

## The Lake

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Oriental art is different from Western, as testified by the alternate depiction of landscape that so enhanced the Western public at the end of the 19th century. The traditional western painting excels in mimesis with an ambition of making every detail show. Oriental art, especially Chinese and Japanese, does instead emphasize evocation.

Could similar attitudes also be the case in Japanese literature, the Haiku being a classical illustration of succinct evocation? The short story - The Lake, certainly on the face of it is an inconsequential story, with a somewhat contrived plot and stilted conversations, could be taken as an example. It tells the story of a forlorn character given to the stalking of young women. The story is told on different planes with somewhat abrupt changes of time and place that tend to get the unwary reader disoriented. As far as plot goes, the crucial event in the story is that the protagonist has a handbag hurled in his face. The handbag turns out to contain a substantial amount of money (200'000 yen at the time) which he appropriates carefully erasing any traces. His story is then intertwined with that of the victim, their paths almost, but not quite crossing. Much of the story, however, is taken up with the protagonist's reminiscences of his one successful exploit, that of a young student in a class, the discovery of which leads to his dismissal from his work as a teacher of Japanese, but not quite to the end of the affair. Other reminiscences further back relate to a crush on a cousin of his when he was a young boy. The Lake of the title appears repeatedly. As a child he lived by a lake, in which his ugly father was found murdered. It was also at the same lake he had tried to drown his cousin, or rather engaged in wishful phantasies of the same, as his competence for decisive action seems undeveloped. The lake also figures as a metaphor when he looks into the eyes of those young girl he fancies.

Japanese fiction, as practised by Kawabata, as well as more modern Japanese writers I know of<sup>1</sup>, tends to be rather airy, just like a Japanese painting, in which most is left to the imagination of the viewer. How much is left to the imagination of the reader? Obviously a lot, but that does not necessarily mean that the imagination is jogged. Do we care for the people sketched in the work? Do we make up extra details, filling gaps, speculate about motives? Hardly. In fact most of fiction fails to make us elaborate on plots and characters, and those that actually do, are ironically seldom held in high literary esteem<sup>2</sup>. This makes it hard to write about fiction, unlike philosophy or history, when the reviewer can elaborate on the text.

So in what sense does Kawabata's stories work? The suggestion of a strange land and time certainly. The lingering of a special feeling, more often than not one of sadness and regret.

To return to the introductory words. A story like the Lake gives very little concrete

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<sup>1</sup> of which Banana is one of the few examples

<sup>2</sup> The Sherlock Holmes stories is a case in point.

detail to give a real sense of presence. It is too dreamy, too abstract, too general, to evoke another existence in its mundane aspects. The setting is supposed to be immediate postwar Japan. There are references to the war as well as ruins (The protagonist meets his student at the abandoned prewar home of her parents, where she eventually will have a house built as she gets married). But no references to an American occupation, or to specific material matters. One suspects that at the time there was poverty and resented deprivation, and the only possible reference to it are the bums that are supposed to hang around the Ueno Subwaystation<sup>3</sup>.

No the book is all about the human condition, the impossibility of love and the longing for it, as well as the pull memories have on our souls.

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<sup>3</sup> Nowadays you see no bums in Japan. The absence of a derelict presence in places where you would normally expect them, as in the large subways stations, is something that strikes the western visitor today.