of Modernism, is more noticeable in cultures not exposed to typical Western practice and canon. Tradition comes to exist as a response to Modernity, as countries like Japan seek to find a bastion from the forces of modernity. Japanese Modernism’s situation is unique. Japan only became open to Western influence in the 1850s, but became an imperialist and industrialized power within only a few decades. In turn, forces of modernity came both swiftly and powerfully, and the changes to life that Western Modernists gradually came to term with had to be internalized much more quickly.² The result is a movement that clearly responded to and dealt with these issues. Due to its rapid industrialization and imperialistic ambitions in East Asia, Japan came to be considered the “West” in Asia.

¹ For a further discussion of Modernism and the periphery, see Neil Larsen, Modernism and Hegemony (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).
² Modernism is a vast topic with more vast scholarship. A fitting introduction can be found in Andreas Huyssen’s book: After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism.
I find this struggle particularly well reflected in the works of Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972). He is a Modernist author, and his pre-war works deal with alleviating contemporary anxiety over the conflict between what was seen as the traditions of Japan with the encroaching values of modernity. As an influential Modernist whose career spanned the time-period, and whose works present a clear struggle with and internalization of the war’s aftermath, Kawabata is a natural choice for analysis. His post-war works focus on the effect of shock and trauma on the individual. With this thesis, I argue how the qualities of the modern as portrayed in Kawabata’s literature evolved between the 1920s and 1950s, to show these qualities changed when confronted with the wide scale and unique suffering of Japan in the Fifteen-Year War, in order to argue that we see thought patterns noticeably change due to national tragedy. Through careful and thorough analysis of his works, I argue how he is a suitable choice to represent the wider Modernist movement, and that his works can be seen as a response to the shock and trauma of the period. This naturally supports the idea that individuals exist in relationship to the world around them, and that we can and will see responses to similar trauma in literature.

Discussion of the Fifteen-Year War and WWII tend to focus on the political and societal changes, and neglect the changes that occurred in the cultural and artistic realms. Kawabata Yasunari, the focus of this thesis, published before, during, and after the war. Although he did not personally serve in the Japanese military during the war, having been disqualified for medical reasons, the war had a profound effect on his psyche. Donald Keene observes, “Kawabata’s preoccupation with death” was especially “conspicuous especially during the war, when there was death everywhere” (Keene, 831). Kawabata’s personal account of his wartime and post-war experience is different from Keene’s interpretation and full of seeming contradictions. He claims that one could find his rejection of war ideals in his writings, yet he
personally toured through Japan, Korea, and the imperial colony of Manchukuo in support of the war effort. Although he frequently spoke about how he felt he had suffered little due to the war compared to many others, he also expressed that the “grief must have permeated my flesh and bones.” Strangely, he claimed this induced in him feelings of freedom and peace (Keene, 827). In another instance, he claims that after the war, he will only be able to write elegies (Snow Country, vi). In spite of his supposed melancholy, Kawabata frequently traveled abroad to visit other scholars, and became the most visible of all the Japanese writers (Keene, 827). There is a clear disconnection between his words and actions, and the true meaning of his statements, like his works, are ambiguous. We must look to his works to attempt to parse his actual feelings. In this instance, Kawabata’s post-war works show the extent to which he truly did internalize the trauma of the destruction Japan incurred during the Fifteen-Year War. Kawabata’s opinion that art is a “matter of life and death” shows the severity to which he, and by extension Japanese Modernists, considered their art to be a reflection of life in its two extremes (Miller, 261).³ Thus, the tragedy made waves through Japanese art, waves which are best analyzed through Kawabata’s works.

Although we know people are severely impacted psychologically by national tragedies, we have an insufficient understanding of exactly how they are internalized. In Kawabata’s works, I see a site where an influential author embraced the pain of the tragedy and discussed it through his writings. Japan faced great devastation as a result of the Fifteen-Year War, Kawabata was influenced post-war by what he saw around him: the huge loss of life, destruction of cities like Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, and the collapse and subsequent restructuring of the

³ In her article, ““A Matter of Life and Death”: Kawabata on the Value of Art after the Atomic Bomb,” Miller goes on to suggest this quote shows how Kawabata believes the art of him and others can be used to help heal trauma.
government by the occupying American forces all brought modernity’s consequences to life.\textsuperscript{4} Further, it came to life in a way that was overwhelming and unavoidable. In Kawabata’s work, we can see the change in his approach to the same themes, and meaningfully make comparisons between his works before and after the war. Additionally, this makes extrapolation more promising, as the changes in his writing are more easily linked to the tragedy of the war.

Through analysis of Kawabata’s works, I argue that the intensification of the shock and trauma that his characters deal with is a direct result of the Fifteen-Year War. For shock, I am using Walter Benjamin’s definition of the word. His definition of shock is multifaceted, but is defined as the individual’s natural response to the changes resulting from modernity. Drawing on Freud, he proposes that humans possess a natural state of protectiveness against stimuli from the outside world, and shock is the response when this barrier is broken due to overstimulation. Benjamin equates shock with modernity, as the rapid changes to society result in constant overstimulation.\textsuperscript{5} In many ways, the destruction of the war in Japan parallels the destruction of the Great Kanto earthquake, which has been attributed with jump-starting modernity and its subsequent shock in Japan.\textsuperscript{6} However, calling the destruction of the war merely “shock” is somewhat of an understatement, and I use the word trauma to refer to the lasting impact of the war that Kawabata deals with. Shock is a phenomenon that occurs at the psychological and conscious level, while trauma can refer both to the event, and to the lingering psychological pain.

\textsuperscript{4} For a detailed breakdown of the destruction Japan faced due to the wartime bombing, see David Fedman and Cary Karacas’ article, “A cartographic fade to black: mapping the destruction of urban Japan during World War II”\textsuperscript{5}
Shock is an instantaneous mental reaction, while trauma is the long-lasting effect of severe or repeated shock.

To support my own analysis of the novels, I draw from existing scholarship on Japanese Modernist literature. For that reason, many of my sources offer textual analysis on works, such as Reiko Tsukimura’s “The Symbolic Significance of the Old Man in The Sound of the Mountain”, which goes in depth on how Kawabata views the “post-war waste-land” in which he lives and how this affects his writing. In The Dilemma of the Modern in Japanese Modern Fiction, Dennis Washburn discusses Kawabata’s works and how they share a recurring theme of fear of cultural amnesia due to the influence of modernity. Although I am taking a historical angle in some sense, my thesis is primarily literature analysis, and I subsequently rely heavily on close readings and existing scholarship to support my own claims. However, this is not solely a literature thesis and thus will incorporate other theory and scholarship. I am drawing on Carl Cassegard’s “Shock and Modernity in Walter Benjamin and Kawabata Yasunari,” and use Benjamin’s notion of shock throughout the thesis. Benjamin’s notion of shock as the default response to modernity is the primary theoretical lens I use in my analysis of this topic. While Cassegard’s article makes good points in connecting the literature and theory, I feel it does not go far enough in attributing shock with external factors. I also draw on Seiji Lippit’s Topographies of Japanese Modernism, which deals with the intellectual and physical landscape of Japanese modernism, and how Kawabata confronts and shapes it.

Publications analyzing Kawabata’s works are not exhaustive. Many authors, including those I am citing, take for granted that Japan and its cultural capital changed as a result of the

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With the influx of modernity, there came a reexamination of Japanese ideas and what exactly authenticity entailed. Tradition, as an idea, came into existence as the fear of modernization grew. As Sun Ge puts it, “there are no inherent differences between Japan and the West, or between tradition and modernity. Such differences are produced in the process of narrating them, and it is only when awareness of such effects of relation and narration breaks down that differences between Japan and the West tend to collapse” (Sun, 61). The process of narration is important to Japanese intellectuals during the period, as they grapple with how to define Japan and the West, to find a unique identity or to admit that it no longer exists. Through this process, the identity of Japan and the West, the modern, become irreversibly linked. In essence, modernity invents tradition. Narration of Japan’s identity is the primary issue that Kawabata dealt with pre-war, and through his literature he ultimately critiques the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. In response to the rapid onset of Western influence, which can broadly reworded as the modern, Modernists composed themselves into two factions: those who supported embracing the West and its influence, and those who sought to react against the West by embracing Japanese tradition. Kawabata explores both viewpoints. In his pre-war works,
“The Dancing Girl of Izu” and *Snow Country*, Kawabata sought to uncover something uniquely Japanese, which I refer to as spirit, a Japanese mixture of the beauty of both the natural and physical world. The first chapter is devoted to analysis of these two works. I analyze how Kawabata explores the themes of the urban and rural dichotomy, and the conflict between tradition and modernity. Before the war, many saw a dichotomy in Japan between the Modernist urban world, and its implicit opposite, the rural agricultural society. This rural world represented a temptation for his new-age characters, who see it as a way to return to the idealistic past. Kawabata subverts this notion, instead showing how this ideal is impossible for the modern individual to grasp, and that the traditional rural world only exists in contrast to the modern.

