

Childhood,
compliance, and
conflict: the
characterization of
noboru in the sailor...



Yukio Mishima's *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea* follows the struggles of a young band of boys who strive to restore a sailor, Ryuji, to his former glory by taking his life and subjecting his remains to dissection. They became acquainted with the process by which they would come to achieve this task, following their brutal killing of a young cat. Reassured that there was 'nothing to worry about,' (Mishima 165) they believed the only discernable disparity between the dissection of a cat, a stray animal, and that of Ryuji, a grown man, lay in their physical size, as implied in their chief's apathetic contention that 'the job's a little bigger this time' (Mishima 165), preceding their commencement of this task. Though the execution of such absurd and extreme measures would advert to a sense of heightened loyalty and honor with which these boys must have preached and practiced the pillars of their nihilistic mindset, Mishima constantly attributes the protagonist of this novel, Noboru, with behavioral traits and characteristics which depict him as a boy whose actions and relations with his fellow Nihilist friends, in particular, the Chief, that question his adherence to this way of thought.

A scene of particular importance arises in Mishima's attempt at detailing Noboru's fascination with ships and maritime activity. Early on in the novel, Noboru's character is treated as a child, detached and stripped off of any associations that can be made to his nihilist mentality. He recounts Noboru and Fusako's first meeting with Ryuji aboard the *Rukayo*, which highlights a disparity between his demeanor in the absence and presence of, the Chief and his Nihilist friends. Mishima attributes the quality of 'boyish excitement' to Noboru in order to describe how greatly captivated he was with the

prospect of touring an actual freighter. He is seen absorbing the happenings at the dockyards and soon after, playing around with the dials and buttons dispersed around the command cabin of the Rukayo. His characterization of Noboru, particularly in his placement of the word 'boyish', would appear redundant given that he was in all actuality, a young boy. This direct emphasis on his juvenility serves to depreciate his Nihilist side, almost rendering it insignificant and absent. Additionally, when preoccupied with these toys of his maritime obsession, the need to remain mindful about staying in 'character' of his Nihilist self seemed to have escaped Noboru. Thus, the appointment of Noboru's character in this setting served to undermine his practices of 'absolute dispassion' and in turn, his adherence to the nihilist way of thought.

When confronted with the inquiries of a local guard while stationed under an overpass during one of their meetings, Noboru's chief knowingly flaunts himself in a childish demeanor with 'a scrubbed, school boy smile'. The feigned innocence with which he pretends to unconfidently contemplate something to say greatly contrasts the Chief's regular, snippy and sharp self. Scrutinization by adults rendered the need to assert to them, their normality as children, something that the Chief and his gang accomplished by purposely behaving like children. Noboru's behavior in the absence of the chief and the other members of their band appears genuine and corresponds with his young age. The detailed fabrication of the environment aboard the Rukayo from the narrative stance of Noboru suggests that his conduct there was sincere and his fascination with the ship absolute. However, when in the company of the chief and his gang, Mishima makes note to present such

childlike qualities in Noboru as forcefully feigned and systematically thought out about by him, before actually being worn and made apparent to those in his company. For example, another scenario that sees Noboru exhibiting a childish demeanor is during Ryuyi's parting with Noboru and his mother, to return aboard his freighter. As expected of a child, the words that escape Noboru seemed appropriate for his young age. He innocently requested of Ryuji to "use all different kinds of stamps" (Mishima 89), when reminding him to write back to them. The manner in which Mishima describes Noboru's request to Ryuji aimed to show that he was "perfectly in command of his role" (Mishima 89). This sense of control over his conduct that Noboru displays during Ryuji's farewell demonstrates that the nature of the child-like demeanors that adorns is relative based on who's present around him.

When in the company of their gang alone, Noboru has to contain any form of raw emotions that he would have otherwise let escape with their absence. The gang barricades itself from the display of all sentiments, and Noboru's failure to heed to this tenet of 'absolute dispassion' in times beyond the scrutiny of his gang, questions both his loyalty to the gang itself, and his understanding of the nihilist ideology.

Noboru's reluctance to perceive his mother and his dead father as figures of authority, like a nihilist mindset would dictate him to do so, directly contradicts his acceptance of the Chief as the leader of their Nihilist gang. In essence, the Nihilist ideology dictates there to exist no system of class based governance in life and rejects of all forms of authority, and the absence of his father helped him ascertain this particular of Nihilist thought. To Noboru, in other words, the death of his father had been a 'happy incident' (Mishima <https://assignbuster.com/childhood-compliance-and-conflict-the-characterization-of-noboru-in-the-sailor-who-fell-from-grace-with-the-sea/>)

8). He believed society to be fiction, with fathers and teachers, 'by virtue of being fathers and teachers, guilty of a grievous sin' (Mishima 8), a belief that does not seem to justify why he still, along with the other members of his Nihilist gang, accept the Chief as their undisputed leader. Though against all roles of leadership and guidance, such as that of fathers and mothers, Noboru, and even the rest of his gang for that matter, had always preached the chief as their leader and guru on the Nihilist way of thought. He presents himself with a cold, stern charisma, correcting the thoughts of his apprentices, enlightening them about this world and leaving them unhesitant about internalizing the knowledge he imparts them with. The chief serves as the source of their understanding of nihilistic teachings, and is responsible for the way the gang, including Noboru, perceive the world. He seems to have adopted the role of a teacher, and the title by which they address him, 'chief', signifying a position of command or control, only further challenges Noboru and the gang's understanding of Nihilist principles. A strong contrast between what Nihilist ideals appear in theory, and the boys' approach to its practice, is evident from their relations with the Chief.

In conclusion, this portrayal of Noboru by Mishima questions the honor with which Noboru and his friends practiced their Nihilist thought. The boys' treatment of their Chief, and that of the adult world, does not differ. Noboru and his gang failed to recognize the fault in their interpretation and practice of the Nihilist way of thought; this is made clear by their acceptance of the Chief as a figure of authority. Mishima holds the ages of these boys as the sole facilitator of their inability to practice Nihilism as it is, as his emphasis on Noboru's youth is almost repetitive. He seems to demonstrate how their

juvility and arrogance as self-proclaimed intellectuals blinds them from unearthing their misconceptions and incompetence in adhering to Nihilism.