

Naomi

JUN'ICHIRO TANIZAKI
1924

Jun'ichiro Tanizaki's first novel, *Naomi* (originally serialized in 1924–1925 in two newspaper-style publications, the *Osaka Asahi Shimbun* and *Josei*), is a study on the transformation of Japan by Western culture. This transformation had been ongoing since the nineteenth century but reached a new level in the 1920s with the rise of mass media such as film, radio, and fashion magazines. Tanizaki views the influx of Western culture satirically, presenting it in the form of a sadomasochistic relationship in which the dominatrix, the Naomi of the title, becomes an idol of the West to the narrator, Joji. Part of the inspiration for *Naomi* was Tanizaki's real-life adulterous affair with his sister-in-law (as well as the adultery of his wife). Tanizaki was one of the most important Japanese writers of his generation and was eventually nominated for the Nobel Prize. The Japanese title of the novel is *Chijin no Ai*, which can be translated as *A Fool's Love*; the novel is sometimes referred to by that title in English criticism. The suggested sexual nature of the relationship between Naomi and Joji makes *Naomi* more appropriate for older readers.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tanizaki was born on July 24, 1886, in the Nihonbashi district of Tokyo. His grandfather had begun a number of successful businesses, including a printing press that circulated a trade paper for rice dealers in Tokyo. Tanizaki's uncle ran that business; his

father failed in one enterprise after another. Tanizaki apologetically suggested this may have been due to ill health. By the time he was in high school, Ta-



Jun'ichiro Tanizaki © GL Archive/Alamy Stock Photo



MEDIA ADAPTATIONS

- Keigo Kimura adapted and directed two films of *Naomi* (in 1949 and 1960), both under the title *Chijin no Ai*. Neither has been released in the West. Both films were produced by Daiei Studios and run one hour and twenty-nine minutes.
- A 1967 film of *Naomi* was released in the West as *Love for an Idiot*. Produced by Daiei Studios, it runs ninety-three minutes.

nizaki had to work as a tutor and later had to drop out of Tokyo Imperial University when his family could not pay his tuition. While he was still in college, however, Tanizaki began publishing his own literary journal, in which he placed short stories and a play. He soon began publishing in paying markets and having plays produced, and he even wrote screenplays for some of the earliest Japanese films. This work allowed him to marry in 1915. He and his wife, Ishikawa Chiyo, had a daughter before the marriage ended in divorce in 1930. The marriage had been challenged by Chiyo's liaison with a friend of Tanizaki's, the writer and poet Haruo Sato, and by Tanizaki's own attraction to his sister-in-law. Tanizaki married twice more and had another daughter with his third wife.

Tanizaki's house in Tokyo was destroyed in the Kanto earthquake in 1923, and he moved to Kyoto and began his first novel, *Naomi*. As was usual at the time, the book was serialized in a newspaper, in this case the *Osaka Asahi Shimbun*. It began to run in weekly installments in March 1924, with Tanizaki writing the chapters as fast as they were published. While the erotic decadence of the novel made it very popular, it also attracted criticism from socially conservative groups and threats of government censorship, so the serialization was canceled at the end of chapter 16. Five months later, the serialization was resumed in the magazine *Josei*. After this, Tanizaki devoted himself mainly to novels, of which the most famous is *The Makioka Sisters*. This novel began serialization in 1943, but it, too, was stopped—in this case because the government chose to reserve the limited supply of paper for war propaganda. The novel completed publication in 1948.

In the postwar period, Tanizaki was considered the most important Japanese writer. In 1949 he won the Asahi Prize, and the government awarded him the Order of Culture. His work became more explicitly erotic. One of his last novels was *Diary of a Mad Old Man* (1961), in which the main character has to bribe his daughter-in-law, a character much like Naomi, with pieces of Western-style costume jewelry to not act seductively around him, before dying of a heart attack. Tanizaki was short-listed for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964. In 1965 he also was elected to honorary membership in the American Academy and National Institute of Arts and Letters, the first Japanese writer to be given those honors. Tanizaki died of a heart attack at his home in Yugawara in Kanagawa Prefecture south of Tokyo on July 30, 1965. He is buried on the grounds of the Temple of Honen in Kyoto.

PLOT SUMMARY

Joji Kawai is the main character and narrator of *Naomi*. He begins by telling the reader that he is going to explain the unusual circumstances of his marriage. Joji comes from a wealthy land-owning family and is a successful salary man, working as an engineer. He meets Naomi when she is working as a hostess in a restaurant he frequents. She is fifteen years old and he twenty-eight. The story plays out over the next five years, with the only anchoring date, 1923, somewhere in the middle.

Joji is struck by Naomi's beauty, particularly her resemblance to popular Western movie stars like Mary Pickford. He almost immediately invites her to start living with him in what they both describe as a friendly relationship. This seems more modern to them than going through a series of medieval ceremonies. After a few months of this arrangement, they make a civil marriage, but Joji does not inform his tradition-minded family or his coworkers. They move into a small Western-style house previously owned and designed by an artist to his own taste.

Joji's dream is to make Naomi over into a modern, stylish, sophisticated, Westernized woman to match her name and looks, and she is eager to make this transformation too. Joji pays for her to take lessons in English and music. Joji thinks of Naomi as a bird he is keeping in a birdcage. The reality of their relationship is revealed when she introduces a little game in which he crawls around the room on all fours with her riding him like a horse, using a towel as the bit and bridle. Joji studied English at university, and it eventually becomes evident to him that while Naomi's pro-



COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1920s:** Japan is still a relatively backward country in terms of industry (compared with France or the United States) and still under the West's cultural domination.

Today: Japan is a world economic and cultural leader.

- **1920s:** Women in Japan, as in the West, do not generally work outside the home and are economically dependent on their husbands.

Today: In Japan many women have professional careers, but the percentage of women

who work outside the home is only about half of the figure in the United States.

- **1920s:** The Japanese economy is still dominated by agriculture, and many farmers are wealthy.

Today: The agricultural economy in Japan is surprisingly important, making a much larger percentage of the overall economy than in the United States. The government has intervened with price supports to preserve small farms and prevent corporate farms from taking over.

nunciation is good, her comprehension and understanding of grammar are unacceptable. They have a terrible argument over it, and though he makes her apologize (threatening to throw her out if she does not) for tearing her exercise book in half, there is no question that she is the one in control.

Joji takes Naomi on a vacation to the beach and, for the first of many times, observes how crude and vulgar she is compared with the truly stylish women they see there; this realization never lessens her hold on him. One day Joji comes home from work early just as a boy named Hamada is leaving the house. Naomi explains that he is a college student and takes music lessons with her teacher. He came to tell her that he is going to take Western-style dance lessons, and she convinces Joji that they should start taking lessons together. The teacher is a Russian émigré countess named Aleksandra Shlemskaya. Joji is completely overwhelmed by her—in that she is a Westerner—treating her almost as an object of worship.

Joji makes a good salary, but however much money he has, Naomi spends it quickly, not only by buying expensive but poorly made clothes she takes no care of but especially by refusing to do the slightest amount of cooking. She insists that they eat at a restaurant practically every night and on most days buys her lunch from a restaurant too. Joji finally has to ask his mother for money.

After a few weeks of lessons, Naomi makes Joji take her to a nightclub for dancing. There they meet Hamada and his fellow student Kumagai

Seitaro, a well-known actress from the Imperial Theater. Hamada has brought as a date Haruno Kirako, a well-known actress from the Imperial Theater. Naomi is reasonably successful as a dancer and even dances with a Westerner who is there.

Evenings like this are frequently repeated. Joji becomes increasingly suspicious that Naomi must be sleeping with Kumagai and Hamada if not others besides, but he is forced to accept her denials. One night the two students accompany Joji and Naomi home after dancing, and it becomes too late for them to leave, so the four of them sleep in one large bed with Naomi playing around like a small child.

Joji starts doing things like leaving work early to try to catch Naomi in the act of adultery, or even only pretending to go to work and coming back in the morning. Naomi is well aware of his snooping, which also includes intercepting the mail. He suggests to Naomi that they ought to try to start a new life: to have a child and try to live like an ordinary middle-class couple. This disgusts her, and she says she wants only the kind of *friendship* that he promised her when he first took her in.

Nevertheless, Joji determines on some kind of fresh start. He plans to buy a traditional Japanese house and employ servants to do the cooking and housework that Naomi refuses to do. To this end, he gets a large sum of money from his mother, whom he lets believe that he might be contemplating a traditional marriage. His suspicions have not abated, however, and one day he hides in the yard and fol-

lows Naomi to an assignation with Kamagi. Joji is enraged at having his suspicions confirmed; when she returns home, he finally throws her out of the house. He immediately repents of his actions and, looking through an old photo album of pictures of Naomi, is once again conquered by her beauty. He has no way to find her and turns to Hamada for help. He discovers that she is now living with William McConnell, the Westerner who had danced with her on their first nightclub outing. There had not been anything between them before; when Joji threw her out, she went straight to him, and he took her in. Hamada had an affair with her, too, and feels she has betrayed him with Kamagi. Joji takes an entirely conciliatory attitude toward his rival.