The second chapter begins the discussion of shock and how it is presented in Kawabata’s work. Starting with his pre-war work, *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, I show how before the war, Kawabata looked at modernity and shock with almost a sense of excitement. Drawing on Lippit’s analysis of the work in *Topographies of Japanese Modernism*, I examine the work as both a celebration of modernity and a critique of the fear that it is destroying tradition. From there, I look at Kawabata’s idea about the impact that traumatic events can have on both the individual and society, before suggesting World War II is one such traumatic event that inflicts a form of cultural amnesia through trauma.

The third chapter explores the effect of the war on society through looking at *The Master of Go*, *Thousand Cranes*, and *The Sound of the Mountain*. I look at how Kawabata’s themes change as a result of the internalization of the tragedy of the Second World War. To summarize, Kawabata makes a stronger case for tradition, only to show how modernity undermines it. Additionally, Kawabata has become much more cynical about the effect modernity has on Japanese citizens. For example, in *The Master of Go*, an aging Go master is defeated by his
younger student, after the student begins exploiting new rules to his advantage. Kawabata laments that Go, influenced by standardized rulings promoting balanced play, has changed permanently, but also in a way almost indistinguishable to outsiders. Kawabata deals with how the younger generation has internalized the trauma of the war, to the point where they can no longer experience shock.

My conclusion succinctly pulls everything together to cleanly chart how exactly Kawabata’s style and content changed from a multi-pronged approach to modernity, to a lamentation of the effects modernity brings through trauma.

In the appendix I have attached a partial translation of Kawabata’s short work, “My Map of Asakusa” (boku no asakusa chizu). As far as I can tell, it lacks an official English translation, so I have provided one. Although it is brief, I believe it is a fitting companion piece to The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa, as it more directly expresses Kawabata’s appreciation of the beauty of a city. If desired, I suggest reading it either directly preceding or directly following the discussion of The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa towards the beginning of the second chapter.

Full names of East Asian individuals are written in accordance with the standard East Asian practice of family name preceding given name.
Chapter 1: The Search for Spirit

I can’t imagine you running through the forest in a cheongsam. But neither can I imagine you not wearing a cheongsam.

-Chang, Eileen, “Love in a Fallen City,” 1943

This chapter examines two of Kawabata’s pre-war works, “The Dancing Girl of Izu,” and Snow Country. I argue how both are a response to the inclination of some intellectuals at the time to treat the countryside as a locus for tradition, for reasons such as struggling against modernity, forming a national identity, or to promote a uniquely Japanese spirit. Through these two works, Kawabata grapples with these ideas, before ultimately rejecting the countryside as containing an authenticity.

Seiji Lippit rightly points out how Kawabata’s pre-war writings, “[shifted between two separate aesthetic trajectories…Asakusa represents his engagement with modernity and the urban landscape…Izu is associated with nature, lyricism, classical aesthetics, and sentimentalism” (Lippit, 134). The Izu variant of his works focuses on the notion of turning away from modernity and feature a search for some form of tradition, a redefining the natural world and rural society as being the opposite to modernity. Many viewed the countryside as a, “locus of authentic identity,” and feared it was sacrificing, “to make for an entirely new kind of social order” (Harootunian, 100). Japanese intellectual elites from as far back as the 18th century sought to reclaim the countryside as a locus of tradition and authenticity. As society became more intertwined with forces of modernity, the number of critics concerned with this issue also
increased. Harootunian points out how Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962), a famous Japanese folklorist, is one such Japanese critic who noticed the divide between the countryside and the city. He uses the term “nonsynchronicity”\(^8\) to define the economic and social gap that Yanagita and other critics dealt with. To put simply, unevenness develops between the countryside and cities, as the cities rapidly modernize and the countryside lags behind. This has both economic and political ramifications, as a divide forms duet to cities and their denizens changing due to modernity.

Kawabata possesses a perspective on both the countryside and city; he lived in the countryside for much of his childhood, moving to the city to attend college. Perhaps drawing from a cynicism of urban intellectuals prescribing imaginary values of tradition to the countryside, in his pre-war works “The Dancing Girl of Izu” and *Snow Country*, Kawabata critiques tradition in the countryside as merely illusion. He rejects idealizing the unevenness that exists, the notion of the countryside’s nonsynchronicity, by showing that modern forces have already ingrained themselves.

In his 1933 essay “Literature of the Lost Home,” literary critic Kobayashi Hideo (1902-1983) writes of a friend from the countryside who feels a profound sense of nostalgia when he sees something that reminds him of home. Kobayashi, born in the city, feels he has lacks this, having never had, “sufficient time to nurture the sources of a powerful and enduring memory, attached to the concrete and the particular.” (Kobayashi, 49). The transient nature of the modern city prevents one from feeling an attachment to the world around them. Walking around, he laments, “I see much in common between intoxication by the beauty of a mountain, and

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\(^8\) Nonsynchronicity is a term is typically attributed to Ernst Bloch and refers to the difference in processes of development amongst classes as a result of modernization.
intoxication by the beauty of an abstract idea. I feel as though I am looking upon two aspects of a spirit that has lost its home” (Kobayashi, 49). Although not in response to Kobayashi, Kawabata examines the same notion of “spirit,” a conflation of the beauty of the natural world and created world, in his pre-war works. For Kawabata, spirit encompasses the uniqueness and beauty of Japanese tradition and the natural world, both in a figurative and concrete sense. As their names suggest, his pre-war works “The Dancing Girl of Izu” and Snow Country tackle the issues spatially and reveal his attempts to find a home for spirit. In “The Dancing Girl of Izu” and Snow Country, the characters travel to the countryside and seek to overcome the anxiety of modernity by attempting to find the locus of spirit.

The narrator of “The Dancing Girl of Izu” (1926) is a college-student from the city. He comes to the countryside in search of spirit, an understanding of tradition that will help him to feel connected with society. Through the narrator’s search, Kawabata hints this spirit does exist, but that the countryside is not this locus of traditional authentic identity. It is indeed nonsynchronous with the city, but he critiques the view that it is an untouched paradise, as it too is a site of encroaching modernity. Just like Yanagita, Kawabata examines the countryside under the premise of “finding enduring forms of cohesion capable of guaranteeing lasting social solidarity” (Harootunian, 106). The ultimate goal of this spirit is to confront the modern, to find resolution for societal discord resulting from things such as nonsynchronicity and social and emotional detachment. The narrator recalls he initially came to Izu, “heavy with resentment that my personality had been permanently warped by my orphan’s complex (kojinkonjōu) and that I

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9 Kawabata himself was an orphan. He frequently includes autobiographical details, a hint at his own connection to the topics and situations covered.
would never be able to overcome a stifling melancholy.”

He soon feels the intoxication of natural beauty, as he is “enchanted by the layers upon layers of mountains, the virgin forests, and the shades of autumn in the deep valleys” (4). Like Kobayashi, the narrator is intoxicated by the beauty of the natural world.

This appreciation for the natural world primes the narrator in turn to appreciate aesthetic beauty, and his object of desire eventually changes to a girl he encounters, although both beauties are a function of spirit. The girl is the daughter of a family of traveling performers, who represent this idea of authentic Japanese tradition in the work. Close to the girl for the first time, he sees that the girl’s hair, “was arranged elaborately in an unusual old style unfamiliar to me…it created a beautiful harmony…she gave the impression of the girls from illustrations in old romances” (4). This is where Kawabata makes clear his association of the natural world with tradition. With no hesitation, the narrator’s fixation with nature turns to a fixation with traditional beauty. This beauty stirs something within him, and he soon becomes enchanted with the girl instead of the natural world.

The inability for the two of them to truly connect is best understood in relation to the class conflict in the countryside elucidated by the novel. At several points, the class difference is clearly illustrated. In one instance, the narrator and the family both stop at a teahouse seeking shelter from the rain. The narrator is invited inside to dry his clothes, while the family is left outside. While inside, the host of the teahouse, herself quite poor, speaks ill of the family, and the narrator notes, “the scorn that lurked in the woman’s words so stirred me” (6). In another instance, the narrator and family stay in different lodgings, partially at the performing family’s

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10Kawabata, Yasunari, *The Dancing Girl of Izu and Other Stories*, trans. J. Martin Holman (Washington, DC: Counterpoint) pg. 27. All further references to this work appear in the text.
insistence. The family has already internalized their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They perceive the narrator as higher than them socially, merely because he is a student from the city. As the troupe and narrator enter a small town, they pass several posted signs stating, “beggars and itinerant entertainers- KEEP OUT” (27). The town considers entertainers nothing more than beggars, the lowest of the low. Class lines are demarcated inexplicitly and explicitly throughout the novel. Because of the social disconnection, due to nonsynchronicity, the narrator’s feelings of spirit are at their strongest when he is emotionally detached from the dancer. Rather than feel an attachment as a person, he feels she is an object. She provides a use for him, helping him understand spirit, but his connection grows as his distance from her does. Extending the scope, he considers this women to exist as ground for him to trample in his hunt for spirit.

