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## The "I" Novels in the Context of Early 20th-Century Japan

by [About Japan Editors](#)

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Grade Level

[Secondary](#)

Historical Period

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

[Taisho \(1912-1926\)](#)

Subject Area

[English and Language Arts](#)

Theme

[Imperial Japan](#)

Topic

[History-Modern](#)

[Literature](#)

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### Background Information.

Around the time that Natsume Soseki used fictional characters such as Sanshiro to reflect on the changes wrought in Japan since 1868, some writers from a later generation began writing in a mode that focused on the author's personal experience. The practice of writing from experience had long been a part of Japanese literature (an example is Yoshida Kenkō's *Essays in Idleness*, 1330), and in the early twentieth century the modern "I-novel" became a lasting feature of the literary scene.

Tayama Katai, who began his career as a naturalist writer in the manner of Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant, originated the genre with a story called "The Quilt" (1907). Katai's story drew on his experience with a young woman who aspired to be a novelist; he agreed to be her mentor but harbored unrequited carnal desires. Although the story is written in the third person, in literary circles it was widely understood that the protagonist was a stand-in for Katai himself. Read as an unrepentant confession, the work provoked scandal and numerous imitations.

Although some writers achieved fame by engaging in outrageous behavior and then writing about it, in the best examples of the genre reflection on personal experience is a vehicle for probing philosophical or social meditation. As the label I-novel suggests, this manner of writing is not simply autobiographical. Writers frequently rework their experience to achieve powerful literary effect, and as in the case of "The Quilt," may write in the third person. In most I-novels the distinction between the author and the persona that is the central "character" remains vague, however. Although confusing, the ambiguity is one source of the considerable power evident in the pieces by Shiga Naoya and Hayashi Fumiko that are the materials for this lesson.

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### Learning Goals.

1. Students will understand the important place that writing from personal experience has in modern Japanese literature.
  2. Students will explore how the writer's description of experience, and even the choice of which experiences to write about, reflect his or her broader aspirations to meditate on problems of human existence and social life.
  3. Students will consider how a writer's background affects the way he or she writes about personal experience.
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### Standards.

#### Language Arts

1. **McRel Standard 5.** [Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.](#)
2. **McRel Standard 6.** [Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of](#)

literary texts.

3. **McRel Standard 8.** Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

### World History

1. **McRel Standard 36.** Understands patterns of global change in the era of Western military and economic dominance from 1800 to 1914.
2. **McRel Standard 37.** Understands major global trends from 1750 to 1914.
3. **McRel Standard 38.** Understands reform, revolution, and social change in the world economy of the early 20th century.
4. **McRel Standard 42.** Understands major global trends from 1900 to the end of World War II.

### Key Concept.

The "I novels" provide insight into both the authors' backgrounds as well as their reflections on problems of human existence and social life.

### Essential Question.

What do the "I novels" illustrate regarding the authors' beliefs about human existence and social life, and how are these beliefs related to the backgrounds of the authors living in early 20th century Japan?

### Thought Questions.

1. How do Shiga and Hayashi transform their personal experience into material for broader meditations? How does Shiga transform seemingly coincidental experiences into a meditation on death? How does Hayashi transform her childhood experiences into the beginnings of a meditation on "wandering" as an existential condition?
2. Why does Shiga focus on his experience of the natural world, and Hayashi on her experience of the human world? How does Shiga's choice support his goal of pondering various aspects of death? How does Hayashi's choice further her meditation on wandering?
3. Are there differences in Shiga's and Hayashi's approaches that might reflect Shiga's affluent background and Hayashi's modest upbringing? Are there differences that might reflect Shiga's position as a male writer and Hayashi's as a female writer?
4. How do "At Kinosaki" and *Diary of a Vagabond* compare to Kunikida Doppo's story "Unforgettable People," which draws on Doppo's experiences traveling Japan? (See the lesson [Changing Times, Changing Styles.](#))

## Activities

### Focus Activity Ideas.

Have students list three potentially positive and three potentially negative points regarding writing a work of fiction based closely on personal experience. Use this activity as a way to focus the class on the impact of the choice of writing an "I novel."

### Main Lesson Activity Ideas.

1. Lecture on the practice of writing from experience in Japan
  - A. precedents in earlier Japanese literature: personal essays and poetic diaries
  - B. modern practice of writing from experience appeared in early twentieth century and continues today
  - C. best writing of this type uses personal experience as the basis for wider philosophical or social meditations
2. Discussion of the works based on the following thought questions:

How do Shiga and Hayashi transform their personal experience into material for broader meditations? How does Shiga transform seemingly coincidental experiences into a meditation on death? How does Hayashi transform her childhood experiences into the beginnings of a meditation on "wandering" as an existential condition?

Why does Shiga focus on his experience of the natural world, and Hayashi on her experience of the human world? How does Shiga's choice support his goal of pondering various aspects of death? How does Hayashi's choice further her meditation on wandering?

Are there differences in Shiga's and Hayashi's approach that might reflect Shiga's affluent background and Hayashi's modest upbringing? Are there differences that might reflect Shiga's position as a male writer and Hayashi's as a female writer?