Joji does not see Naomi for a long time. The Kanto earthquake occurs during this time—an earthquake that devastates Tokyo and Yokohama. Joji's absences from work were noticed, and it is agreed that he will work until the end of the year and then he will be let go. Joji's mother dies, leaving a large amount of profitable farmland. Joji sells it off and starts a new company with acquaintances of his from college. As a senior executive, he now has a very large income but few duties. He spends his time longing for Naomi. One night she returns. She lets herself in with a key, though she had given him her keys when she left. He does not recognize her at first, because she is in Western clothes and he mistakes her for a European. She just collects a few of her things and then leaves. She starts to come back occasionally, always with the excuse of getting belongings. Finally, Joji begs her to stay, and she does so on the understanding that she will not give up her lovers.

CHARACTERS

Hamada

Hamada, familiarly called Hama-san, is one of the students with whom Naomi has an affair. He seems to be her first lover besides Joji. After Joji finally accepts what she is doing and throws her out, he turns to Hamada to find her so he can take her back. Joji is inclined to treat Hamada as though he is a friend and to commiserate with him over Naomi's faithlessness. Hamada feels that Naomi has betrayed him, too, by taking still other adulterous lovers.

Joji Kawai

Joji is the main character and narrator of *Naomi*. He is the son of a rich family of farmers and works as an engineer. His attention falls on a fifteen-year-old

waitress. He is attracted by her Western-sounding name, which he eventually renders as "Naomi," and her Western looks. In a courtship that finally leads him to marry her, Joji wants to make her over as a Western idol, at the same time projecting onto her his innermost needs for humiliation and masochistic servitude. Something equally hidden in the depths of her being responds to his needs. What is less apparent is that Joji has spent his formative years transforming himself on a Western model too. He made himself over from a rustic aristocrat into a salary man—an office worker with a college degree who is considered superior to workers paid by the hour. The salary man type entails a certain social respectability together with its privileges, and paradoxically Joji destroys his own identity as a salary man out of his countervailing desire to make himself subservient to Naomi.

He misses more and more work from time spent spying on her (which must be interpreted as a kind of worship rather than any attempt to catch her out and punish her), and he eventually falls prey to office gossip. His reaction—to use his inherited wealth to start a new company, which leaves all his time free to devote to Naomi—also reveals the extent to which his salary man identity was a pose, a part he was playing himself as he groomed Naomi to play her part. Once Joji becomes consigned to his mere supporting role in the drama he has created for Naomi, he becomes known by the Western name George.

Haruno Kirako

Kirako is a popular stage actress at the Imperial Theater who comes as Hamada's date to the first evening of dancing at a nightclub to which Joji takes Naomi. Joji says that he appraises every woman he sees in comparison to Naomi and judges Kirako to be superior in every way, particularly in her natural elegance, the slenderness of her limbs, and similar characteristics. Even so, he is not at all attracted to her. This seems to be because she represents to him a Japanese, rather than a Western, ideal.

William McConnell

McConnell is evidently a Western businessman resident in Japan whom Naomi first meets at the dance clubs she makes Joji take her to. When Joji throws Naomi out after first discovering her adultery, she immediately goes to McConnell and becomes his mistress. Joji must have realized that

this would be the outcome of his actions even as he fantasized about a virtuous punishment of her and then felt remorse over *his* cruelty. McConnell becomes merely the first of many Western lovers of Naomi whom Joji is not interested in differentiating.

Naomi

Naomi is best understood as the antagonist of the novel, the person who creates all of the misfortune that befalls the protagonist and narrator, Joji, with his undeniable complicity each step of the way. At the start of the novel she is working as a waitress in a café he frequents. Besides her name, Naomi looks like a foreign woman and is evidently quite beautiful. Without ever fully realizing what he is doing, Joji set out to make her into the fashionable idea of a foreign woman. She seems to be aware of her own attractions and is unusually fit for the role of goddess Joji wants her to fill; still, she can play it out only through cruelly and sadistically lording it over her husband. There is something cheap and lower class about Naomi that Joji, at least, cannot put into words. She is also, in his view, shallow and uncultured and in no way desirable as a wife. Aside from her youthful attractiveness, Naomi's one skill is to create an image or veneer of Western exoticism. She is not, in fact, heavily Westernized and is too uneducated to understand very much about Western culture, but she is able to parrot its most obvious surface characteristics. She puts on a performance of Western style and fashion.

Her audience—that is, men she is aiming to seduce—have to cooperate with her in order to make her over into a Western image, reading her in light of their own knowledge about and longing for the Western ideal. Joji is obsessed with this Western image that stands for everything that is the opposite of his own background, coming from a farming village in the countryside: foreign, exotic, and modern. It is Naomi's very faults that most powerfully attract him. In the novel, Naomi is largely seen through Joji's perceptions and not through any direct impression of her.

Kumagai Seitaro

Kumagai, familiarly called Ma-chan, is one of the students with whom Naomi conducts an adulterous affair. In fact, he is the one with whom Joji catches her.



PRIMARY SOURCES & OTHER LINKS

- The University of Colorado at Boulder maintains a set of Teaching East Asia pages, among them, *Becoming Modern: Early 20th-Century Japan through Primary Sources* (<https://www.colorado.edu/ptea-curriculum/becoming-modern>). Its many pages contain scholarly essays that incorporate and explain a wide variety of primary sources from Japan in the 1920s as well as contemporary illustrations.
- The Kitsune (Japanese for “fox”) page on the Ancient Origins website (<https://www.ancient-origins.net/myths-legends-asia/kitsune-0012027>) gives an extensive illustrated overview of Japanese legends about the fox (a figure that contributes to Naomi's character).
- WNYC hosts online an extensive interview with Anthony Chambers, the translator of *Naomi*, about Tanizaki (<https://www.wnyc.org/story/54316-underappreciated-junichiro-tanizaki/>).
- The Nobel Committee has made public the history of nominations for the Nobel Prize in literature, including the number of times a candidate was nominated and by whom. Tanizaki's page is available at https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/archive/show_people.php?id=12374.
- *Glamour* magazine's website hosts a brief video showing the evolution of Japanese fashion (<https://www.glamour.com/story/evolution-of-japanese-fashion-video>).

Aleksandra Shlemskaya

Shlemskaya is the teacher at the dancing classes that Joji and Naomi attend. She is a member of the fairly large Russian émigré community that existed in the Far East, composed of individuals who had fled the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. Shlemskaya claims to have been a wealthy noblewoman before the revolution, but such claims were com



CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

- Why does Joji use Naomi as a model against which he judges all other women?
- Does Joji succeed in his efforts to convert Naomi into a Western woman or at least a thoroughly Westernized woman?
- Why does Tanizaki play down the 1923 Kanto earthquake in *Naomi*?
- Why does Joji conceal his marriage from his mother?

mon as a matter of social prestige, irrespective of actual birth. Nevertheless, with this claim to status and her imperious manner, along with the fact that she actually is a Westerner, Shlemskaya is a natural alternative love object for Joji. At the lessons, she also carries a whip, which she periodically cracks for emphasis or beats on the floor. Joji also emphasizes negative, even disgusting qualities of her, such as her strong odor. Still, even this he finds admirable. Shlemskaya seems to embody everything Joji wants to turn Naomi into.

THEMES

Exoticism

Western readers will not be used to considering Western culture as the subject of exotic fascination. Viewed from a Japanese perspective, however, it could certainly become one. Tokugawa Japan, up until the American Commodore Matthew Perry forced contact in 1854, had pursued a policy of strict isolationism. The subsequent influx of Western culture must have seemed strange and fascinating. One can see a physical expression of this in photographs of the period of men parading through the streets of Tokyo wearing kimonos but also straw boater hats. Realizing that the alternative was to become subject to a humiliating colonization like China, the Japanese government turned the entire national energy to imitating and catching up with

the Western nations as quickly as possible, in industry and technology but also in culture.

By the 1920s, Japan had a Western-style constitutional monarchy with a two-chamber parliament. There was nothing unusual for an intellectual like Tanizaki to be fluent in English and to read the latest European and American literature. *Naomi* chronicles the influx of the latest wave of fashion, facilitated through the exhibition of Western films in Japan, and fashionable women presented themselves not just as imitators of Western women in general but, indeed, as flappers—women who wore short skirts, had their hair bobbed, and embraced a lifestyle considered immoral by respectable society. Naomi represents this to the ultimate degree in Joji's conception of her. The entire basis of his attraction to her is her Western-sounding name and even her Western appearance. Although, like many Japanese, she spends most her time in traditional dress, when they go out in society Naomi wears the latest Western fashions. He is devastated anew by Naomi when, after a period of estrangement, she is dressed in even more refined Western fashion.

Decadence

Decadence was a movement in European literature and art in the late nineteenth century up until about World War I. Perhaps its greatest representative was Oscar Wilde. His play *Salome* (1891) is set in a remote exotic past, turns on the examination and exposure of deep-seated and unnatural sexual desire, involves characters who murder out of passions sexual and otherwise, and even includes one character who has supernatural powers. These main themes of decadent literature were described in a language of sophisticated refinement that overwhelmed every other aspect of the text; the artificial and the contrived are considered more beautiful than the natural.