The first evidence of this is when a glimpse of her body in an outdoor bathing pool reveals is actually quite young, only appearing older due to her traditional hair and dress. She is still a girl. This realization actually relieves him, and he states, “when I gazed at her white body…I breathed a sigh of relief and laughed out loud…she’s a child…my head was as clear as though wiped clean” (14). He becomes further distanced from her, realizing their age gap being a barrier between them. Through this disconnection, he feels relieved of anxiety. To summarize, he feels spirit most strongly when he treats her as an object, rather than a person. Her beauty is the catalyst for him to experience spirit. Their relationship meanders on, as he never truly desires to get close to her. He tunes out her ramblings about school, they play games in silence, and they appear almost incapable of communicating on any level. In one instance, he overhears the dancing girl say she thinks of him as a nice person. At hearing this the narrator finds himself, “inexpressibly grateful to find that I looked like a nice person (ii hito) as the world defines the
word” (27). Her simple statement is enough to make him feel as though he has cured his melancholy through their relationship. He feels he has encountered and come to understand spirit, that he has formed a real relationship with someone completely different from him. Of course, the irony is that he merely overheard this, and his feelings of attachment stem from eavesdropping, only possible because he is detached from them.

Feeling accomplished, the narrator departs from the countryside back to Tokyo, noting to himself that, “it already seemed long ago that I parted from the dancing girl,” and seemingly assumes that he will never see the family again (32). He begins to feel a “lovely hollow sensation,” and “could accept any sort of kindness and it would be only right…everything seemed to melt together into one” (33). In the countryside, he has indeed found a cure for his melancholy. Through the girl’s spirit, he feels reconnected with society, able to immediately form new connections with a boy on the ship, to the point where he doesn’t hesitate to eat the boy’s food. Spirit, drawing authenticity from beauty and tradition, has liberated him. However, as in most of Kawabata’s works, this ending is ambiguous. On one hand, it affirms the existence of spirit. It is hard to argue that the narrator here does not feel relief, he seems to indeed have found the cure he sought. At the same time, the story itself is critiquing the avenue used to acquire it. The narrator was not truly connected to the girl. His acceptance of spirit is reliant on believing the illusion that the countryside is the locus of tradition, even though it is shown to be nonsynchronous. Those who look to the countryside to fix their lack of connection with society succeed only by detaching themselves from the countryside, where they believe tradition to exist. In doing so, they are not delineating authentic tradition at all, merely creating their own illusion of tradition, ungrounded in reality.
Snow Country (1935-47) is a continuation of Kawabata’s search for spirit in the countryside. The main character, Shimamura, is a married socialite from Tokyo who frequently takes trips to visit geisha in a hot spring village. He considers himself an expert on ballet, yet prides himself on never having seen a play. A modern man, Shimamura lives, “a life of idleness,” and tends “to lose honesty with himself,” frequently traveling, “alone into the mountains to recover something of it” (Snow Country, 17) As he rides the train to this other world in the snow country, Shimamura notices a hauntingly beautiful image. Looking out the window he sees a beautiful superimposition of the natural world with the scene of a beautiful girl caring for a sick man. He describes:

The figures and the background were unrelated, and yet the figures, transparent and intangible, and the background, dim in the gathering darkness, melted together into a sort of symbolic world not of this world. Particularly when a light out in the mountains shone in the center of the girl’s face, Shimamura felt his chest rise at the inexpressible beauty of it” (9).

This is the spirit Kobayashi described on a concrete level, as he sees the superimposition of natural beauty with aesthetic beauty. Shimamura is able to see the beauty of nature and the aesthetic beauty of a girl at the same moment. He chases spirit through the rest of the novel, hoping to escape the inauthenticity he feels through it, to find some meaning in life. In Shimamura’s quest, Kawabata once again questions if this spirit truly exists, and whether one

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11 Like most of Kawabata’s works, Snow Country was published through newspaper serials. The first section was published in 1935, but he did not publish a complete edition until 1947. As the majority of it was written between 1935-37, it is natural to consider it a pre-war work.
who feels inauthenticity with the modern world can find solace in spirit. Once again, he questions whether one can reform a connection with the world through spirit.

Although he admits that he has come to feel, “a keen dissatisfaction with the slumbering old tradition,” Shimamura nevertheless comes to the hot spring town, as he sees it as a land frozen in time, a land in which tradition and beauty still exist (24). Just as he finds pleasure in ballet as, “an art from another world…a lyric from some paradise,” in the snow country he seeks a different world, attempting to derive authenticity from Japanese tradition in the rural countryside (20).

Relatedly, in the novel Shimamura describes the manufacturing process of Chijimi 12 Shimamura himself is quite fond of the linen and every year sends his Chijimi kimonos to have their bleaching, “done properly in the country where the maidens had lived,” although he himself admits he “had no way of knowing that the bleaching had really been done in the old manner” (152). He considers his Chijimi kimonos to be authentic, and yearly sends them so they can continue to be so, as if it is a characteristic as concrete as color or fabric.

He seeks out the geisha for a similar reason, a cleansing of his modern mindset through relationships with the traditional and beautiful geisha. He rekindles a relationship with Komako, a beautiful apprentice geisha in the town. In a parallel with the train scene, he looks at Komako’s reflection in a mirror, and as he sees, “Komako in that mirror reflecting the mountain snow,” his thoughts turn to “the girl in the evening train window” (53). He has another fleeting image of spirit, as he becomes intoxicated on the cocktail of nature, her beauty, and the authentic tradition he is interacting with. However, just as with the train scene, he is disconnected, looking at these

12 Also known as ojiya-chijima, a type of linen famous for its long history and the bleaching process which uses ozone produced by snow melting under the sun.
images of beauty as if they are, “part of nature, and part of some distant world” (57). He is not truly encountering spirit, rather willing himself to believe in the illusion of it.

Just as he came to the snow country to bridge worlds, he begins to try to bridge worlds with Komako, but in doing so he uncovers the illusory nature of her beauty. Komako is not formally trained in the geisha tradition, instead she learns from sheet music and the radio. The existential relief he feels only comes from a belief that he is performing authentic actions with authentic people, but the tradition he buys into is only possible through a willful ignorance of reality. He realizes the binary between tradition and the modern simply does not exist. As he progresses in his relationship with Komako, he comes to find the minutia of her life to be, “so ordinary a bit of melodrama that he found himself almost refusing to accept it” (61). These small moments add up, until he becomes, “conscious of an emptiness that made him see Komako’s life as beautiful but wasted…he pitied her, and pitied herself” (128). The idea of waste comes up frequently. Early on Shimamura finds that Komako is an avid reader and writer, yet he considers these habits to be wasted effort. Initially, this draws him to her, as he sees the waste of his own ballet-scholarship reflected in it. Eventually however, as he realizes her wasted effort points to her own disconnected fantasy world. He pities both of them for their shared folly.

As his pity for Komako grows, he comes to feel an attraction to Yoko, the girl from the train. He frequently describes her beauty, especially the beauty of her voice, which he considers extremely clear, a purity similar to his vision of the snow world. He notices, “her laugh…was so high and clear that it was almost lonely…it struck emptily at the shell of Shimamura’s heart, and fell away in silence” (137). For Shimamura, her voice is the siren’s call, attempting to draw him into another chance at love. After speaking with her, he ponders if running off with Yoko to Tokyo would not, “somehow be in the nature of an intense apology to Komako, and a penance
for Shimamura himself” (136). He realizes his error; by creating this fantasy world in the mountains, he is only making love impossible. His redemption lies in merging worlds, bringing this beauty out of the unreal world into his own real world, ruining the illusion of tradition but allowing for human connection. Rather than choose this path however, he concludes, “how unlikely it was that he would come once again once he had left,” and makes preparations to leave(155). Shimamura chooses to leave Yoko and Komako behind, giving up any possibility of penance. He leaves without finding spirit or love, seemingly content to forego either to retain what is left of his illusion. It is at this point he begins to think of the Chijimi and that he has a Tokyo shop handle the logistics of ensuring it retains its “tradition.” The truth is that neither the Chijimi nor the geishas represent true tradition, as tradition is merely illusory.

