
Changing Times, Changing Styles: New Japanese Literary Styles of the Late 19th Century

by [About Japan Editors](#) , October 28, 2007

Grade Level

[Secondary](#)

Historical Period

[Meiji \(1868-1912\)](#)

Subject Area

[English and Language Arts](#)

Theme

[Imperial Japan](#)

Topic

[History-Modern](#)

[Literature](#)

Background Information.

"Modern" Japanese literature often has been thought to begin with writers' encounters with European literature in the 1870s and 1880s. These encounters began during a period of intense scrutiny of European and North American societies that followed the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate (1604-1868) and the establishment of a reformist government in the Meiji Restoration. The idea of a complete break with the literary past is not correct: many established writers continued to write in genres and styles that had appeared earlier in the nineteenth century, and readers eagerly consumed these "traditional" works.

For a number of young writers, however, the encounter with European literature was decisive. In keeping with a general enthusiasm for reform during the Meiji period (1868-1912), these young writers tried to create new genres and new styles. They frequently looked to European literature for inspiration. European literature also played a more direct role in the emergence of new literary forms: a number of writers devised new styles as they translated European works into Japanese, because they thought that the established styles of writing were inadequate to the task. Translations thus were some of the most "original" works of the 1870s and 1880s. (One well-known example is Futabatei Shimei's 1888 translation of Ivan Turgenev's story "The Rendezvous.")

Beginning in the 1880s, writers also began to write their own stories and novels in new styles. In many of these works, writers stressed observation of the world (both nature and society) and the description of characters' mental states. These efforts, too, often were driven by a sense that established styles were not adequate to the task at hand—describing a quickly changing society in which individuals were expected to make their own way. The works of Kunikida Doppo—one of whose pieces is the primary text for this lesson—exemplify one approach that writers took.

Learning Goals.

1. Students will understand that writers devised new literary styles in the 1880s and 1890s in order to write about topics that were new to Japanese fiction. Understanding the details of the changes, which requires some knowledge of the language, is less important than understanding that the new styles differed significantly from the styles common for most of the nineteenth century, and that the emergence of new styles was part of the emergence of new topics and themes.
2. Students will know that writers' encounters with European fiction played an important role in both their turn to new themes and in their stylistic experimentation. In many cases, writers developed new styles by translating European works, as seen in the case of Futabatei Shimei's translations of the Russian writer Turgenev and Kunikida Doppo's translations of the English poet Wordsworth.
3. Through their reading of [Doppo's "Unforgettable People,"](#) students will understand that a consideration of the individual in society was an important theme for the literature of the 1880s and 1890s.

Standards.

Language Arts

1. **McRel Standard 4.** Gathers and uses information for research purposes.
2. **McRel Standard 5.** Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.
3. **McRel Standard 6.** Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of literary texts.
4. **McRel Standard 7.** Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.
5. **McRel Standard 8.** Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

World History

1. **McRel Standard 34.** Understands how Eurasian societies were transformed in an era of global trade and the emergence of European power from 1750 to 1870.
2. **McRel Standard 36.** Understands patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic dominance from 1800 to 1914.
3. **McRel Standard 37.** Understand major global trends from 1750 to 1914.

Key Concept.

Changes in Japanese literary style during the late 19th century reflected a need to write about new topics that arose as a result of rapid change in Japanese life and Japan's role in the world during this period.

Essential Question.

What were the new literary styles of the 1880s and 1890s, and why did they emerge?

Thought Questions.

1. Why did writers in the 1880s and 1890s feel they needed to develop new styles?
2. How were the new styles related to new themes and topics?
3. What place do the individuals who appear in "Unforgettable People" (including Ōtsu, the writer) have in society? Are they in tight-knit communities? Are they solitary or alienated? How does the story's style contribute to its depiction of these individuals?
4. Why are the people Ōtsu meets "unforgettable"?

Activities

Focus Activity Ideas.