In the Japan of the 1920s, decadence was influential on the aesthetic movement, the competitor to naturalism and the I-novel, an autobiographical confessional form of literature. It is in this movement that Tanizaki is more at home. If the first sentence of *Naomi* establishes it as a satire of the naturalists, the second proclaims it an aesthetic novel, when Joji introduces the fantastic nature of the story he has to relate: "It's probably a relationship without precedent. My account of it will provide me with a precious record of something I never want to forget." Tomi Suzuki, in *Narrating the Self*, points out that Tanizaki's early novels



Joji first sees Naomi at a cafe in Yokohama. © evstory/Shutterstock.com

relied heavily on the mystifying allure of abnormal sexuality, a theme popular among Japanese intellectuals of the time. Tanizaki, in fact, was one of the foremost promoters of this literary and intellectual trend, which derived from the fin de siècle European decadent movement.

This certainly applies to *Naomi*, as is evident in its plot of a man's destroying himself through a perverted worship of a woman's beauty, while the woman is transformed from a weak and miserable creature into a cruel idol of debased sexuality. Tokugawa Japan had produced a large literature, notable especially for illustrations, of strange and bizarre sexuality, but while the works were often prized by aristocratic collectors, they were nevertheless kept secret and looked down upon with scorn. Tanizaki and other authors of the 1920s utilized the decadent movement to bring these themes out into the open in legitimate literature. Cultural reaction against this attempt is the reason *Naomi* was censored by having its initial serialization canceled, though its subsequent publication shows the success of the effort. While other authors interrogated these themes in Japanese history, especially in the courtly life of the medieval period (such as Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's 1922 "In a Grove"), Tanizaki, viewing the West through the lens of decadent literature, saw

it as a symbol of perverse sexuality inextricably tied up with the truth and power that all of Japan sought in imitating the West. In an essay published in 1916 (never translated but treated by Tomi Suzuki in *Narrating the Self*), Tanizaki reveals that he was very conscious of his public persona as a diabolist (literally a "devil worshiper" but actually a term derived from the decadent movement) and an egoist. He feared it would be infringed by the news that he and his wife had had a child, because after that he would no longer be imagined to be devoting himself manically to his art if he had become a family man rather than a sexual adventurer.

STYLE

First-Person Narrator

Before *Naomi*, Tanizaki had used the first-person narrative voice only in a series of detective stories he wrote. Although much of his work contained autobiographical details, he had never before combined the matter of his own life with the first-person style. His choice of the first person in *Naomi* served many purposes. The character of Joji is a masochist, finding sexual satisfaction in being humiliated by the woman he loves. Readers might



ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

- In a paper, analyze Tanizaki's attitude to the West and Western culture, as revealed in *Naomi*.
- C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950) is an allegory of Christianity aimed at young-adult readers. The White Witch stands for the devil, and her character is based on the femme fatale of European decadent literature, just as is Naomi's character in Tanizaki's novel. Write a paper comparing the two women and showing how the character of each relates to heroines of decadent literature like Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1891). You might try forming your paper by using the interactive Essay Map or Persuasion Map provided by the National Educational Association.
- Tanizaki's *Naomi* is often compared to Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955). Make a presentation to your class focusing on the character of the two protagonists—Tanizaki's innocent, stumbling Joji and Nabokov's cunning and manipulative Humbert Humbert.
- At one point, Joji likens Naomi to a fox in old fairy tales that could cheat a young man by transforming herself into the likeness of a princess. Write a paper exploring traditions about the fox in Japanese folklore and how this impacted Tanizaki's novel.

find this unusual, if not shocking, but because it is essential to Joji's character, he is able to present it in a natural and unaffected way: he cannot imagine anything else. This pose makes it easier for the reader to accept and also presents the character as ridiculous by the reader's standards, thus rendering him harmless in a way he would not have been if portrayed as a sadist. The humor is created by Joji's lack of awareness and particularly his lack of self-awareness. *Naomi* is probably also intended as a satire of the I-novel, an emerging genre of Japanese

literature that grew out of naturalism and was nearly confessional in presenting the author's own life under a thin veil of fiction.

Naturalism

One of the main themes of the Japanese novels of the 1920s was described by the term *naturalism*. This meant that the author tried to represent as realistically as possible the actual events of his own life, thus making his art into an image of his natural existence. Tanizaki is often seen by critics as connected with this school, and the opening sentence of Joji's narration might look as though he is writing a naturalist novel: "I'm going to try to relate the facts of our relationships as man and wife just as they happened, as honestly and frankly as I can." However, given the general comic tone of *Naomi*, with all of its characters seen in a ridiculous light, the novel might more appositely be seen as satirical of naturalism. However, even satire must enter into the spirit of its subject, and *Naomi* has many features of a naturalist novel.

Taking their cue from the Freudian psychoanalysis that reached the height of its popularity in the 1920s, the naturalists viewed sexual desire as a repressed force whose disclosure could reveal the most fundamental truths of human nature. On one hand, Joji certainly shares this view. On the other hand, exposing his innermost nature to the reader does not remedy his own lack of self-awareness—his revelation is inadvertent. Rather than revealing any insight into his inmost nature, his exhibition makes him look like a fool, entering into voluntary slavery to a teenage girl and embracing every kind of humiliation. It would be possible to argue that Tanizaki is nevertheless following the program of naturalism and basing Joji's liaison with Naomi on his own entanglement with his sister-in-law as well as his wife's affair with one of his literary colleagues, of which Tanizaki seems to have approved. While no one except Tanizaki himself could know the truth of this, even if it were the case, it would presuppose a far more introspective understanding of his own sexual life by the author than he imparts to his character, defeating the analytical purpose of naturalism.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Kanto Earthquake of 1923

Perched on the Pacific Rim, on the boundary between the Pacific, the Okhotsk, and Philippine tectonic plates that ceaselessly but slowly grind



WHAT DO I READ NEXT?

- *The Makioka Sisters* (serialized 1943–1948; first translated into English by Edward G. Seidensticker in 1957) is Tanizaki’s best-known novel. It concerns the efforts of the once-wealthy Makioka family to find a suitable husband for their youngest daughter amid their declining fortunes. It has been filmed or adapted for television over half a dozen times.
- Donald Richie was one of the most distinguished English-speaking scholars of twentieth-century Japanese culture and literature (and especially film) and lived most of his life in Japan. *The Donald Richie Reader: 50 Years of Writing on Japan* (2001) collects outstanding examples of his essays and other writings from his whole career.
- *Lady into Fox* (1922) is a novel by the Bloomsbury author David Garnett. It won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize and the Hawthornden Prize. Without evident contact with Japanese folklore, the novel concerns a man whose wife suddenly turns into a fox. She goes on living with him for some time, at first wearing human clothes but no longer able to speak. She becomes increasingly demanding and wild and eventually runs away into the woods. The next year, her husband enjoys playing with her kits. Soon thereafter she is run over by a truck.
- *Descending Stories*, by Haruko Kumota, is a series of manga, or Japanese comic books, first published in 2010 and intended for young-adult readers. The first volume was published in English in 2017, as translated by Matt Alt. Set in the 1920s and 1930s, it tells the story of a young man ambitious to be trained in the traditional art of rakugo storytelling—told by a lone storyteller seated on a stage.
- *The Woman and the Puppet* (1898; translated by Arthur Symons in 1935), by Pierre Louys, one of the leading French decadent authors, describes a wealthy, middle-aged Frenchman who falls in love with a poor young Spanish girl. She constantly sends him into jealous rages by flirting with other men, causing him to break off relations with her. Still, he always come groveling back to her. Finally, overcome by anger, he strikes her, and she only then adopts a submissive attitude toward him. Her old ways begin all over again, however, and he leaves her. A year later he is back again. The novel’s ending suggests that the cycle will repeat indefinitely. The novel was adapted into the opera *Conchita* in 1911 by Riccardo Zandonai and has been frequently filmed—for example, as *The Devil Is a Woman* by Josef von Sternberg (1935) and as *That Obscure Object of Desire* by Luis Buñuel (1977).
- *Childhood Years: A Memoir* (translated by Paul McCarthy in 2017) is Tanizaki’s account of his early life. In it, he describes his experience of the 1894 Tokyo earthquake, which left him with a lifelong fear of earthquakes. He also relates certain experiences that may have shaped the fetishistic interests he explores in *Naomi*, for example, his appreciation of the unusual whiteness of his mother’s skin compared with that of other Japanese women.
- Arthur Golden’s *Memoirs of a Geisha* (1997) is a best-selling novel set in Japan beginning in 1929. The main character and narrator is a geisha, a position that includes prostitution. The book provides an atmosphere and performance based on Japanese tradition.

against each other, Japan is one of the most earthquake-prone nations on earth. Just before noon local time on September 1, 1923, Japan—especially Tokyo—was hit by one of the most devastating earthquakes in recorded history. The Kanto earthquake was of magnitude 7.9 (the same magnitude as

the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco). Countless buildings collapsed, especially in Yokohama, where Tanizaki lived at the time, and more than 140,000 people were killed. Most, however, were killed in the fires afterward, caused by the failure of the Tokyo natural gas system. The fires were so intense