In the novel’s concluding scene, Yoko falls from the second story of a burning building. Shimamura looks at her unmoving body, feeling that at that moment, she held “both life and death in abeyance (sei mo shi mo kyuushi)...he felt rather that Yoko had undergone some shift, some metamorphosis” (173-74). In the train, she held spirit, both human and natural beauty, in abeyance, but here, she holds life and death in abeyance. Just as death is the termination of human beauty, the novel shows that life, experience, is the termination of natural beauty, the beauty of tradition. Through living with Komako, he comes to see that the tradition he imagined in her was illusory. The only way to believe in tradition is to define it in opposition to modernity, and then detach oneself from it to retain the illusion. This understanding shocks him, and he reels his head back and looks at the night sky, which, “flowed down inside him with a roar” (175). Realizing this, he turns to the stars, the last remaining source of constancy.

From these two works we come to understand Kawabata’s nuanced approach to the idea of tradition. Responding to common thought at the time, Kawabata ultimately critiques the idea
of the countryside as a locus of spirit, indicating that such thought only comes from an incomplete understanding of the countryside. Kobayashi reaches this conclusion as well, saying, “to go off for inspiration to the beauty of Nature may seem to be a perfectly natural activity, but on reflection we must admit that it is another manifestation of our quotidian intellectual unease” (Kobayashi, 49). There is no real tradition, it is merely a delusion we choose to believe in, defined only in relation to modernity. Although Kawabata does suggest there are things of value in the countryside, it is ultimately a nonsynchronous place, itself victim to forces of modernity.
Chapter 2: The Shock and Trauma of Confronting Modernity

At the same time, however, if you ignore them completely they lose all possible connection with yourself, and at once become nothing more than vanishing “ghosts of science.”

-Dazai Osamu, *No Longer Human*, 1948

In this chapter, we examine Kawabata’s pre-war work, *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* (1929-1930). In this work, Kawabata looked at modernity and shock with almost a sense of excitement. Drawing on Lippit’s analysis of the work in *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* and Benjamin’s notion of shock, I examine the work as both a celebration of modernity and a critique of the fear that it is destroying tradition. From there, I look at Kawabata’s idea about the impact that traumatic events can have on both the individual and society, before suggesting the Fifteen-Year War is one such traumatic event that inflicts a form of cultural amnesia through trauma.

*The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* gives us a change of context, from the countryside to the city. Kawabata confronts the other common sentiment during the period, that it is better to embrace modernity than to rebel against it by seeking tradition. In doing so, he confronts both necessary opposition of the rural world in the city, and the shock of modernity on the individual.
In his 1930 essay, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” Walter Benjamin argues that individuals must confront shock, a form of trauma for an individual that results from modernity. The connection between Benjamin’s theory of shock and Kawabata was originally brought up by Carl Cassegard, who writes how Benjamin views the conflict of modernity:

Exposed to shock, inner nature seeks to protect itself under the protective shield of identity. Where the shield is strong, the self is rigified and cut off from experience. Where it is thin it will be torn apart, and the self will again have to face shock.¹³

Individuals wish to live in what Benjamin terms “now-time,” time in which items have histories and memory. Shock traumatizes us as it interrupts this now-time and forces us to live in a time of information, fleeting sensations which lack significance outside of the moment. He calls this time “empty and homogenous time.” In order to combat this, the individual develops identity, best put as the necessity for “a dominance of the intellect over the emotions in spiritual life…consciousness is fully developed and nothing is left which might be perceived as shocking” (Cassegard, 239). In protecting ourselves from one form of trauma in the modern world, we invite another: boredom. Even if we can avoid shock, life in the modern city will tend away from meaning as we are also unable to experience as we could in a pre-modern world.

As I discussed in the first chapter, Sun argues the notion of tradition only exists in response to the modern. The belief in a traditional rural Japan is little more than delusion. In this chapter, we will discuss the Kawabata’s “Asakusa variant” of literature through his work, *The

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¹³ To give more context to terms: Cassegard defines shock is the sensation of overstimulation caused by modernity, experience is an idealized form of existence in which one can assimilate perception into their innermost being, and identity is the state of consciousness we adopt in order to protect ourselves from shock (238-240).
Scarlet Gang of Asakusa. Just recently having been rebuilt after the Great Kanto earthquake\(^\text{14}\), the new Asakusa prompts Kawabata to experiment with theme and form. Before our eyes, The Scarlet Gang, “breaks down the distinction between pure and “mass literature,” dissolving the novel into multiple, “impure” forms of writing (Lippit, 120). After being rebuilt following the earthquake, Asakusa becomes the nexus of modernity in Japan, and Kawabata’s novel becomes representative of a certain eagerness to embrace the forces of the modern. The work embodies, “a culture suspended between the foreign and the native, between past and present, belonging properly to neither” (Lippit, 121). Kawabata’s Asakusa rejects binaries; he shows the coexistence of the supposed dichotomous forces of modernity and tradition. Kawabata uses the narrator to confront modernity and shock directly in the city, and ultimately, if begrudgingly, argues for the benefits of shock. On one hand, he shows how the dichotomy doesn’t exist, whilst also showing the benefits of modernity, that shock can actually be a positive force for those that live in the city.

Switching locations and perspectives, in The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa, Kawabata brings us to Japan’s nexus of modernity, Asakusa. Asakusa, a district in Tokyo, is perhaps best summed up by the narrator’s quotation of Azenbō Soeda’s\(^\text{15}\) theory of Asakusa as a foundry:

In Asakusa, everything is flung out in the raw. Desires dance naked. All races, all classes, all jumbled together forming a bottomless, endless current, flowing day and night, no beginning, no end. Asakusa is alive…The masses converge on it constantly. Their

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\(^{14}\) 1923 earthquake that saw much of Tokyo and Yokohama destroyed due to the earthquake, aftershocks, and subsequent fires.

\(^{15}\) Japanese political activist (1872-1944)
Asakusa is a foundry in which all the old models are regularly melted down to be cast into new ones (*The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*, 30).

For Kawabata, Asakusa is the locus of raw modernity in the form of technology, sexuality, and the grotesque. The past is continuously melted down and recreated into something new. Abandoned buildings become homes or places for erotic dance, theater, jazz and an importer of foreign revue respectively. The crowd, consisting of beggars, gangs, prostitutes, policemen, and businessmen, becomes a force in itself. From this, society is stripped bare, and the desires of the individual and society shine forth. Instead of merely lamenting the loss of identity in the crowd or the loss of tradition in the city, Kawabata shows the many benefits that modernity can bring, such as the ability to have new experiences, appreciate different forms of beauty, and give disenfranchised people their own space. From the novel’s outset, Kawabata sets up the distinction between those with experience with Asakusa, and those who are not. While being led by Yumiko, a member of the scarlet gang, the narrator encounters something shocking, and says, “I freeze in my tracks. Four dressed-up young girls with very white faces are standing right in front of us…Yumiko laughs: You’ll always be a tourist” (4). There is a difference between outsiders and insiders, outsiders are merely tourist, visiting Asakusa to see its sights. As such, they have not prepared themselves to the shock, and still find the situation traumatic. Insiders, like Yumiko and the scarlet gang are more prepared for shock, they live in empty and homogenous time, but this is in a sense liberating. Yumiko, the narrator’s guide and arguably the work’s heroine says, “I am a daughter of the earthquake. In the middle of the earthquake, I was reborn” (66). In the new Asakusa, she too found a new life. Throughout the work she expresses her desire to never become a woman, and she considers her loss of identity in the crowd to be the catalyst, saying, “when hundreds of people sleep, lying together on concrete, legs touching,
without anything to cover up their bodies—then a girl starts to hate becoming a woman” (66). She hopes to escape the confines of womanhood and the limits it imposes. She frequently cross-dresses and appears in different disguises, sometimes a boy, and sometimes a girl. The crowded pile of bodies creates a desire in her to escape the confines of identity, especially feminine identity, and the ubiquity of crowds and other modernist forces in Asakusa allows her to do just that. In Asakusa, one might see “a man dressed as a woman…slipping off with another man into the dark alleys behind the temple,” and this might send “a chill up your spine” (51). Acts that transgress against societal values are common in Asakusa, and this is shocking to an outsider, but normal to those within. The crowd is liberating, allowing many to live out their true desires in ways that the confines of traditional conventions do not.

In one of his most unexpectedly beautiful passages, Kawabata describes the typically cacophonous sounds of the modern city, saying, “the whistles of the traffic cops, the bells of the newspaper sellers, the sound of the crane’s chains, the sound of the engines…they become one, and I float along on this wave of sound; it is almost like the lullaby” (96). The crowd and the noise of the city share a sublime quality, the ability for one to give themselves up to modernity and experience new things, to escape the forces that confine them normally.

