

The connection between glory and death



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea aroused a lot of controversy in the world's literary society. As a classic example of Yukio Mishima's later works, it combined themes and motifs that were borderline acceptable and unusual for the period, such as child violence, exaltation of death and scenes of sexual intercourse. Celeste Heiter described the novel as ' a study in contrast: summer and winter, land and sea, companionship and isolation, wanderlust and domestication, glory and nihilism'[1]. The description given by Heiter is applicable as Mishima does introduce ideas are binary opposites. For instance, the main focus of the novel is the connection between glory, usually connoted with longevity, and a completely opposite concept of death. This connection is elusive and vague at first, but becomes more conspicuous as the novel progresses.

Intrinsic with Mishima's style, he masterfully lays out various aspects of rapidly changing oriental life under the veil of the rather ordinary love story of Fusako and Ryuji — a widowed businesswoman and a well-traveled sailor. Although the main accent is put on romantic relations between these two, this relationship is mostly used as an enigmatic tool and is not as fundamental for the novel's ideology as the concept of glory. Glory, on the other hand, as well as its direct association with death created by the author, is as a tool for conjoining various storylines present in The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea.

Represented in a very abstract form, glory is not outlined at any point of the novel, even Ryuji, a central character, who felt destined for glory — " there's just one thing I'm destined for and that's glory; that's right, glory!" Mishima's narrative suggests " he had no idea what kind of glory he wanted or what

kind he was suited for" (16). Yet it is still drawn throughout the novel to link up storylines: Ryuji's adventurous past, his relationship with Fusako and Noboru, and the gang with its members. On their own, all of them are independent parts of the novel that scarcely overlap. However, in an attempt to explore glory as a social construct, Mishima pieces them together so that each character contributes to further development of the theme.

In spite of not being clearly delineated, glory runs throughout the novel and becomes a reoccurring theme. From the very first moment Noboru sees Ryuji, he describes him as romanticized hero (the first impression Noboru has is that " there were gold-braid epaulets on his white short-sleeved shirt" (10), which extols Ryuji, presenting him as a romantic hero) and appears to notice something honorable about his mother's lover.

This is particularly evident in the earlier depictions of Ryuji. Through the author's clever use of a third person omniscient narrator, the reader gets a chance to perceive the situation through Noboru's eyes. This has a significant impact on the subsequent reception of the character as it allows the reader to determine exactly what Noboru's attitude towards the sailor in his mother's room is. Combined with the vivid imagery and explicit symbolism the author uses in his narration, it amplifies the hyper-masculinity of Ryuji and hence turns him into a representative of the concept of glory in the novel. It is believed that the novel is partially autobiographical, where Mishima identifies himself with the main character, Ryuji[2]. Mishima grants this character features that he personally perceives as indicators of glory: throughout his life, Yukio Mishima attempted to further his pursuit of glory through hyper-masculinity and his stringent workout routine for

bodybuilding. Therefore, the way Ryuji is represented in the novel only further expands the extent to which glory is explored and supports the idea that glory is central to the novel as it is one of the characteristics of the main protagonist.

To describe Ryuji, Mishima writes: ‘ The reflection of the moonlight in the background traced a ridge of gold across his shoulders and conjured into gold, the artery bulging in his neck. It was authentic gold of flesh, gold of moonlight and glistening sweat’ (12). Strongly connoted with the colour of gold, which in Japanese culture denotes power, strength, wisdom and honor. Ryuji appears to look like a strong and heroic character, someone who is glorious. This image is further supported with detailed descriptions of Ryuji’s robust appearance: “ his body looked younger and more solid than any landman’s” (11), he had “ broad shoulders” (11) and “ his flesh looked like a suit of armour” (11). This significantly enhances Ryuji’s valiant figure as physical fitness ties perfectly with Mishima’s personal views of what glory is.