How do "At Kinosaki" and *Diary of a Vagabond* compare to Kunikida Doppo's story "Unforgettable People," which draws on Doppo's experiences traveling Japan? (See the lesson [Changing Times, Changing Styles](#).)

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### Summative Activity Ideas.

Have students list three things they learned specifically about Japan through the reading selections, and one topic related to more universal themes that the stories caused them to think about more deeply.

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### Resources.

Francis Mathy, [Shiga Naoya](#) (New York: Twayne, 1974); Joan E. Ericson, *Be a Woman: Hayashi Fumiko and Modern Japanese Women's Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997). (These studies provide accessible introductions to the careers and works of Shiga and Hayashi.)

Shiga Naoya, "At Kinosaki," trans. Edward Seidensticker, *Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology*, ed. Donald Keene (New York: Grove, 1956), 272-77; Hayashi Fumiko, excerpt from *Diary of a Vagabond*, trans. Joan E. Ericson, in *Be a Woman: Hayashi Fumiko and Modern Japanese Women's Literature* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997), 123-29.

"At Kinosaki" ("Kinosaki ni te") was published in 1917 by Shiga Naoya (1883-1971). Although Shiga wrote some purely fictional works at the beginning of his career, he is known for a series of works drawn from his life, many of which focus on his difficult relationship with his father. (The conflict had deep roots, but the break between father and son came when Shiga's father refused to let him marry a woman who worked as a maid in the family house.) The most widely read of these works are "Reconciliation" (1917) and *A Dark Night's Passing*, published in several parts between 1921 and 1937. Shiga described "At Kinosaki" as "a story that describes events exactly as they occurred," a comment that reflects his refusal to distinguish between fiction and other forms of writing such as the personal essay. Even today Shiga is idolized for his style, which is both unadorned and lyrical and focuses on thoughts and impressions rather than dramatic incidents.

Although Shiga came from a wealthy family, Hayashi Fumiko (1904-1951) grew up in the impoverished circumstances described in the opening of *Diary of a Vagabond* (1930). She began her career as a poet and continued writing poetry throughout her life. *Diary of a Vagabond* was her debut prose work. As is typical of the genre, Hayashi took liberties with this "diary" of her life, which made her a well known figure in the literary scene. Wandering continued to be a central theme in her work, appearing in the two sequels to *Diary of a Vagabond* and *Floating Clouds* (1951), a novel about two lovers returning to Japan after the Asia-Pacific War.

"At Kinosaki" and *Diary of a Vagabond* both draw from the writers' experiences, yet show great contrasts. "At Kinosaki" reflects on the narrator's mental state after a near-fatal accident, as the narrator reflects on his encounters with the natural world. While convalescing, the narrator confronts death on three occasions: when he discovers a dead bee (pages 273-74), as he watches a rat struggling to avoid drowning (pages 274-76), and when he accidentally kills a water lizard (pages 276-77). The three encounters seem to reveal three aspects of death: the repose the narrator imagines would follow death, the instinctual desperation to avoid death, and the way in which death randomly takes one creature and not another. "Lonely" and "quiet" recur as adjectives to describe the narrator's observation of death in the natural world. Although concerned with the natural world, his observations are propelled by his own close encounter with death, and thus his description of his experiences while recuperating from the accident ultimately are descriptions of his inner world.

The opening section of *Diary of a Vagabond*, in contrast, vividly describes the towns and people the narrator experienced as a child. The description of the mining town of Nogata (page 124) is a notable example of Hayashi's description of places: the narrator remarks on everything from the sooty eaves to the appearances of the residents and the songs that were popular. Among the descriptions of the people she met, those of the inhabitants of the boarding house in Nogata—"more diverting than a circus" (page 125)—stand out. In contrast to "At Kinosaki," where the people living in the area are almost incidental to the narrator's experiences, *Diary of a Vagabond* highlights the narrator's experiences with others. Although as a young child the narrator appears to have had a life without many enduring relationships other than those with her mother and stepfather, the opening of Hayashi's book seems to stress the shared experiences of those who lived and worked in mining towns, from the everyday dealings between miners and peddlers (pages 126-27) to the craze for the 1914 film *Kachusha* (pages 125-26). The narrator's longing for home (page 123, page 129) emerges somewhat paradoxically from such close descriptions of the places she has inhabited and the people she has met there. The more vivid are her memories of such places and people, it seems, the more piercing is her memory of a longing for a fixed home.

After the opening section, *Diary of a Vagabond* is concerned with the narrator's adult life. The narrator's reflections on her longing for home develop into a more philosophical reflection on the situation of women like the narrator who avoid marriage and try to pursue their own ambitions (in Hayashi's case, to write). Although such women seem condemned to a life of wandering, Hayashi suggests that such an existence is a positive state that offers its own opportunities. The song lyrics that Hayashi includes in the opening of the book are replaced by Hayashi's own poems, recalling the long tradition of writing poetic diaries in Japan.

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[\*\*Discuss \(0\)\*\*](#)

[\*\*Contribute to this Lesson \(0\)\*\*](#)

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