Naomi reminds Joji of the actress Mary Pickford.
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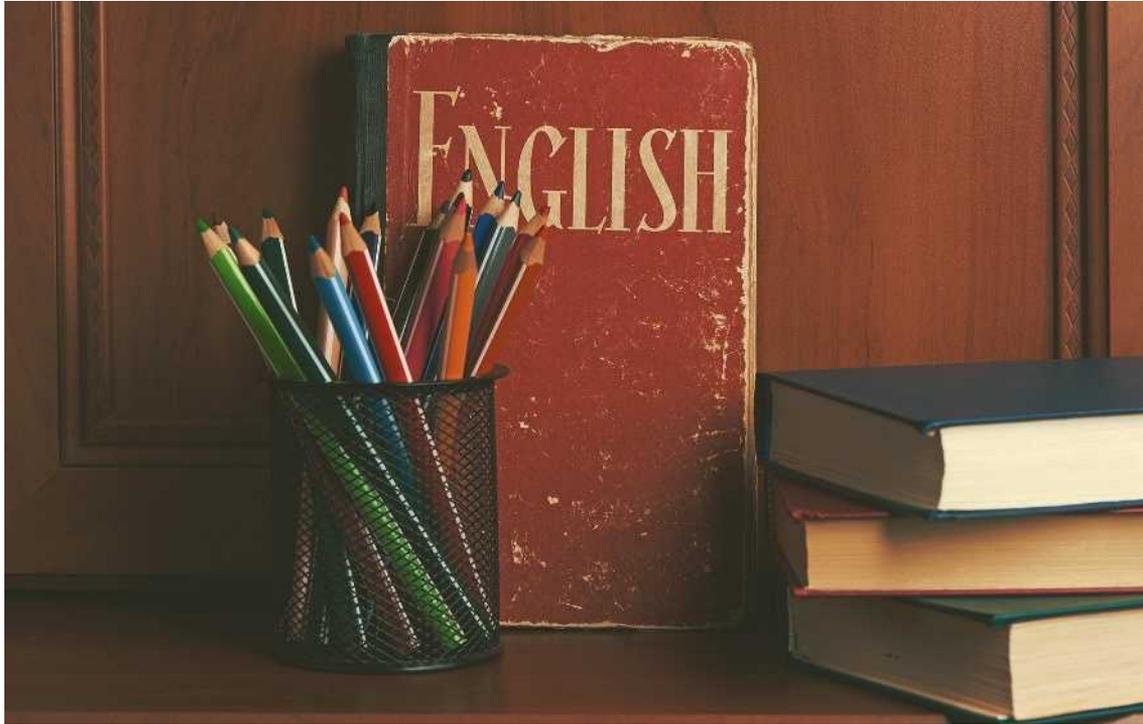
that they created perhaps the world's first firestorm, where giant flames are whipped up and burn hundreds or thousands of acres, a phenomenon Japan would experience again during the Allied strategic bombing of the islands during World War II.

Moreover, at that time Korea was a Japanese colony, and the Korean people were commonly the subject of intense racial prejudice by the Japanese. As soon as the earthquake hit, a rumor circulated, one that was soon published in newspapers, that Koreans living in Tokyo were planning terrorist attacks to destroy what was left of the city. In response, over the next week, soldiers, police, and vigilante mobs massacred over six thousand Koreans and many other Japanese who tried to protect them. Tanizaki himself happened to be in the countryside during the earthquake and so was unharmed, but his house was destroyed, and as a result he moved to Kyoto. The earthquake occurred during the dramatic events of *Naomi* and is mentioned there, but in a strangely insignificant way. It happens while Naomi is living apart from Joji and he can barely manage to write the briefest summary of the situation, so fascinated is he with her. He says little more than that their house survived undamaged.

Cleopatra

There is not much of a historical consciousness present in *Naomi*, but on one occasion Joji recalls an old middle-school history lesson about the naval Battle of Actium. This was the main action in the civil war between Augustus, the future Roman emperor, and Marc Antony and Cleopatra. According to his teacher's lecture, Cleopatra took her part of the fleet and ran away in the middle of the battle. Antony's force was destroyed because he chased after her rather than fighting. What Joji found remarkable was the teacher's comment on the action: "This man Antony pursued a woman and lost his life. He is the greatest fool in history, truly the laughingstock of the ages. Alas! That a valiant hero should meet his end in this way." Still more interesting was the student's reaction: "The teacher's manner was so odd that we burst out laughing in his face. Naturally, I laughed too." Joji's teacher must not have been very knowledgeable, because what he was teaching was Augustus's later propaganda about the battle (as reflected in texts such as book 7 of Vergil's *Aeneid*). Today it is often thought that Cleopatra's galleys may have been attempting to ram under sail and were driven off by unfavorable winds. In any case, his teacher's analysis made a deep impression on Joji.

Thinking about historical conflicts and political intrigues throughout his life, Joji comes to the conclusion that "you always find in the background the wiles of a terrifying enchantress. Now, are these wiles so ingeniously, so slyly constructed that anyone would be taken in by them?" He concludes that men as shrewd as Antony and Cleopatra's earlier lover, Julius Caesar, certainly could not have been. Instead, he thinks, "A man who lets himself be deceived, even though he knows that he's destroying himself, is just too fainthearted. If this was really the case with Antony, then there's nothing so wonderful about heroes." In the present of the narrative he realizes that he is no different from Cleopatra's victims, casting Naomi in the role of the destructive foreign queen, although he is still not at the point that he has figured out that she is committing adultery against him. Rather than being symptomatic of a relationship without precedent, Joji's subservience to Naomi has very clear precedents, as here with Cleopatra. While Joji thinks he is analyzing the problem, he enters into the fantasy that was stirred up in his middle-school classroom, rather than trying to achieve any dispassionate distance from it that might have enabled him to get his own actions and reactions under control.



Joji grooms Naomi to be the ideal modern wife, paying for English lessons and taking her to see Western movies. © spaxiax/Shutterstock.com

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

As one of the most important Japanese authors of the twentieth century, Tanizaki is the subject of a large body of criticism, even in English. One of the most important of his critics is Tomi Suzuki in *Narrating the Self*. In the early 1920s, Japanese literature went through a fashion for biographical narratives told in the first person. By 1925, this would give rise to the so-called I-novel, which strove for realism through an explicit autobiography of the author. (Tanizaki may have been the first to use the word, though he did not write such a novel.) Suzuki suggests that *Naomi*, with its comically pathetic protagonist, is meant to be a satire of this trend. However, Suzuki finds the satirical pose of the novel trivial, compared with its presentation of Tanizaki's inner life in terms of the European decadent movement of the 1890s. Foreign influence on Japanese literature often lagged a generation, not so much because of problems with translation as because of other forms of cultural isolation and distance. At the same time, Suzuki points out that a model for the character Naomi was Tanizaki's mistress, Seiko, his wife's younger sister. Gwenn Boardman Petersen, in her book *The Moon in the Water*, observes of the relationship between Naomi and Joji:

It is true that the relationship seems masochistic, that he is unable to break with this dream girl who resembles Mary Pickford—even when she takes innumerable foreign lovers—and that he humbles himself in order to keep her. But any modern marriage counselor will concede the validity of Tanizaki's case history, while any ordinary reader should be able to recognize that the *contrast* is artfully rendered in contemporary terms.

She places the relationship into the larger movement of Japanese society to assimilate itself to Western culture, trying to follow the good and reject the bad, in this case resulting in failure. Although Indra Levy, in *Sirens of the Western Shore*, does not deal at length with *Naomi* directly, she sees its title character as the precursor of the figure of the Japanese schoolgirl as a destructive seductress that is a commonplace in modern Japanese literature and culture, visible especially, but hardly exclusively, in anime. According to Levy:

Seen within the context of 1920s Tokyo, Naomi presaged the emergence of the Modern Girl. ... When considered within the overall trajectory of modern Japanese literary history, she also lays claim to a genealogy that traces back to the Taisho New Woman, who shared with the Modern Girl in her marked capacity to personify, most provocatively, the latest twist in Japanese modernity.

The earlier figures in this chain might be compared to the Western Gibson Girl and flapper, but Naomi's descendants as icon of decadent sexuality have no parallel in the West.

CRITICISM

Bradley A. Skeen

Skeen is a classicist. In the following essay, he considers Tanizaki's Naomi as an allegory, in which Joji's subservience to his Westernized idol, Naomi, stands for the political, economic, and cultural relationship of Japan with Europe and America.

In *Naomi*, Tanizaki receives and applies the lessons of the European decadent movement to create an entirely Japanese sensibility. The decadent movement valued personal freedom without any limit, including the freedom to indulge in the most base desires that brought gratification to the self. This is what Joji, the narrator of *Naomi* does, making his wife, Naomi, into an imperious sexual goddess and himself into her erotic slave. At its most immediate level, the novel can be read as an exploration of the two character's psychologies as they undergo their transformations. This is work that the reader must perform, because neither seems to have much inward personal insight. It may be that there are other layers of material in the book that can be mined by the same kind of hard work on the part of the reader, but even for this excavation the surface layer must be the beginning.

Sexual desire lies at the deepest heart of the human identity. Indeed, in civilized human beings it goes back to our evolutionary origins as animals. (At one point Joji claims that it is the animal in him that loves Naomi.) It is not a surprise, then, that the wish to control sexual desire is a primary concern of the oldest instruments of social control—religion—and its illegitimate but ever-present counterpart, magic. The desire to control sexuality, especially the wish to control sexual partners and to be free of control by them, was always a part of the most ancient magical rituals.