The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea reflects the beliefs Mishima held. As a representative of active nationalists and a devoted follower of Samurai culture, he thought that dying in battle or if that was not possible, dying serving his lord or his cause to maintain his honor, was the greatest privilege. Thus, Mishima’s personal understanding of glory is strongly associated with death, which is shown in the novel.

Noboru’s initial aim that he subsequently shares with the gang is to “ preserve glory”. In order to do that, Noboru claims that he “ would do anything to stop that [Ryuji becoming a father], no matter how awful” (13).

However, this idea is subconscious at first, with it being the Chief, the figure Noboru admires the most, who expresses it. The authority of the Chief, as well as the way he presents this plan as the ‘ only way to make [Ryuji] a hero again’ (163), makes Noboru inspired to conserve the sailor’s dignity, revert him back on the glorious path through delivering him to death.

Consequently, although the novel has an ending open for interpretation, this foreshadows the later murder of Ryuji as Noboru kills him to not let him “ abandon” his pursuit of glory.

An idea of “ preserving glory” by capturing Ryuji in the moment of honor, when he has not yet contaminated it, does not only come from Noboru and the Gang. The connection between demise and glory is fostered early in the novel, where Mishima includes Ryuji’s memories from his sailing past. The sailor himself avers that “ man sets out in quest of the Grand Cause; the woman is left behind”, where glory and honour is achieved through dangerous adventures at sea (74). Ryuji, too, associates glory with a heroic death: “ The secret yearning for death. The glory beyond and the death beyond.” (111) He despises those sailors who settled down to have families and could not obtain honour like that: ‘ Now perilous death had rejected him. And glory, no doubt of that.’ (180) Thus, by killing Ryuji as he reminisces over his adventures at sea and his pursuit of glory, Noboru is offering Ryuji a glorified death the sailor was looking for as he can be considered dying while chasing his glory.

Members of the gang, the Chief in particular, contribute to the overall idea of equating glory to death, although in a slightly more metaphorical way.

Children see “ fathers” and “ teachers” as the biggest enemies to society,

<https://assignbuster.com/the-connection-between-glory-and-death/>

those who are burying glory and those who can never reach any heights. “ They stand in the way of our progress while they try to burden us with their inferiority complexes, and their unrealized aspirations” (136), writes Mishima about fathers, implying that those who choose to embrace a paternal role will inevitably hinder glory, and thus encouraging juveniles not to become fathers themselves. However, for a Japanese society, where family is traditionally one of the most important aspects of life, not fulfilling a paternal role can be associated with a social death. Moreover, this can subsequently lead to a literal death of a generation and abolish a memory of an individual. This draws another sturdy line of connection, reinforcing a tie between glory and death as the final goal and the price to pay for it.

Glory is undoubtedly a central theme throughout the novel. However, it is not an easy concept to comprehend. Although it reoccurs as a plot engine, it is very subtly used. It links other motifs together (“ glory and death and women were consubstantial” (180)), with one of the strongest connections being the one between glory and death. Representing traditional Japanese views on how glory can be obtained, this relation translates a powerful idea: glory as a goal is unachievable unless searched for in a struggle — physical, mental or social. To emphasize and clarify the outcome of his exploration, Mishima draws a clear line in the end of the novel with a laconic sentence: “ Glory, as anyone knows, is bitter stuff” (181).

Works Cited[1] Heiter, C. (2002). Book Review: The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea by Yukio Mishima | ThingsAsian. [online] Thingsasian.com. Available at: <http://thingsasian.com/story/book-review-sailor-who-fell-grace-sea-yukio-mishima> [Accessed 16 Oct. 2017].

<https://assignbuster.com/the-connection-between-glory-and-death/>

[2] Book Review: The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea by Yukio

Mishima | ThingsAsian. Thingsasiancom. 2017. Available at:

<http://thingsasian.com/story/book-review-sailor-who-fell-grace-sea-yukio-mishima>. Accessed September 5, 2017.