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**Shimazaki Tôson: The Maker of
Modern Japanese Literature**

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1997

**SHIMAZAKI TÔSON:
THE MAKER OF MODERN JAPANESE
LITERATURE**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the development of Shimazaki Tôson (1872-1943) from his earliest work through to the final summit of his literary career, the novel *Yoake mae* (*Before the Dawn*). It examines the way in which the writer responded to the influx of Western culture and ideas that characterised early- to mid-Meiji Japan, and the way in which, in the course of integrating these influences, he evolved a view of nature and of man's place in it, and an approach to the craft of letters, that enabled him to produce compelling works of fiction and to earn his reputation as the father of modern Japanese literature.

In particular, the thesis identifies a variety of specific factors that successively influenced Tôson's development. The works of Rousseau and of the English Romantic poets, and the view of nature and of the individual's place within it found in Protestant Christianity, are identified as decisive influences on the poetry of his early manhood, a significant part also being played by his mentor of that time and leader of the Bungakkai group, Kitamura Tôkoku (1868-1894). Subsequent key influences are identified as: the emphasis on objective observation and enquiry found in both Western science (epitomised by Darwinism) and aesthetic theory (in particular the work of Ruskin), the painting of the French Impressionist Millet, and the writings of Turgenev and Dostoevsky. The thesis shows how, in absorbing and integrating these influences, Tôson consciously practised to develop his observational and descriptive technique, and demonstrates the results of this self-training in the works Tôson produced after turning from poetry to prose, particularly the powerful visual impact of his descriptive writing.

The thesis shows how subsequently Tôson combined the confessional impulse gained from Rousseau and the disciplined objectivity of the scientific spirit, to create powerful works of naturalistic autobiographical fiction. It demonstrates in particular Tôson's use of nature-description to achieve functional narrative goals, and not merely as decoration.

In considering his final masterpiece (written and serialised during the period 1929-1935), the thesis examines how Tôson applied the creative methods he had developed thus far to the writing of fiction set in the context of decisive events in Japan's modern history.

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A Note on Pronunciation

There are various approaches to the transliteration of Japanese into the Roman alphabet (a process often rather awkwardly referred to as “romanization”).

The method employed in this thesis is essentially the same as the so-called Hepburn System, with the difference that long *o* and *u* are represented by the addition of a circumflex.

Generally speaking, the vowels in the Japanese words and names that appear in the text may be pronounced more or less as in Italian or New Zealand Maori (preferably without the stress-accent that English-speakers find hard to dispense with); and the syllable represented in the Hepburn System as *fu*, should ideally be sounded like *hu* (a shortened version of *who*), with an initial expulsion of breath between relaxed and slightly parted lips.

Shimazaki Tôson: the Maker of Modern Japanese Literature

INTRODUCTION

In the field of modern Japanese literature, Shimazaki Tôson¹, the author who is the subject of this thesis, may be considered as the father of both modern poetry and modern fiction. The scholar Ino Kenji has written: "The name of Shimazaki Tôson could be found on every page of the history of modern Japanese literature" (in: Higuchi, 1949, p. 4), and justifies that statement as follows:

"Modern Japanese writers who lived through the three eras of Meiji, Taishô and Shôwa² are by no means uncommon. But we rarely find any writer who can match Tôson in terms of the commanding position he has occupied in the literary world throughout and despite the ever-changing social conditions since the Meiji era and the dizzying rise and fall of literary movements."
(ibid., p.3)

Donald Keene writes: "There were the rare *shintaiishi* poets of interest before Shimazaki Tôson burst on the literary scene." Again: "Tôson may fairly be called the creator of modern Japanese poetry" (Keene 1984, vol.2 pp. 201; 204). Also: "The outstanding writer of the Naturalist movement was undoubtedly Shimazaki Tôson." (op. cit., vol. 1, p. 254).

As Keene pointed out, Tôson achieved a brilliant reputation in fiction as well as in poetry. Here I will summarise his half-century of creative life by reference only to his major works.

¹ Throughout this thesis, Japanese names are given in Japanese style: i.e., family name first.

² Meiji era 1868-1912; Taishô 1912-1926; the Shôwa era began in 1926 and was to continue until January 1989.

His maiden collection of poems, *Wakana Shû*, proclaimed a liberation of individual feeling, as the bright flowering of Romanticism in the 1890's. The novels *Hakai* (*The Broken Commandment*), *Haru* (*Spring*), and *Ie* (*The Family*), which were published from 1906 to 1911 and first established modern Realism in Japan, have been praised as the finest works of Japanese Naturalist literature. These works, together with *Shinsei* (*A New Life*) and *Sakura no Mi no Jukusuru Toki* (*When the Cherries Ripen*), published in the Taishô era, depict the problem of individualism in relation to the feudal customs and the traditional Japanese family system, not in the form of the conventional so-called "I novel" (*watakushi shôsetsu* or *shishôsetsu*) but taken to the ultimate degree. Continuing into the Shôwa era, the voluminous novel *Yoake mae* (*Before the Dawn*), written from 1929 to 1935, may be seen as a summation of all his literary achievement, blending his abiding interest in society and history with his passion for unrelenting self-exploration. It is widely regarded as the pinnacle of modern Japanese literary achievement since the Meiji era.