In addition to the beauty of the unconventional sounds, unconventional sights in the city have their own beauty. This is what Kawabata refers to as “charm of asphalt” in the work. He gives an example of the daily cleaning of a concrete toilet by poor local kids. He questions, “don’t the kids do it because of the charm of the modern building…don't the kids love the concrete bathroom more than the teahouse or the Momoyama Castle?” (95). The children are transfixed by the modernity the toilet represents, and their appreciation of it borders on worship. In a short work, “My Map of Asakusa,” Kawabata further elaborates on the unexpected beauty of
the modern city, “[the] bridges have little ornamentation; they are simple and mechanical. Within their steel and their scientific aesthetic lies the beauty of the modern city” (Kawabata Yasunari Zenshū, v.27, 276). Even within simple infrastructure, one can see a certain strength and endurance that the modern city represents. Both the people and buildings of the rebuilt Asakusa have come back stronger than before. As Henry Smith puts it, “Kawabata's descriptions of the physical city ring with a sensuous appreciation of the hard, cutting qualities of the steel…that echoes the imagery of sharpness in…gang members themselves” (Smith, 71). The gang members represent a lower stratum of society that have been to escape their confines to find their own place. They possess a vitality for life that the city enables. Although they are victims of shock, they are liberated from their previous lives and find one more permitting of their desires in the city.

At the same time, Asakusa does not completely destroy tradition. The narrator later teases that, “Asakusa folk are truly old fashioned…they all respect their hierarchical differences, all subscribe to duty, believe in friendship among buddies—just like the gamblers back in the Edo days” (SGA, 102). These values can hardly be considered unique to Edo, but what is really emphasized is that there is an underlying order reminiscent of the past. For all of the new, something of the past remains behind. Later in the conversation between the narrator and one of the scarlet gang, the topic switches to so-called “birds of the capital,” something poets have written of throughout the ages. The narrator dismisses, “they are ”birds of the capital” until they reach the Azuma Bridge, site of the old Takemachi Ferry, and then turn into pitiful seagulls as they travel straight downriver to Komagata” (103). Depending on physical and cultural location, we treat things as innocuous as seagulls as either mere birds or as objects that hold a cultural legacy. He implies what we see as modernity and what we see as tradition are merely matters of
perspective. The new social hierarchy of Asakusa is built upon the tradition of the past, but also elevates those on the edge of society. Lippit argues that in Kawabata’s Asakusa, “it has become impossible…to identify the boundaries that separate past from present and native from foreign culture” (Lippit, 144). Kawabata supports modernity and shock as having beneficial qualities, while simultaneously showing Asakusa as an inflection point between tradition and modernity, where they coexist such that one is defined in relation to the other.

From this complex look at tradition and modernity in Kawabata’s pre-war works, we move to more direct view towards modernity in his post-war works. Many have already drawn a connection between the Great Kantō earthquake of 1923 and the surge of Modernist works and authors in the years following.¹⁶ Lippit writes “the earthquake as an event…was a tremendous shock with intense and often contradictory effects on writers’ consciousness of modern culture” (Lippit, 22). The aftermath of the earthquake included reconstructing¹⁷ vast areas of the city, which in tandem with the economic boom of Japan saw an even more rapid process of modernization and industrialization compared with the years immediately before the earthquake. Similarly, different forms of culture, such as film and Western style theatre emerged. This blending of new cultural forms, the influence of foreign culture, and physical processes of modernization created the ground from which Japanese Modernism developed. Given this connection between disaster and the resulting change in culture, it is interesting that few go as far as to consider the Fifteen-Year War in this context. If it is true of the earthquake that “the disaster and its violent aftermath…created a psychological shock that intensified the sense of

¹⁶ For example, see Seiji Lippit in *Topographies of Japanese Modernism* and Henry Smith in “Tokyo as an Idea: An Exploration of Japanese Urban Thought until 1945” (68-73)
¹⁷ Silverberg in “Constructing the Japanese Ethnography of Modernity” argues that this can be better phrased as *construction* due to the marked difference between pre and post-earthquake infrastructure.
rupture that was a necessary foundation of modernist literary practice,” then it should naturally follow that other instances of shock would have the same effect (Lippit, 25). The Fifteen-Year War had a death toll in the millions and destruction on a nationwide scale, while the earthquake’s death toll was in the hundreds of thousands and localized. Based on scale alone, the psychological impact from the war was a tremendous burden for both the average citizen, and intellectuals, to bear. The fact that Kawabata’s works span both the earthquake and the war give us a unique opportunity to examine how the psychological impact compares.

After the war, Kawabata turns against this same modernity he once supported. As discussed in the introduction, the war has a tremendous effect on Kawabata. Partially drawing from his experience with the Kanto earthquake, Kawabata starts to worry about traumatic events having effects on the memory of society. In one of his earliest works, “Diary of My Sixteenth Year,” (1925),18 Kawabata cannot recall his experience of his grandfather’s final days and “pondered the things that human beings lose to the past” (Dancing Girl of Izu and Other Stories, 59). Already an orphan, the loss of his grandfather was one of many traumatic events Kawabata endured during his childhood. He suggests that we easily forget trauma, losing these memories to the past. The trauma of his grandfather’s death is surpassed by the trauma of the earthquake. Lippit contends “for Kawabata, the earthquake represents [a] loss of memory…it is a sudden and violent break with the past and the catalyst for a creation of a city” (Lippit, 151).

The Fifteen-Year War or Pacific broadly refers to the realization of Japan’s imperial ambitions as the military sought to extend its influence throughout East Asia, particularly through war with China. During this time, the state became increasingly militarized as more

18 Published in 1925 but supposedly written in 1914.
resources were devoted to financing the war. Eventually, Japan became involved with WWII, and this is when much of the devastation in terms of military and civilian casualties rapidly increased, leading to nationwide trauma.

The trauma of the earthquake was in turn surpassed by the war, as the war’s devastation was nationwide, and for Kawabata implied a loss of memory on the societal level. In a short work, “Sentiments of an Orphan” (1925), Kawabata asks, “what if all the people in the world lost that function of the mind called memory…this would become “a city without homes”—everyone would become like me”\(^\text{19}\). The war caused the destruction of many of the locations from which Japanese people drew meaning and identity. Cities were razed, many lost relatives or loved ones, and even the Japanese emperor had to admit that he was not truly divine. In this world, where individuals must forge new identities devoid of the figures they looked to for authority and stability, maybe they did become orphans. In his post-war works, Kawabata expands his scope to show how the psychology of individuals changes due to the trauma of World War II; he shows how individuals have come to confront the past and present differently.

A fitting parallel for Kawabata’s internalization of the war is found in Kawabata’s short story, “Oil” (1927). The seemingly biographical account goes through his feelings during his early childhood. He confides in the reader that during his father’s funeral, when Kawabata was only three years old, he threw a tantrum and poured the oil out of the clay alter vessel. As he was a young child, he forgot the event entirely, but remembers when informed by his aunt as a teenager. He says, “what I believe to be memories are probably daydreams,” but still feels “an intimacy with them as if they were my own direct memories” (Other Stories, 70). Although the

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trauma and his young age caused him to forget, he still comes to feel a kind of attachment to his aunt’s description, itself only his aunt’s representation of the event. Despite not remembering, the grief held an emotional weight. Growing up, he was repulsed by rapeseed oil, vomiting if he smelt it in his food, and even refusing to wear a kimono that had a single drop spilled on it. Upon hearing the story, he realizes “my parents’ deaths had permeated my heart like the smell of oil” (72). Although he was not consciously aware of it, their deaths still caused an emotional impact.

Although Kawabata denies the war creating a break in his works, careful reading of the texts shows that there is a dramatic change in the subjects and themes he pursues. After the war, “signs of disintegration seemed to be everywhere and the necessity for national solidarity appeared to be more urgent than at any time in Japan's modern history” (Harootunian, 106). Kawabata already showed the effect to which modernity can cause an inability to maintain relationships due to resulting class conflict and nonsynchronicity. In his post war works, the intensity of this alienation increases, and the attribution of it to modernity and the war is further clarified.

Returning to Benjamin’s concept of shock, I argue that the trauma of the war profoundly impacted Kawabata and subsequently how he chose to portray the psychology of his characters. Although the tropes of the Izu variant of Kawabata’s works of aesthetic beauty, sentimentality, and such are repeated in the post-war works, individuals broken or shaped by their trauma are essential parts of the works. Characters exist in a state of numbness, antisocial to the world around them. Cassegard argues that these characters, in pursuit of beauty, “knowingly neglect to take any measures of defense against sensed threats…self-preservation is suspended in the face of overwhelming beauty…with open eyes the protagonists invite the shock from which they draw pleasure” (249). However, I contend that these characters, rather than consciously
neglecting to shield themselves, no longer need to. As Benjamin says, “the greater the shock factor in particular impressions, the more vigilant consciousness has to be in screening stimuli” (319). Benjamin argues that one must adjust their response or level of consciousness based on the intensity of the shock.