Richard Gordon, in his essay "Imagining Greek and Roman Magic," observes that the sexual spells that survive from the Roman Empire show "men's desire for sexual excitement and their fear that the very act of pleasure is merely another feminine wile." Men, in traditional patriarchal society, were supposed to control women, but in practice it often turned out that they were instead controlled by women, at least as far as sex was concerned. A man

in this position would fear that he was no longer a real man and would turn to magic to try to guard against this humiliation. Surviving magic rituals offer

the thought that the pleasure experienced may outweigh the shame at being so gulled. More important, though, to the general theme is that the subjective experience of the force of desire is represented as something created from outside, manipulable, subject to wile and skill.

Although there is no use of magic in *Naomi* (even if Naomi is frequently called an *enchantress* and similar terms and is once even likened to a fairy-tale fox who can transform herself into a princess), these same concerns are very clearly expressed. Joji uses every rational, modern means to manipulate Naomi and subject her to his will, but the opposite happens, and she becomes the realization of his worst fears. His worst fears are also his most intense desires, as with a person standing on the edge of a cliff and consumed by the desire to jump down it.

Throughout the novel, Joji constantly wavers between worshipping and rejecting Naomi. For example, at one point he offers this analysis of the problem:

My heart was a battleground for the conflicting emotions of disappointment and love. I'd made the wrong choice; Naomi was not as intelligent as I'd hoped. ... My desire for her to become a fine woman was nothing but a dream. ... Bad breeding is bad breeding. ... And so I abandoned my ambitions. But at the same time, her body attracted me ever more powerfully.

When he looks at the matter rationally, it is obvious that Naomi is entirely unsuitable, but then he is stunned by her beauty and is unable to take rational consideration into account. The effect is metaphorically a magical spell that puts him under her control.

The extent of Naomi's control over Joji or, to put it another way, the extent to which their relationship is not based on mutual love and respect but on an eroticization of domination and submission is illustrated by a game that they play several times in the novel. Joji acts the part of a horse and carries her on his back. "'Giddap, giddap!' she cried. For reins, she made me hold a towel in my mouth." This story may seem like a trivial invention, a comic miniature of the deep humiliation that Naomi heaps upon Joji, but is, in fact, a sign of Tanizaki's deep learning in Western culture. The

episode is anything but original. A story circulated in the Middle Ages according to which Alexander the Great had a mistress named Phyllis. She bet Alexander that she could make any man do anything that she wanted. Alexander said that Aristotle, his former tutor, his adviser, and the most learned and respected philosopher in Greece, would be immune to her charms. So they approached Aristotle (as they were all on campaign with the army). Within a few minutes he was crawling about on all fours, and Phyllis was riding him like a horse, complete with a saddle strapped on and a bit and bridle held in his mouth. Alexander had to concede that she had won the bet. Many narrations of the story emphasize that Aristotle fell in love with Phyllis's beauty and therefore would do anything she commanded.

There can hardly be any question that Tanizaki is referring to this story of Aristotle, another old myth (like the story of Cleopatra that he also uses in *Naomi*) that shows the power of woman as a dominatrix to control and humiliate men. Moreover, an important detail of the story is that Phyllis was Indian, a lover Alexander had acquired during his conquest of that country. This detail was invented to make her a type of the exotic Other, a foreigner who combines every dangerous attribute of woman available to male fantasy. Thus the parallel is complete, since Naomi is made to take on the image of an exotic foreigner from the ends of the earth, in this case a Westerner.

While Tanizaki's exploration of the unusual dynamic of Joji's relationship is suitable material for a novel, and not least because it touches on many universal human fears and anxieties, does it also have some other purpose? The reader has to infer much about the characters that Tanizaki leaves unspoken, but is there also some allegorical meaning in the novel that the reader must unravel? Many of Tanizaki's early works embrace the dominance of Western influences in fashionable Japanese culture and are obsessed with masochistic sexuality—topics that were, if anything, more prominent in Japanese tradition than in the West. These subjects are just as prominent in *Naomi* and, indeed, may be called the main themes of that work. However, in *Naomi* for the first time Tanizaki approaches them from an ironic and critical perspective. They become an allegory for the situation of Japan itself in the 1920s.

Joji thinks of himself as a perfectly normal young man, entirely conventional in his feeling and without a trace of decadence. Yet, rather than develop the feelings proper to such a condition toward Naomi, he is led into a degraded and

“His worst fears are also his most intense desires, as with a person standing on the edge of a cliff and consumed by the desire to jump down it.”

humiliating worship of her; the more abusive she becomes, the more powerfully enslaved he is. Within this context it is significant that Joji is aware that the first thing that attracted him to so unlikely a love object was her Western-sounding name and her Western looks. In the most important respects, he remains completely ignorant of her. Given the intensity of his feeling, Joji is strangely distanced from Naomi. He does not know her at all in the way a man in love is usually expected to understand his beloved. Joji proceeds to make her more Western: sending her for English lessons as well as lessons in Western music and dancing. He wants to make her into an image of the West. By the end of the novel, she insists on living in a Western-style house, in a neighborhood filled with Westerners, and starts calling Joji “George.” Eventually, she effectively becomes a prostitute for Western men, which only increases Joji's desire for her.

The pleasure in indulging in masochism in *Naomi*, then, is derived from Tanizaki's worship of the West as the origin of the decadent celebration of eroticism that justifies and conditions his own feelings. As the receiver of Western influence, he must necessarily feel himself in an inferior position, like a student before a teacher. This corresponds exactly to his own innate masochism, which Joji never questions. It may be that Tanizaki himself was not so innocent of self-examination and understanding.

The reader, in contrast, can take Naomi not as a symbol of the West but rather of Japan making itself over in Western fashion. Joji becomes part of the complex. He strongly approves and, indeed, requires Naomi, or Japan, to become something she is not, as if submitting to the West is the highest happiness. Just as the reader sees how hopeless and ridiculous Joji's position relative to Naomi is, Tanizaki perhaps hopes he will see something to criticize also in Japan's cultural surrender to the West and the adoration of everything imported from Europe or America. There is, Tanizaki seems to be

saying, another way Japan ought to be following, one that is authentically Japanese, just as Joji ought to be behaving in a different way than he does with Naomi.

Just as Joji cannot escape his humiliating obsession with Naomi, it must have seemed impossible also to Tanizaki for Japan to really do anything else but submit to a foreign, sexualized, degraded, female Other. If Tanizaki at least sees the problem and the ridiculous position that Japanese culture is in, what of Tanizaki himself? He wore Western clothes every day, he vacationed in the West, he read novels in English, and above all he wrote in the distinctly Western idiom of the modern psychological novel. His own career and the whole effort of his literary contemporaries are all ultimately focused on producing a Japanese literature based on Western models and informed by importing the latest Western trends and fashions (decadence, psychoanalysis, etc.); it need hardly be said that the development of Japan as an industrial economy and an imperialist power is also an imitation of the West (as with Joji's becoming a salary man). Hardly any Japanese ran after the West harder than Tanizaki. Ultimately, Tanizaki is exposing his own humiliation.

Source: Bradley A. Skeen, *Critical Essay on Naomi*, in *Novels for Students*, Gale, Cengage Learning, 2021.

Paul McCarthy

In the following excerpt, McCarthy compares Naomi with Lolita.

To someone interested in both Japanese and American literature, the comparative study of the two great writers Tanizaki Jun'ichiro and Vladimir Nabokov holds almost irresistible appeal. Each stands in the very front rank of the novelists of his own period and country. Each was highly prolific, producing works of startling variety in a number of genres. And each is known to the general public for allegedly scandalous works centering on the theme of sexual obsession. Nabokov's *Lolita* was finished in 1954 and first published by Olympia Press of Paris, known for its erotic offerings, after having been rejected by major American publishers due to the alleged immorality and perversity of its content. It took several years for this modern classic to be published by mainline publishers in England and America. Similarly, Tanizaki had frequent problems with the censors, ranging from interference with his early (and to present-day eyes) completely innocuous *Itansha no kanashimi* in the 1910s to the suppression of *The Makioka Sisters* (*Sasameyuki*) in the

late 1930s due to its lack of nationalistic, militaristic content. But the closest parallel to Nabokov's problems with *Lolita* is to be found in the 1950s controversy surrounding *The Key* (*Kagi*). Partial publication in the journal *Chūōkōron* led to critical charges of obscenity, so Tanizaki decided to alter and abbreviate his original storyline as he completed the work. As Shimanaka Hōji, late president of *Chūōkōron*, has said, we will never know what Tanizaki's originally planned novel would have been like, though it surely would have surpassed in boldness the already daring *The Key* that we now have.