Moreover, even in the period of literary sterility during the Pacific War, when many writers wretchedly yielded to the aggressive régime of the day and became its advocates, or complained in subdued tones of their ill fate, Tôson's *Tôhō no Mon* (*The Gate of the East*) alone confronted both writers and readers with unswerving authority. While writing the third chapter, he collapsed from a cerebral haemorrhage and died in 1943, aged 72.

When we read the major works mentioned above, we find that the description of nature constitutes a characteristic feature of Tôson's works. For him, description of nature based upon thorough observation was not merely a means of writing poems. Nature is portrayed to great effect in his fiction and occupies an important position in all his works. This approach to nature description can be found in his early short stories and essays, not to mention major works from *The Broken Commandment* to *Before the Dawn*. And even in his collections of poems, there are many excellent pieces that have nature as their subject.

The relationship between Tôson and nature is closely connected with his personal history. In considering how Tôson came to be regarded as the father of modern Japanese literature, it is useful to divide his life into three phases, which may be headed "Poet", "from Poet to Novelist", and "Novelist"; but at each point of transition he was powerfully influenced by nature as it surrounded him.

Born in 1872, Tôson spent his childhood in surroundings of rugged natural beauty: the Kiso valley in Nagano prefecture, Central Japan. Before the modern era the Nakasendô, the main road between Edo and Kyôto, ran through the Kiso valley; the village of Magome, where the family seat was located, was one of the post-stations (staging posts) on that road, and his father was the seventeenth manager of the station (a hereditary position). When Japan entered the modern era, just about when Tôson was born, the Shimazaki family, which had belonged to the élite of rural Tokugawa society, began to decline.

He left Magome at the age of nine to study in Tôkyô. At that time Japanese capitalism was developing, European culture was having an impact and a new cultural focus was evolving. One facet of the modern literature that came into being against this background was the *shintaiishi* (poetry of the new style).

The *shintaiishi* poets sought to break new ground, abandoning the *waka*³ (or *tanka*, as the form came to be called during the Meiji era) and *haiku*⁴ of traditional Japanese poetry. They even felt a sense of liberation as they described whatever had stirred their spirits as men of the new Meiji era, daringly breaking the rules of the old prosody.

It was as a writer of *shintaiishi* that Tôson achieved his first literary success with *Wakana Shû*. This collection of poems, written during his stay in the tree-clad city of Sendai, marked the start of modern poetry in Japanese literary history. Tôson's love poems expressed a modern morality and the feelings and emotions of modern people. They have greatly influenced all subsequent Japanese poets.

In Chapter 1, I discuss how Tôson came to be able to write *Wakana Shû* and to emerge as a poet among the many young people who were awakened to the modern spirit of the Meiji era.

The success of *Wakana Shû* was followed by three further successful collections: *Hitoha Fune* (*A Boat Tossed Like a Leaf*, 1898), which consisted mainly of prose sketches; the eighteen poems of *Natsukusa* (*Summer Grass*, 1898);

³ Waka: a five-line, 31-syllable poem in the pattern 5 - 7 - 5 - 7 - 7

⁴ Haiku: a three-line, 17-syllable poem in the pattern 5 - 7 - 5

and *Rakubai Shû* (*Fallen Plum Blossoms*, 1901). But then, bidding a permanent farewell to the world of poetry, Tōson turned his attention to prose and became a novelist.

In 1906 *The Broken Commandment* was published. Completed during a seven-year period living in the mountains at Komoro, it attracted much critical acclaim. Natsume Sōseki praised it as “the first novel of the Meiji era”. It was the first truly naturalistic Japanese novel. In Chapter 2, I discuss the background to Tōson’s evolution from poet to novelist. In that discussion, works written during the early stage of his development are considered as representing a period of careful preparation, in which description of nature became the foundation on which the path to his first successful novel, *The Broken Commandment*, was laid.

After *The Broken Commandment* Tōson wrote many novels, for example *Spring* and *The Family*. In 1913 he went to France, seeking to escape from a complicated relationship with a niece. There, as a foreigner, he felt alienated and, looking back toward Japan, realised how deep were the bonds that tied him to his homeland. His thoughts turned to his hometown of Kiso, and to his father. From a distance, he re-evaluated the meaning of the traditional relationship between father and child in Japanese culture, and critically re-examined the course of nineteenth-century Japanese history. This resulted in *Before the Dawn*, published some time after his return home. Like *The Broken Commandment*, this novel took seven years to complete. In part autobiographical, it is set in Magome Station in the Kiso valley, an important junction for eastern and western traffic. It describes the social upheaval and crisis confronted by generations of Japanese, but particularly that of his father’s generation, as a result of political reform in the nineteenth century. It has an established place as a leading work in Japanese modern literature.

Before the Dawn is a long novel written against the background of nineteenth-century Japanese history from Tōson’s father’s point of view. Together with his father, in a sense, modern Japanese history itself, the Kiso road, and the Kiso station also constitute key figures in the story. However, the natural landscape of Kiso is also an important element in this novel. Tōson minutely describes the natural scenery of his birthplace, portraying it as if seen through his father’s eyes.

In Chapter 3, the development of nature description and its significance in Tōson’s major novels published after *The Broken Commandment* (e.g. *Spring*, *The Family*, *A New Life*, *Before the Dawn*) will be discussed.

In summary, this thesis explores the background and other factors that gave birth to Tôson the father of modern Japanese literature, with particular reference to the rôle of nature in his writing, dividing his life into three parts—examining first Tôson the poet, then his evolution from poet to novelist, and lastly his subsequent development as a writer of fiction.