Having endured the trauma of the war, characters are almost impervious to the trauma of shock; they have eclipsed the upper bound. As such, they lack the same emotional response his pre-war characters possessed. For Kawabata, modernity has arrived, in the form of various sociological processes that have changed these characters, typically the characters of the younger generation, irreversibly. Kobayashi Hideo says, “anxiety—the greatest drama on stage within the modern spirit… once people have experienced extreme anxiety, they feel they cannot live without it” (39). Instead of saying people seek anxiety or shock, it is perhaps better to see they seek engagement. If the complete avoidance of shock brings boredom, and great trauma numbs us to minor shock, then it follows that individuals afflicted by trauma may pursue shock, if only to feel. In Kawabata’s novels, these antisocial forces include things such as conflict with the older generation and a lack of ability to feel empathy. To better show the effect of these modern influences, Kawabata takes a stronger stance towards supporting the notion of tradition. He holds things like Go and the tea ceremony as authentic Japanese tradition, even if it is only to use their decline as a foil to modernity. Thus we see a changed Kawabata. Rather than searching for a way to bring people together, he sadly laments how far they are apart.
Chapter 3: A Traumatized World

All is as I have described it—the things in the world which make life difficult to endure, our own helplessness and the undependability of our dwellings.

-Kamo no Chōmei, “An Account of My Hut”, 1212

This chapter explores the effect of the war on society through looking at *The Master of Go*, *Thousand Cranes*, and *The Sound of the Mountain*. Kawabata’s themes change as a result of the internalization of the tragedy of the Second World War. To summarize, Kawabata makes a stronger case for tradition, often only as a foil or contrast to the forces of modernity. In addition, Kawabata has become much more cynical about the effect modernity has on Japanese citizens.

Kawabata’s novel *The Master of Go* (1951-54) is a semi-historical recount of a famous Go match that Kawabata himself reported on. The match was between the aging Master Shūsai and his former pupil and challenger Minoru Kitani (renamed Otaké in the book). Go is an ancient two-player game that is, “simple in its fundamentals and infinitely complex in the execution of them” (*The Master of Go*, vii). Two players place stones in order, and when two opponents of the highest skill both play to the best of their ability, it is said that the final game board stands alone
as a work of art. Go is the primary image of tradition in the novel, and its decline is the novel’s tragedy.

While on a train, the narrator Uragami is approached by an American Go player with whom he plays several matches. He notes that this foreigner’s play resembles a textbook more than a professional player. The foreigner plays, “thoughtlessly, without putting himself into the game,” and unlike the, “competitive urge in a Japanese,” in this foreigner, “the spirit of Go was missing” (116). Uragami becomes, “conscious of being confronted with utter foreignness” (116). Despite both being amateurs, Uragami defeats his American opponent in every game. The American represents a new kind of way to play Go, a foreign and soulless kind of trial and error reminiscent of the textbook it was learned from. Above all, his style lacks tradition. Although Go initially came from China, Uragami notes how, “real Go…developed in Japan…Go was elevated and deepened by the Japanese” (117). Without a tradition to draw from, one cannot fully give themselves to or hope to understand the complexities of Go. This image haunts Uragami, as from his encounter with the American he sees what Go could become without the structure of tradition.

The Master is described as something akin to aristocracy, being, “twenty-first in the Honnimbō succession” (3). In terms of his appearance, he is alternatively described as being as frail as a child and as “growing larger when he seated himself before the Go board,” due to the, “power and prestige of his art” (20). It is almost as if he exists on two levels, a physical body and the persona he takes on when he plays Go. However, the work deals with the decline of both his body and art. In the end, the Master is defeated by the modern challenger, one who has learned how to make the rules play for him. Kawabata’s critique of the younger challenger, Otaké, is perhaps best reflected by Kawabata’s stand-in, the reporter Uragami’s musing that, “there is a
certain slyness among younger players, a slyness which, when rules are written to prevent slyness, make use of the rules themselves” (54). New rules, such as sealed plays and time limits, are introduced to support competitive fairness, but eventually become essential strategy.

Uragami describes Otaké and the younger generation’s abuse of technicality as, “rationalism that somehow missed the point” (55). Although the Master is suffering from illness, Otaké does everything in his power to move the game along, and is even willing to threaten forfeit. The novel suggests that Otaké’s ultimate victory can be at least partially attributed to his Black 121 move, in which he unexpectedly plays a stone far away from the center. Surprise moves are not against the rules, but Otaké’s Black 121 was a sealed play. Sealing an unexpected play will give the player the ability to think over the new decision in the interim, and force the opponent to play reactively, a clever and modern technique. Uragami questions, “had Otaké taken advantage of…a sealed play…had he put the device of the sealed play to tactical use?”, and then denounces this by saying, “if so, he was not being worthy of himself” (160). That same session, out of anger, the Master makes a mistake that loses him the game. Uragami remarks, “I even saw in that White 130 something that spoke less of a will to fight than of angry disdain” (161). The novel emphasizes that Go is as much a psychological game as a tactical one, and that the younger players have the advantage. The Master, “disciplined in an age when there were no time restrictions,” is of a different world entirely (73). The new generation has a certain pragmatic desire to win at all cost, sacrificing tradition and customs if it will improve their chances of winning. When Otaké makes his move that eventually gives up the game, the Master remarks, “that sealed play…was like smearing ink over the picture we had painted” (163). Otaké is unable

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20 As one match of Go between skilled players can last weeks, playing was broken into sections. Sealed plays are plays decided on before the end of a session, but not revealed until the beginning of the next.
to see the Master’s last game as being his swan-song, and ruins its beauty in his unending pursuit of victory.

Much of the Master’s skill for the game is said to draw from his ability to enter a Zen state during the match. In this state, he is both oblivious to the rest of the world and fully connected. Kawabata describes in his Nobel acceptance speech that this Zen state is, “a state of impassivity, free from all ideas and all thoughts…a universe of the spirit in which everything communicates freely with everything, transcending bounds, limitless”.21 Seeing him in this state, Uragami describes his face as, “the ultimate in tragedy…a man so disciplined in an art that he had lost the better part of reality” (32). He focuses entirely on the game, to the point where he becomes “lost in his own game…quite oblivious to the feelings of others” (78). On the other hand, Otaké is obsessed with time and the game, feeling overwhelming anxiety and taking almost twice as long thinking between moves, saying “I start thinking and there’s no end to it” (156). However, after White 130, the move that loses the master the game, the dynamic switches. The Master begins looking at his watch, even commenting during a match, “he does take his time…more than an hour already” (154). Meanwhile, Otaké is the one who begins to enter a Zen state. Uragami notes, “Otaké seemed in a state of rapture, in the grip of thoughts too powerful to contain…perhaps he had entered a realm of artistic exaltation” (175). The traits that defined them previously become inverted. However, with the switch, Kawabata does not give the sense of passing the torch. They become, “part of vaster forces at work in the flux of time…the fall of the grand Master…the decline of the old sensibilities and traditions of Japan are inescapable realities” (Pilarcik,20). The modern pragmatism of Otaké does not immediately become the new norm, rather Otaké adopts some of the qualities that were previously associated with the Master.

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21 Yasunari Kawabata - Nobel Lecture, December 12, 1968, “Japan, the Beautiful and Myself”
With the defeat of the Master, who encompasses, “a whole panorama of history,” and was “the symbol of Go itself” (54). Go has internally changed, even when it appears to have changed little on the outside. One wonders whether, without Uragami’s report, anyone would ever notice the underlying change, and not merely consider the Master’s defeat a symptom of the passage of time.

In this work, Kawabata certainly, “laments the fading sensibilities and elegance of the past” by players like Otaké, and by foreigners who seem to lack spirit for the game entirely (Pilarcik, 20). The generational gap that is forming is both an inescapable reality and difficult to notice. The novel is a meditation on the changing times, showing the seamlessness in which the dialectical forces of tradition and modernity become linearized in time.

_Thousand Cranes_ (1949-52) continues the discussion of the generational gap in Japan. The novel is set in the post-WWII period, and follows a son returning to his father’s old life almost four years after his death. It is a microcosm of the new generation’s struggles to find its own place in the world and deal with the trauma of the war. Unsure of his place in the world, Kikuji returns to his father’s memories, and his father’s lovers, to try to find his place. His father’s first ex-lover is Chikako, who is seemingly still bitter over his father’s treatment of her, and continuously interferes in Kikuji’s life (under the guise of helping). The other is Mrs. Ota, who is still stricken with grief over the death of Kikuji’s father. Kawabata uses the tea ceremony as the central metaphor to explore the effects that the war and trauma have on the individual, and implies there is an insurmountable generational gap forming.

Tea ceremony is the central Japanese tradition explored in the novel. Like the game of Go discussed above, it is presented as having already lost what once made it special. As the curator of tea ceremony in their town, Chikako has made it somewhat of a tourist destination, saying,
“anyone who happens to be in the neighborhood can drop in…the other day I even had some Americans” (12). It is a commodity, a spectacle even available to a Western audience. In the only direct reference to his own works in his Nobel Prize speech, Kawabata brings up *Thousand Cranes* to correct a common misreading. He says that, “an evocation of the formal and spiritual beauty of the tea ceremony is a misreading. *[Thousand Cranes]* is a negative work, an expression of doubt about and warning against the vulgarity into which the tea ceremony has fallen.”