... TWO NOVELS

To turn now to the two novels that are our principal concerns, in Tanizaki's *Naomi*: the middle-class, middle-brow engineer Kawai Jōji discovers a girl working in a cafe and, finding she approximates his ideal "type," establishes a relationship and begins to live with her. The relationship changes greatly over time: when they meet, Naomi is only fifteen, "a beginner—an apprentice, a budding hostess, so to speak," while Jōji is a solid, settled twenty-eight. He insists that his "original plan was simply to take charge of the child and look after her. . . . I was motivated by sympathy for her." His motives, then, are not immediately sexual. Yet he is thinking of the future. Immediately after his declaration of sympathy for the child, he remarks, "The best approach would be to bring a girl like Naomi into my home and patiently watch her grow. Later, if I liked what I saw, I could take her for my wife." In the meantime, however, "Naomi and I would play house, like children." And at first they do indeed literally "play"—at tag, "horsey," and blindman's buff. A stay at the seaside introduces a new and more intimate form of play, as Jōji starts regularly to give Naomi baths; and a year or so later, when the girl is sixteen, the relationship becomes sexual. By now, each seems committed to the other, and a legal marriage takes place, though this is kept secret. Although the two are oddly matched, very different in age, background, and education, there is nothing legally or morally wrong in their relationship, at least on a formal level. Moreover, the element which is shocking to a Western readership—raising a young girl with an eye to marrying her—is a motif familiar to Japanese readers from their great classic *The Tale of Genji*, in which the idealized lover-hero Genji does precisely this with one of the heroines, Murasaki. The classical parallel no doubt functions in part as parody, since Jōji and Naomi's

world is far removed from that of Genji and Murasaki; but the relationship itself has a demonstrable classical precedent, and that of the highest order.

Nabokov's Humbert Humbert follows a similar path in his relationship with Lolita, but the dark and scandalous elements are much stronger from first to last. Humbert comes across his ideal not in a cafe, where men in fact went to look for female companionship, but in the child's own middle-class home in a New England college town. She is not fifteen, but only twelve; and Humbert's interest is romantic/erotic/sexual from the very start. Lolita is a reincarnation of his first love, whom he identifies as "Annabel Leigh," a name we will examine a bit further on. She is the "type" that he has spent his whole life in quest of. A ripe eroticism of description is present from the first moment he catches sight of her: "half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses. It was the same child—the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chestnut head of hair. A polka-dotted handkerchief tied around her chest hid from my ageing ape eyes, but not from the gaze of young memory, the juvenile breasts I had fondled one immortal day. ... I saw again her lovely indrawn abdomen where my southbound mouth had briefly paused; and those puerile hips on which I had kissed the crenellated imprint left by the band of her shorts."

The shift from these erotic imaginings to Humbert's own brand of active "play" is accomplished in a matter of days, scandalously but amusingly. Lolita gets a speck in her eye, and Dr. Humbert is on the spot: "Held her roughly by the shoulders, then tenderly by the temples, and turned her about. 'It's right there,' she said, 'I can feel it.' 'Swiss peasant would use the tip of her tongue.' 'Lick it out?' 'Yeth. Shly try?' 'Sure,' she said. ... Bending toward her warm upturned russet face, sombre Humbert pressed his mouth to her fluttering eyelid. ... My heart seemed everywhere at once."

This rake's progress is interrupted when Lolita's mother, herself in love with Humbert, sends her daughter to summer camp to get her out of the way. Humbert marries the mother to be close to the daughter, but a tragicomic accident removes the mother from the scene. Now Humbert is in the position of foster father; and when, shortly after beginning a long journey with his new stepdaughter, he consummates the relationship, he is guilty not only of statutory rape (for Lolita is much too young to give informed consent) but also of quasi-incest. The sharp consciousness of both legal and moral guilt

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casts its shadow over the bulk of the novel, complicating and darkening the scenes of both lyric-erotic passion and parodic comedy. Nabokov's novel is, as a result, finally much darker in tone than Tanizaki's, and riddled with more unsettling ambiguities.

The two heroines, again, are alike in some respects but very different in other, more significant ones. Each is portrayed as naive and uneducated, yet capable of great cleverness when it comes to deceiving their older lovers. Jōji's preferred metaphors for Naomi are, in the first part of the novel, animal ones. She is compared to a "caged bird," "an alert dog," "a wild animal," and an "unruly colt." Later, when Naomi is nineteen and is proved to have been unfaithful to Jōji with several different men (including, worst of all, a foreigner), Jōji thinks of her as "a harlot ... this faithless, defiled woman," "this despicable slut." When at last he decides to throw her out, his description runs: "Naomi looked like evil incarnate as she stood there. Her face was the perfect expression of a whore's defiant look." And so he beats her, calling her "Dog! Fiend!" as he drives her from his house.

But within an hour or two, his feelings begin to change radically: "Little by little, the loathsomeness changed into an unfathomable beauty. ... [Her face] was evil incarnate ... and at the same time it was all the beauty of her body and spirit elevated to its highest level. ... How could I have turned on that awesome goddess?" Here, what some critics have termed Tanizaki's diabolism (*akumashugi*) comes into play. The very fact of "evil" (accepting for the moment Jōji's highly biased judgement of Naomi) renders the other more beautiful. Instead of condemning or despising the other, the self kneels down in worship. This self-abasement expresses

itself concretely in masochistic, fetishistic terms that are also regarded as typical of Tanizaki: “In the excess of my love, I got down on all fours and crawled around and around the room as though her body were resting firmly on my back even now. And then ... I went upstairs, took out her old clothes, piled them on my back, put her socks on my hands, and crawled around that room too.” Continuing in this literally idolatrous vein, Jōji goes on to compare the now-absent Naomi to “a Greek statue or a Buddhist image ... a work of art,” which inspires in him “a deep, religious sense of gratitude.”

In time, and after many vicissitudes, Naomi and Jōji begin to live together again, through very much on *her* terms this time. In this, the last section of the novel, another descriptive motif that was present from the beginning now emerges with new emphasis: Naomi as a foreign, white goddess. From the first, she had reminded Jōji of the Hollywood film star Mary Pickford, and he had assured her that she looked Eurasian. Now she is described in terms of “a marble statue of Venus,” with a “white body in a powerful halo, setting her off from the pitch-darkness around her.” Her skin, “a pure, vivid white,” is kept free from hair by careful shaving, a novel practice sanctified by the example of “Western” or “American women.” Moreover, under the new regime, Naomi declares that “from now on, I’m going to spend my time with Westerners. They’re more fun than Japanese.” Poor Jōji can only submit. Then there is the matter of residence. Naomi insists on living on the Bluff in Yokohama, in “a Western house on a street where Westerners live,” properly equipped with bedroom, dining room, cook, and houseboy.

Naomi, of course, gets the kind of life she wants, spending her days as a lady of leisure. After she has applied “white makeup to her entire body,” she goes out with new friends with names like McConnell, Dugan, and Eustace. “She seems strangely Western as she goes around spouting English and making herself agreeable to the ladies and gentlemen at a party. Often I can’t make out what she’s saying. Her pronunciation has always been good. Sometimes she calls me ‘George.’” The reader will be smiling at this, but the narrator-protagonist is ready for that. Laugh or draw a moral, whichever you like, he says in the novel’s last lines. Thirty-six-year-old Jōji is still madly in love with his twenty-three-year-old Naomi. It is—in a Tanizakian sense, certainly—a kind of happy ending. ...

Source: Paul McCarthy, “Tanizaki’s *Naomi* and Nabokov’s *Lolita*: A Comparative Essay,” in *The Grand Old Man and the Great Tradition: Essays on Tanizaki Jun’ichiro in Honor of Adriana Boscaro*, edited by Luisa Bienati and Bonaventura Ruperti, 2009, pp. 131, 134–37.

Thomas LaMarre

In the following excerpt, LaMarre discusses Tanizaki’s involvement with film and how this is reflected in his stories and novels.

In the late twenties and early thirties, after his move to western Japan, Tanizaki wrote a number of essays about Kansai, typically in comparison to Kantō or eastern Japan, such as “On Behalf of Kansai Literature” (*Kansai bungaku no tame ni*, 1927), “Comparisons of Taste in Kantō and Kansai” (*Tōzai aji kurabe*, 1928), “Forms of Beauty in Kantō and Kansai” (*Tōzai bijin*, 1929), and “Speaking of Kansai Women” (*Kansai no onna o kataru*, 1929). “Love and Sexual Desire” follows a similar pattern. It first appeared in 1931, in the April through June issues of the journal *Fujin kōron* (Ladies Public Review), one of a number of women’s reviews founded in the Taishō era, spurred by the emergence of the new woman. *Fujin kōron* aimed ostensibly to raise women’s intellectual consciousness and awareness of social issues, largely with articles written by illustrious men like Tanizaki. Ostensibly in keeping with the journal, Tanizaki builds on contrasts between eastern Japan and western Japan, in order to raise awareness about the virtue of the traditional Oriental woman versus new or Westernized woman. True to his bent, however, Tanizaki ultimately defends Oriental modesty on the basis of its superior capacity for perversity and pornography.

“Love and Sexual Desire” is one of a handful of Tanizaki essays that remains popular today, frequently appearing in paperback anthologies of his non-fiction writing. Usually, it is grouped with such essays as “An Account of Laziness” (*Randa no setsu*, 1930), “In Praise of Shadows” (1932-33), and “Thinking about Tokyo” (*Tōkyō o omou*, 1934). These essays are thought of as the finest expressions of Tanizaki’s desire to return to traditional Japanese aesthetics. One of the hallmarks of these essays is that they consistently treat the difference between Kantō and Kansai as comparable to the difference between Occident and Orient. Tanizaki associates Kansai with traditional arts and literature, such as ukiyo-e, jōruri or bunraku, Noh drama, and Heian tales (*monogatari*), as well as Chinese letters. Tokyo and the Kantō region he associates with modern arts and activities, such as cinema and sports and

electric lights. It is such associations (Kansai = the Orient = traditional aesthetics) that have encouraged the “great change” theory discussed in the Introduction.