Choose a picture of a scene that will be completely alien to your students, such as a work of visual art that would defy conventional description. Picasso's [Standing Figure](#) or [Portrait of a Woman](#) would work particularly well. (Alternatively, you may want to choose one of the images from the [resources section](#).) Have them write a paragraph that expresses the essence of the scene. After reading some paragraphs, ask them how using conventional descriptive writing styles may have limited their ability to describe or catch the essence of an unfamiliar and unconventional scene, as a preface for the focus on changing literary styles in late 19th-century Japan.

Main Lesson Activity Ideas.

1. Lecture on new styles and encounters with European fiction
 - A. the Meiji Restoration and the sentiment for reform that followed

- B. the persistence of established literary genres and styles during this period
 - C. young writers' literary experimentation, prompted by their encounters with European fiction
 - D. the role of translation in the creation of new styles
 - E. the challenge of describing a changing society and the changing place of individuals as a further impetus for experimentation
2. Discussion of the story, *Unforgettable People* by Kunikida Doppo, based on thought questions
- A. Why did writers in the 1880s and 1890s feel they needed to develop new styles?
 - B. How were the new styles related to new themes and topics?
 - C. What place do the individuals who appear in "Unforgettable People" (including Ôtsu, the writer) have in society? Are they in tight-knit communities? Are they solitary or alienated? How does the story's style contribute to its depiction of these individuals?
 - D. Why are the people Ôtsu meets "unforgettable"?
3. Familiarize students with the geography of Japan and East Asia and ask them to locate places mentioned in the story.

Summative Activity Ideas.

Have students identify one specific example in which Doppo's style reflects his need to describe a topic or scene that was new to late 19th-century Japan.

Resources.

[Kunikida Doppo, "Unforgettable People," *Monumenta Nipponica*, trans. Jay Rubin 27:3 \(1972\), pages 294-304.](#)

Published in 1898, the Japanese title of this piece is "Wasure-enu hitobito"; the author's penname is Doppo; he is conventionally referred to by this name rather than by his family name of Kunikida. As a young man Doppo (1871-1906) aspired to a career in politics, but after the Diet (parliament) was established in 1890 he became disillusioned with the conduct of politicians.

In 1891 Doppo was baptized as a Christian at a time when many young intellectuals embraced Christianity for its social concerns. His faith gradually waned, and in the midst of personal troubles (including a divorce) he turned increasingly to the reading and writing of literature for solace. Early in the 1890s he encountered the work of Wordsworth and translated some of Wordsworth's poems into Japanese, a process that forced him to experiment with new poetic styles. From Wordsworth, Doppo took, above all, an enthusiasm for writing about nature based on direct experience; reading Tolstoy's *Hunter's Sketches* confirmed this passion. He composed poetry and, beginning in the late 1890s, fiction, that included striking descriptions of the natural world. Most of his stories were written in new, experimental prose styles as opposed to the classical language common until the 1880s, and made an important contribution to the creation of a "modern" language for literature.

In this story, the idea that a writer can "sketch" from life as an artist does (page 297) is an introduction to a series of sketches of "unforgettable people." Ôtsu, the writer, explains what he means by "unforgettable people" on page 298. Significantly, only strangers seem qualified to be truly unforgettable, which may explain why the manuscript includes an entry on the innkeeper but not on Akiyama, the painter with whom Ôtsu seems to have something in common (page 304). In this sense Ôtsu's inability to forget these people seems to reflect a deep sense of loneliness and isolation (page 303). Equally important, however, is that Ôtsu recalls the singular "unforgettable people" he has encountered as part of a larger scene (page 303). Ôtsu's manuscript—and Doppo's story—seems to sketch a world of basically isolated people who may be momentarily linked by chance encounters and their memories of such meetings.

Bibliographical reference: Masao Miyoshi, *Accomplices of Silence: The Modern Japanese Novel* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), Chapter 1, "The New Language." (This chapter provides helpful background on writers' efforts to create new literary styles.)

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