Mrs. Ota’s daughter, Fumiko, gives Kikuji a prized tea bowl as a gift. Chikako chides Kikuji, saying, “shouldn’t you have paid for it? I’m a bit shocked that you took it from the girl” (84).

Throughout the work, characters suggest tea vessels are made to bear the weight of their history, including the circumstances of their creation, which hands they have passed through, and even their wear and tear. Their history once showed their importance, but now shows merely their monetary value. One piece is said to still contain the stains of Mrs. Ota’s lipstick, and shows up throughout the novel. Sitting with Fumiko, Kikuji notes this piece and another belonging to his father, “were like the souls of his father and her mother” (140). Tea vessels are capable of bearing the weight of the history of their owners in a way humans are unable to. These same vessels, however, are falling prey to the forces of the times. Vessels are given to lovers out of passion, or sold to make ends meet. They are appraised, commodified, or shown off to tourists as relics of an age gone by.

Humans are unable to bear weight in the same way tea vessels can. Using the tea ceremony as a metaphor, Kawabata questions how humans will be able to bear trauma without tradition. A recurring trend in the work is that of individuals bearing the weight of death. At one point, Kikuji remarks, “the dead are our property, in a way…we must take care of them” (79).

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22 “Japan, the Beautiful, and Myself”
Kikuji’s plight is that he still grieves his father; he cannot bear the weight of his death. He is part of a younger generation that has been traumatized by the war, to the extent that he cannot feel shock enough to grieve his father. In one instance, Kikuji suggests his father caused Mrs. Ota’s daughter, Fumiko, “a great deal of pain,” to which Mrs. Ota responds, “not at all…at first she would not be friendly…but towards the end of the war, when the air raids were bad, she changed” (25). Kikuji proposes that she had changed in this manner due to the war, and that, “in the confusion of defeat…in the violent reality of those days…she must have left behind the past that was her own father, and seen only the present reality of her mother” (26). The shock of the war caused a cultural amnesia in her, as she came to assume the daughter role for Kikuji’s father, forgetting the reality of her actual father. Kikuji is similarly looking to fulfill a role, and in trying to find out how to grieve his father’s death, he attempts to continue his father’s relationships.

On the other hand, Mrs. Ota shows us a different reaction to grief. Having loved Kikuji’s father and never been able to get over his death, she eventually starts a relationship with Kikuji, out of a “yearning for the past,” the desire for Kikuji’s father (33). However, their relationship is doomed to fail. Although both grieve, Kikuji is numbed by shock. Rather than intimacy, he feels, “something seductive in the thought that he could do her injury with a light heart” (28). After sleeping with her, he injures her, saying the tea ceremony was merely a front for a miai, a meeting for the potential suitor to look over his bride. She is shaken that her love for Kikuji’s father has caused discord in his life, and begins to feel guilty. Afterwards, he tries to destroy her illusion that he is his father questioning her, “can’t you see the difference between my father and me?”, although this is addressed, “less to her than to his own disquieted heart” (62). By plainly stating this, he pushes her over the edge. She is forced back to reality, where she is not with
Kikuji’s father, but with Kikuji. Unable to make a choice between guilt at using Kikuji and the love she felt for his father, she takes her own life.

Kikuji suffers from the numbness of trauma, a direct result of his experiences with his family’s death and modern society. This prevents him from experiencing shock. Without shock, he lives in empty and homogenous time, to him, sensation has no meaning and cannot be differentiated. Pondering Mrs. Ota’s suicide, he wonders, “was it love or guilt that had killed her…for a week [he] had debated the problem” (70). He is unable to tell which killed her, and although he seems to take some responsibility for her death, he ultimately pursues her daughter, Fumiko. As they drink tea together, they contemplate the cups they are using, which once belonged to their parents. Kikuji feels, “when you’re held by the dead, you begin to feel that you aren’t in this world yourself” (141). To escape her mother’s death, Fumiko destroys her mother’s cup, said to have been stained through daily use with her mother’s lipstick. Kikuji however, feeling disconnected from the world through his father, seduces her, and feels, “the mother’s body was in a subtle way transferred to the daughter” (145). He describes the sensation as if he had “been freed of his addiction by taking the ultimate dose of a drug,” feeling liberated by continuing in his father’s footsteps, and does not care about the consequences (146).

In Thousand Cranes, Kawabata goes a step further in showing the generational divide expressed in The Master of Go. Using the tea ceremony, Kawabata shows how tradition has become corrupted, commodified or misused out of misunderstanding. Previously, even something as concrete as a tea vessel and its history could help one cope with loss. Now, the characters have to carry the weight of their deceased loved ones, but because of the trauma of the war are unable to cope. Some attempt to live in the past, like Mrs. Ota, only to find they can’t bear the pain of the future. Others, like Kikuji, are so traumatized that they no longer feel
emotional connections at all, choosing to act without empathy and regard for their actions, seemingly only seeking anxiety and pain. To a point, they will seek out grief and trauma, even if only to experience some sensation.

In *The Sound of the Mountain* (1949-54), Kawabata directly confronts the war and shows the effects it continues to have on the Japanese people. The main character, Ogata Shingo, quizzically states, “even when natural weather is good, human weather is bad” (185). This is a surprising statement to come from Kawabata, who tried to find a way to connect humans through the beauty of the natural world. Even when he is able to appreciate beauty, the beauty and orderliness of nature conflict with the strife Shingo experiences within his household: his son is having an affair, and his daughter separates from her drug addict husband and returns home. Through Shingo and his family, Kawabata shows how the trauma of the war has changed society to a point where not only is reconciliation among people not his aspiration, it is no longer possible.

One night, Shingo hears the sound of the mountain, “like wind, far away, but with a depth like the rumbling of the earth…a chill passed over him, as if he had been notified that death was approaching” (8). As he hears the sound and is reminded of mortality, he begins to contemplate his family and the world around him. Tsukimura Reiko rightly argues, “the behavior and relationships of the characters cannot be understood without relating them to the effect of the war” (Tsukimura, 46). The younger generation suffered the most from the war, Shingo’s children and their spouses included. They are entirely different people, with different values than their parents, and have a different relationship to the world surrounding them. At various points, the war is implied to be directly responsible for these changes. Even Shingo feels he has been permanently changed, as, “what had been killed by the war had not come to life again…his way
of thinking was as the war had left it, pushed into a narrow kind of common sense” (210).

Shingo’s world begins to contract, as he becomes increasingly focused on fixing the situation in his household. The trauma of the war forced him into a narrow-mindedness that caused him to ignore all of the discord in this house, he only begins to come to understand the world around him when the mountain reminds him of the past and mortality.

On a train one day, Shingo comments on a foreigner and the foreigner’s young companion. He suspects, “that the boy was a male prostitute who specialized in foreigners…that such a man should come to a foreign country and appropriate a boy for himself—Shingo suddenly felt as if he were faced with a monster (kyodaina kaiju)” (243). Kawabata is expressing his displeasure at the state of Japan, the extent to which it has become susceptible to deviants. It is if the war has awakened something in the country, released an ugliness that the people of the country now have to come to terms with. Shingo looks out of the stopped train and notes, “the foul ditch (kusai komizo) was lined with green weeds” (242). This final line is a fitting description of his post-war works. It is natural to interpret his works as existing in a continuum, as even novels such as Sound of the Mountain feature descriptions of and appreciation of aesthetic beauty. However, the beauty in these novels is merely “green weeds”, existing despite, not because of, the foulness that surrounds them. Kawabata no longer searches for spirit, because when the surrounding world is foul, spirit can no longer exist.

In one instance, Shingo questions his son, Shuichi, asking if Shuichi had killed anyone during the war. Shuichi replies, “if anyone got in the way of a bullet from my machine gun, he probably died…but you might say I wasn’t shooting the gun” (212). This seemingly contradictory statement provides context to his actions throughout the novel. He cheats on his

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23 Based on context, likely a service member of the American occupying forces.
wife, comes home drunk frequently, and even beats his mistress because he is unable to consider the consequences of his actions as truly his own. This trauma of the war has desensitized him to shock. No longer susceptible to shock, Shuichi’s world has expanded in possibilities, and he, in a way, becomes free from identity. He always lives in the empty and homogenous time that Benjamin describes, where everything lacks fixed meaning. He cannot move to now-time where objects gain their meaning and significance. For this reason, he cannot confront the effects of his actions, because he truly does not understand them. Shuichi prefers the catharsis of the chaos he is numb to: alcoholism, abuse, and affairs.