The great change theory sees in such essays a process of maturation in which Tanizaki outgrew his youthful infatuations, turning away from the West toward Japan’s traditions. That is to say, the great change or “return to Japan” theory sees in Tanizaki’s career a movement toward national particularism or cultural nationalism. This was a particularly welcome interpretation of Tanizaki in the Cold War era, for he appeared as a good nationalist, one who asserted national identity in a purely cultural register without militarist overtones. Seidensticker for one took issue with the great change theory, suggesting a smaller, selective change theory in which Tanizaki retained those Western things suited to his traditional aesthetics. Seidensticker, in effect, made clear that cultural nationalism was not in the least incompatible with modernization or Westernization. He built on what was already implicit in the great change theory: the compatibility of cultural nationalism with modernization. Rather than a simple rejection of the West, cultural nationalism involves an internalization and stabilization of modernizing processes associated with the West. Cultural nationalism is entirely compatible and frequently complicit with Western universalism. In recent years, as Japan Studies have cast a more critical eye to Japanese nationalism, some commentators have begun to question the idea that Tanizaki’s interest in traditional aesthetics constitutes a straightforward manifestation of cultural nationalism, a simple return to Japan. After all, for all its endorsement of an aesthetic of Oriental sexual modesty, an essay like “Love and Sexual Desire” is full of humor, parody, and perversion. It is not surprising that some readers see Tanizaki’s perversity as subversive of Japanese identity and cultural nationalism.

... In his collaborations with Thomas Kurihara in the early 1920s, Tanizaki strove to produce films with such moments of cinematic shock to the body, of pure affect. He especially favored overlap dissolve to convey such shock. Even in the rather anodyne comedy *Amateur Club* the relation of rupture and contact at the heart of cinematic experience began to evoke a certain historical relation: an image of the heroine in modern dress dissolves into one of her in traditional dress, such that the two temporal references momentarily coexist visually. *The Lust of the White Serpent* explicitly made this cinematic experience of the coexistence of past and

present into one of terror. This is a logic of the cinematic relation in its historical register, in which it figures at once as rupture and contact between historical moments. It thus entails the co-presence or coexistence of apparently incommensurable times, rather like Benjamin’s dialectical image, which also involved a shock to the body.

On the level of narrative, Tanizaki experimented with a similar problem. On the one hand, he adhered to the logic of the continuity script, with its conventions for cutting between different times and places, and for building actions progressively to a resolution. The final scene of *The Lust of the White Serpent*, for instance, structurally recalls a prototypical Western or adventure film. And it is clear from his later remarks on the novel that his work on continuity scripts had an impact on his sense of narrative. In particular, he argued that the novel should employ geometrical, architectural plots with parallel crosscut actions. On the other hand, he countered the progressive narrative movement associated with crosscut actions, mostly by multiplying temporal frames of reference. In *The Lust of the White Serpent*, we see a man in the past encountering a ghost from yet another past, which makes for three temporal frames. Tanizaki strives toward a moment in which the spectator experiences all three at once, and experiences the movement between them. Analogously, Tanizaki suggested in his notes to the published screenplay that readers might find it interesting to compare the screenplay with the film, and both with the original story. One is invited to read three versions, in three different media, in relation to one another. This logic is one of layering temporal frames, in order to produce moments in which their frames prove unstable, and the different times are suddenly experienced all at once. This layering of time frames (or reading between versions) does not result in progressive movement. Rather, the story coalesces around moments of shock that collapses the boundary between apparently different layers. A prime example is the dissolving of the face of the good wife into that of the bad wife (the serpent woman) in *The Lust of the White Serpent*. One consequence of the coexistence of different temporalities with moments of shocking collapse is an abyssal movement of potentially infinite regression. In a sense, one is asked to return to the original but the original has changed in relation to its versions, becoming another version.

In sum, Tanizaki’s sense of the structural potential of traditional or “classical” literature owed much to what has come to be known as “classical

***“How are we to assess
this denunciation of the
modern (cinema and the new
woman) in favor of tradition
(traditional arts and literature,
and the Oriental woman)?”***

film style.” For Tanizaki discovered the tension inherent in narrative architectures based on crosscutting parallel actions. He found that the story could at once move resolutely forward (interweaving actions toward a final resolution) and backward (spiraling into the abyss of an enigma or traumatic origin). The thrill of his film stories derives from the sensation that we are moving forward toward the resolution of some mystery, yet the enigma expands and deepens as we approach. Thus, I previously suggested that his narrative style could be said to combine the logic of the hermeneutic circle with that of psychoanalytic trauma. In such stories, there is always a figure that allows the story to move forward and backward, who is, literally, a pivotal figure. Usually, the pivotal figure is a woman, or rather, a woman-image that is somehow autonomous of the woman who served as model. Prime examples are the snake-woman in *The Lust of the White Serpent*, the mermaid in “The Mermaid’s Lament” and the actresses in “Mr. Aozuka’s Story” and “The Tumor with a Human Face”. Typically, such figures appear to exist in two realities at once. The pivotal figure is at once snake and its woman-image, mermaid and its woman-image, or actress and her woman-image. She is always somehow double. She is two things at once. Thus the problem of original and copy, or thing and image, proved central to Tanizaki’s forward-and-backward spiraling narratives. Tanizaki twisted this Platonic problem of the image, with the fetish. With the fetish, he continually sought to confuse the priority of the original and to establish the autonomy of the image or copy. Is the snake-woman originally a snake or a woman in our experience of her?

By the time of “Love and Sexual Desire,” he had begun to attribute the confusion of original and copy to traditional, Oriental aesthetics, rather than to cinema. He writes of images of the Eternal Woman that appear autonomous of any original, whose original can no longer be located except in “tra-

dition.” As his film work attests, however, this priority of image over original derived from cinematic experience. Or at least, it was through cinematic experience that Tanizaki explored and consolidated this aesthetics of the autonomous image (that is, the fetish). And the aesthetics of traditional images in essays such as “In Praise of Shadows” and “Love and Sexual Desire” derives from Tanizaki’s fascination with the operations of the cinematic image. How are we then to interpret his overt denunciation of cinema, especially of Western cinema? And there is also his rejection of the dream of the “new woman” associated with cinema and with the modern. How are we to assess this denunciation of the modern (cinema and the new woman) in favor of tradition (traditional arts and literature, and the Oriental woman)?

Note that Tanizaki continues to use cinema as a point of reference. Cinema and Oriental aesthetics are still in relation. The important question then is, “What kind of relation is it now?” In many ways, the relation between cinema and Oriental aesthetics in “Love and Sexual Desire” follows directly from that announced in “The Pursuit of Chinese Things.” What is overtly denounced is secretly retained and repeated. The logic of this relation is that of disavowal. Disavowal works to displace the secret desire, to sustain and conceal it. It is secretive repetition. The difference between “The Pursuit of Chinese Things” and “Love and Sexual Desire” is that, in the latter, Tanizaki explicitly denounces cinema. Yet, as he denounces cinema, he secretly repeats it. It is as if the secret tradition of Japanese aesthetics was cinema. Suddenly, the Oriental tradition appears always to have been secretly cinematic.

Throughout the essay, for instance, Tanizaki delights in establishing a secret tradition of sexual desire behind Japanese aesthetics. Oriental modesty has kept this sexual tradition secret, because the Japanese, as Orientals, prefer to keep their passions hidden. Ironically, it is only the arrival of Western attitudes toward sex and love that threaten to make Oriental modesty visible and thus powerless. What then is Tanizaki doing? Is he making the secret tradition visible or guarding its secret? Is he Oriental or Western in his stance? He encounters a certain dilemma: although he writes as an Oriental, he must also adopt the position of a Westerner. Maybe then the true secret is that the Orient’s hidden tradition is always already modern. Its secret is cinema. Tellingly, when he cites the passage from his novel *Some Prefer Nettles*, in which the protagonist watching traditional puppet theater has

the sensation that the doll is coming to life, Tanizaki omits the end of the passage where the protagonist likens the doll to the fairies in the film version of *Peter Pan*. While the uncanny ability to bring the inanimate to life now belongs to traditional arts as well as cinema, it was first and foremost cinema that allowed Tanizaki to explore the implications of such experiences. Simply put, the traditional arts are paradoxically cinematic in “Love and Sexual Desire.” The paradox comes to the fore in one of the crucial passages of the essay, in which Tanizaki brings forth a sado-masochistic scene from Heian literature. This moment of radical exposure of the perversity underlying Oriental modesty comes with this comment of surprise: “This is not a Western love scene but an actual event from the ancient Japanese court.” The surprise is that the scene is shocking enough to evoke a love scene from Western cinema yet it derives from classical literature. It is as if we Orientals have always been (secretly) modern, that is, secretly cinematic. Even more, the “cinema” implicit in our Oriental arts is superior insofar as it is oblique, furtive, and perverse.

It is also telling that Tanizaki’s disavowal of cinema takes the form of a critique of contemporary film, namely, Clara Bow, whom Tanizaki decries for showing too much of “It.” Yet he does not denounce cinema in general, and his disenchantment with Clara Bow is in keeping with his earlier preference for the more modest sirens of the screen, such as Mary Pickford, one of the important models in *Naomi*. American critics of the same era frequently contrasted Bow’s immodesty with Pickford’s modesty. By the standards of the early 1930s, the bathing beauties of the early 1920s, who had inspired Tanizaki to lavish so much attention on his sister-in-law in her bathing costume in *Amateur Club*, appeared quite modest. In fact, Tanizaki had always shown a certain preference for modest women, even among screen sirens. In other words, his defense of Oriental modesty in “Love and Sexual Desire” is not incompatible with his earlier relation to an earlier cinema. Indeed, “Love and Sexual Desire” could be read as nostalgic for a form of cinema that has passed, silent cinema with its more modest heroines. Moreover, Tanizaki’s ideas about Oriental modesty are in keeping with his earlier experiments in perversity. The way in which Tanizaki imagines possibilities for perversity afforded by this alleged Oriental modesty recalls the art work of one of his perennial favorites, Beards-

ley, whose most perverse game was to expose men’s bodies and desires while women remained partly clothed yet complicit in men’s fantasies. Beardsley, too, presented a kind of false female modesty designed to trouble viewers more than nakedness.

In contrast to the open expression of sexual desire and cinematic display of “It”, Tanizaki evokes *iroke*, a sexiness that is expressed with great subtlety and nuance. This evocation of *iroke* recalls Kuki Shūzō’s account of *iki*, a sort of coquetterie deemed characteristic of the Edo geisha, which Kuki offered in contrast to Western love (*ren’ai*). In other words, like Beardsley and Kuki (and Baudelaire, whose ideas about coquetterie inspired Kuki’s *iki*), Tanizaki plays with an exposure of the woman that is not an exposure, a display of sexuality that is not open, a modesty that is perversely exciting. He pursues an exposure of the woman that is not one (not an exposure and maybe not a woman). While he attributes this to Japanese tradition, it entails a thoroughly modern and urban sensibility about seduction that owes as much to Baudelaire and Beardsley as to *The Tale of Genji* or *Onna daigaku*. Tanizaki searches for a seductiveness that goes beyond the logic of veiling and unveiling, for a gesture or attitude or glance that is at once veiling and unveiling.

There is, however, something about Tanizaki’s search for Oriental modesty that differs from Kuki. As suggested by his choice of a scene from Heian literature in which the man submits passionately to torture at the hands of the woman, Tanizaki’s eternal Woman has an aura of violence and trauma about her. She recalls the Freudian logic of the fetish: terrified yet fascinated by the exposure of the woman’s genitals (her castration), the man obsessively recalls that which he saw just prior, her foot, her breast, her face. He looks as closely and fixedly as possible at the traumatic origin (the woman’s genitals) without seeing it, because his gaze is slightly off, deliberately. His gaze deliberately misses the mark. Yet, because he continues to look so closely and fixedly, the fetishist always runs the risk of ruining his fantasy. As a consequence, he must incessantly re-fix or displace his gaze. He strives in vain to find the perfect viewing position or to arrive at the perfectly arranged image, from which he would at once see and not see the woman’s nakedness. Like the two men in “Mr. Aozuka’s Story”, he constructs a series of images or

copies, a series that is necessarily endless if he is to sustain the seductive game in which the woman simultaneously shows herself and does not show herself.

In other words, even though Tanizaki claims that the perversity latent in Oriental modesty is sexier than the “It” of Clara Bow in cinema, his Oriental modesty clearly entails a continuation of the fetishistic operations that he formerly attributed to cinematic experience in the early 1920s. Common to cinematic experience and Oriental aesthetics is the logic of the fetish. The fetish relates them, it allows Tanizaki to displace cinematic experience into Oriental aesthetics, and vice versa. His interest in Oriental aesthetics in the early 1930s is thus at once a break with cinema and a continuation of cinematic experience. While, in the 1910s, Tanizaki was reworking Oriental aesthetics through moving pictures, in the 1930s, Tanizaki is still doing film, but through Oriental aesthetics. The displacement of cinematic experience into Oriental aesthetics is most obvious in his famous “In Praise of Shadows,” in which he lavishes attention on the possibilities for lighting in traditional aesthetics, in an attempt to make a truly Japanese photographic or cinematic image: “One need only compare American, French and German films to see how greatly nuances of shading and coloration can vary in motion pictures. In the photographic image itself, there somehow emerge differences in national character. If this is true even when identical equipment, chemicals, and film are used, how much better our own photographic technology might have suited our complexion, our facial features, our climate, our land.”

Through Oriental aesthetics, Tanizaki strives to invent a Japanese photographic technology that has never been invented. Not surprisingly, then, in his reinvention of traditional Oriental aesthetics, he finds something analogous to the cinematic shock to the body, an experience of the image that is at once pain and pleasure. He writes, “It must have been simple for specters to appear in a ‘visible darkness,’ where always something seemed to be flickering and shimmering, a darkness that on occasion held greater terrors than darkness out-of-doors.” In this respect, it is not so much a new technology that he labors to invent as a new or renewed experience of the cinematic image, an experience of fascination and terror. In the early 1930s, it is as if Tanizaki wishes to continue his cinema-derived aesthetics by other means, via traditional aesthetics. Traditional aesthetics, like the cinematic image, begins to afford

an experience of shock, that is, an experience that combines a sense of rupture and a sense of contact. As in cinema, in traditional aesthetics, Tanizaki continues to explore the possibilities for an *a-modal experience*, an experience in which a sensory modality (seeing) evokes another modality (hearing or touching, for instance). A-modal experience allows for a seeing that is not seeing, a touching that is not touching. Thus, it dovetails with the logic of the fetish (seeing the woman yet not seeing the woman). ...

Source: Thomas LaMarre, “Conclusion: A-modality and the Dialectics of Rivalry,” in *Shadows on the Screen: Tanizaki Jun'ichiro on Cinema and 'Oriental' Aesthetics*, University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2005.

Kirkus Reviews

In the following review, the anonymous reviewer characterizes Naomi as one of Tanizaki's minor works but still a good representation of his common themes.

Tanizaki's first book to be greeted significantly in Japan, written in 1924. Set in the Twenties, among the urban young in a rage to westernize, the story is about Jogi, 30, an engineer, and the bar girl he meets and tries to Pygmalion-ize, Naomi. Naomi is 16 when he takes her in (after asking the most perfunctory permission from her family, who turn out to be brothel owners in any case). She's strikingly beautiful, looks like—to Jogi's eyes—Mary Pickford. But her rehabilitation from bar girl to proper woman is slow, then impossible. She learns English poorly and would rather go to dances or shop for new kimonos. But Jogi can refuse her nothing: her animality is too strong, always asserting itself in their private erotic idyll—the baths he gives her (during which she calls him “Daddy”), the pictures he takes of her dressed and undressed, the way they play horsie. It's only when Naomi rubs Jogi's nose in her infidelity (whoredom, actually) that he rebels and chucks her out. But, of course, not for long: the lady is a vamp. Tanizaki's crystalline style, as well as the piquant kinkiness of his characters' sexual obsessions, is just assembling in this early book, especially in a scene late in the story when Jogi shaves Naomi's face (as per Japanese female custom), or when Naomi's choice of what she does or doesn't bare of her body becomes an artful dance of manipulation. Not major Tanizaki—but with all the flavors set out in a row.

Source: Review of *Naomi*, in *Kirkus Reviews*, September 15, 1985.

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This volume collects the papers from a scholarly conference on Tanizaki that cover every aspect of Tanizaki's literary production.

Gardner, William O., *Advertising Tower: Japanese Modernism and Modernity in the 1920s*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2006.

This historical study examines, through the format of advertising, the Japanese drive to modernism in the 1920s that is both reflected and satirized in *Naomi*.

Tanizaki, Jun'ichiro, "*The Secret History of the Lord of Musashi*" and "*Arrowroot*," translated by Anthony H. Chambers, Vintage, 2003.

This collection contains two of Tanizaki's novels. The first takes the form of a historical investigation based on two newly discovered documents about Musashi, long considered in Japanese as the ideal of the samurai, as outstanding for his personal virtue as his martial skill. The documents are, of course, fictitious and claim to be written by two of Musashi's servants. They detail his unusual sexual practices and desires. *Arrowroot* concerns a grown-up orphan looking for his parents but also involves a search through Japanese history and myth.

———, *Some Prefer Nettles*, translated by Edward G. Seidsticker, Vintage, 1995.

This is considered Tanizaki's most autobiographical work and is often cited as being based on the same network of adultery Tanizaki was involved in with his wife and sister-in-law that can be seen as the inspiration for *Naomi*.

SUGGESTED SEARCH TERMS

Jun'ichiro Tanizaki

Naomi

naturalism AND Japanese novel

I-novel

Kanto earthquake AND 1923

Phyllis AND Aristotle

decadent movement AND nineteenth century

Tanizaki AND film adaptations