Shingo confronts Shuichi’s mistress, Kinu, about her pregnancy by Shuichi. Once again, the topic of the war is brought up. Shingo tries to convince her to stay in Shuichi’s life to ensure the child will have a father figure, a last attempt to regain the morality that has been lost. He is swiftly rebuffed. Kinu is a new type of woman, a war widow, and she bluntly tells him, “a war-widow has decided to have a bastard, that’s all” (233). The war freed her from the confines of traditional relationships and gave her a strength of character, as evidenced by her assertion, “the child is inside me, and it is mine” (233). Unlike, Kikuko24, the timid wife of Shuichi, Kinu asserts her body as her own and claims a new and strengthened place as a war-widow. Further contrasted with Kikuko, she questions Shingo, “you think a pampered wife (zeitakuna okusan) can understand how I feel?” (233). The barrier between her and traditional society is not limited just to her affair, but also extends to her relationship with other women. She feels herself an outcast, society and its expectations have lost their significance. She now exists outside it all, another casualty of the war.

24 Kikuko means “child of chrysanthemum,” while Kinu (named Kinuko in the original Japanese) means “child of silk,” further pointing to the divide in society between tradition and modernity.
Shingo confronts his son about this potential child, and Shuichi replies, “it’s nothing at all, meeting your own bastard and not recognizing it, when you’ve had bullets whistling by your ear” (266). He very clearly states how he has been impacted by the war, and that he reached a point where he has significantly changed, to where he no longer can empathize. Shingo rebuts that, “wartime and peacetime are not the same thing,” but to Shuichi, they have already been conflated (266). To Shuichi, "maybe another war is on its way…maybe the other is still haunting people…still somewhere inside us” (266). Shuichi has internalized the war and the trauma it brought, to the point where all of his destructive acts can be said to result from his shock and trauma, or rather his numbness to them.

Although, as can be found in his pre-war works, there are moments where characters such as Shingo contemplate the beauty of the natural world, these moments are brief respite from the turmoil in the world surrounding them. The shock of modern society was certainly present in his pre-war works, but in his post-war works it is internalized. Shuichi and his mistress both transgress the boundaries of society in ways that pre-war Kawabata never suggested were possible.

All three novels explore the state of Japanese society after the war. Put together, they show an image of the subtle changes in society, perhaps invisible from a distance, but impossible to ignore up close. The trauma of the war has irreversibly changed characters like Shuichi and Kikuji, to the point where they injure those around them. All three works point to a changing of the times, and Kawabata props up the authenticity of tradition only to show how it is being torn down due to the forces of modernity.
Conclusion:

Given Kawabata’s ambiguous writing style and the tumultuous times and events in which he survived, it is probably impossible to cleanly connect all of his works, or even several of them, with a common thread. Despite this, based on textual evidence, I have demonstrated some of Kawabata’s thoughts concerning Japan in a pre and post-Fifteen-Year War context. I argue that he subtly critiqued the idea of a traditional rural countryside as a locus of authenticity for the modern man before the war, and in fact was somewhat supportive of the changes that modernity could bring. Using Benjamin’s notion of shock, I showed how post-war Kawabata both increasingly supported the notion of tradition, while showing its decline due to forces of modernity. Some of these forces, such as the trauma of the war, left lasting effects on Japanese society and its people. In terms of Benjamin’s notions of shock, these characters live in “empty and homogenous time,” they are traumatized to the point that they face great difficulty in escaping this, leaving them antisocial or unable to show empathy or understanding. In his pre-war works of “The Dancing Girl of Izu,” and Snow Country, Kawabata, perhaps knowing the futility of searching for spirit, nevertheless had his characters search for it as a means of understanding tradition and reconnecting with society. In The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa, he went the other direction, showing how modern society’s alienation can itself be a good thing. After the
trauma of the war, his viewpoint changed, and rather than trying to show or find how society could come together, he showed how it was drifting apart before our eyes.

In conclusion, Kawabata never truly subscribes to the notion of tradition, always qualifying that it is defined in relation to modernity, and as such doesn’t truly exist. Before the war, he explored the two common responses in confronting modernity: embrace it or fight it through defining modernity. He ultimately found that modernity does have its benefits, that it creates a space for people who would have none in a rural world. In addition, this rural or traditional world cannot properly be said to exist, and that believing in it is merely delusion. After the trauma of Japan’s defeat in the Fifteen-Year War, Kawabata’s style changed greatly. He began showing the effects that the trauma of the war, the trauma of modernity, can have on the people. Additionally, we can no longer even hope to look to tradition for modernity, as it has become tainted with the forces of modernity: the tea ceremony is commodified and Go has changed in spirit, even if we cannot see so from the outside.

Kawabata’s works are some of the most complex and ambiguous that I have had the pleasure of reading. One could easily write a thesis on any of the works I’ve chosen and still not fully exhaust all of the nuance and meaning. As consequence, I have not been able to truly give any of the works the attention and space they deserve. Others that could be considered “runner-ups” in importance include: The Old Capital (1962), Beauty and Sadness (1964), and The Lake (1962). These are good sites to begin looking at other instances of shock or dealing with tradition, if one wanted to continue the line of reasoning in this thesis. Beyond that, I think a very interesting take could be comparing the different editions of Snow Country, whose publication spanned over a decade in total. Comparing the writing style, themes, and revisions would essentially be taking this argument down to a purely textual level.
Appendix:

My Map of Asakusa (僕の浅草地図)

Kawabata Yasunari

From my point of view, Asakusa begins at the Sumida River. Only 10 years ago, while writing many works about Asakusa, I intended to incorporate more of the great river into them. I rode the “one sen steamboat” (also known as the “ponpon steamboat”) and probably crossed the river ten times. Each time I got on the boat at Asakusa’ Azuma bridge. Because of this, my memories of Asakusa are linked with the river. I still enjoy the feeling of traveling to Asakusa on the water, and looking at the bridge expresses to me the river’s beauty.

Within Tokyo (the old city at least) there are 66 rivers, they extend for 160,992 m², with a total area of 4,473km². The rivers cover over four times the area of the city streets, people today would be surprised to hear that it is the city with the second most water area (after Osaka). In the Edo period, many of these areas dried up. Of the bridges that Hiroshige and other landscape painters enjoyed drawing, not one remains. After the Great Kanto earthquake, the two riverside parks, Sumida Park and Hamamachi Park, were created. Will we see a revival in people finding inspiration in the water? However, the greatest pride of new Tokyo is of course its bridges. The
cost of rebuilding the bridges was about 34,000,000 yen, but there is no city in history that has repaired or built close to 500 bridges in so short a time. Also, considering the varied forms and the cutting-edge techniques employed, Tokyo has surpassed even the various capitals of European countries.

These bridges have little ornamentation, and they are simple and mechanical. Within their steel and their scientific aesthetic lies the beauty of the modern city. Through the Kiyosu Bridge and Kokotoi Bridge, I have come to see the Sumida Bridge as the representative masterpiece. It is as if the Kiyosu Bridge is a woman and the Kokotoi Bridge is a man; the beauty of Kiyosu lies in her curves, and Kokotoi’s beauty lies in the straightness of his edges. Izumi Kyōka describes the Kiyosu bridge, “within the bridge, one sees haze flow like black hair.” The ropes flutter in the light breeze, their metal skeletons are unthinkably graceful. However, the style of the suspension bridges here comes from the softness of the riverbeds in the surrounding area. The Asano cement color of the building makes it look even more beautiful. From Nakasu in Nihonbashi to Sayakamachi in Fukugawa, we rode the one sen steamboat and crossed under the Kiyosu Bridge. Underneath, one could see the Eitai Bridge connecting with the Kiyosu Bridge. The Kiyosu Bridge is a suspension bridge, while the Eitai Bridge folds up, resembling two giant iron arrows. The Eitai Bridge is at the final stop of the one sen steamboat. From the boat, one can look up and see the power of the bridge’s form, and gaze at the underside of the conjoined steel frame. The water is polluted, and the background of the riverbank has changed, but the surface of the water in some way reflects the mood of the traveler. The melancholy of the city and nostalgia hang in the air.

The one sen boat…is it not itself a relic that makes one nostalgic for the past? The helmsman, silent and arms folded, feet on the handle, steering with the soles of his feet. I can still
picture the image. It is day after the end of the summer sumo tournament, and sumo wrestlers from Ryōgoku have come aboard.

We got onto the Ryōgoku riverbank, and passed through Yasuda Park on the way to a clothing shop. The disaster memorial there was shoddy, but in the hall containing the ashes 53,000 people were interred. Their ashes took up 260 bottles, held in a 40 liter earthenware pot.

“Tokyo must not lose the prestige of the old capital.” Hearing this reminds one of the sorrow of the moving of the capital. This shrine commemorating the earthquake victims has been added to the sightseeing bus route, schoolgirls came to commemorate as a fieldtrip. On the wall of the main hallway, there is a picture of a mountain of the bones of the earthquake victims. Upon closer look I noticed the mountain of corpses was burning.
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