JAPANESE PRACTICES AND LORE IN JAMES CLAVELL'S SHŌGUN

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Abstract*: The confluence in James Clavell's Shōgun is between medieval times and legacy, on the one hand, and modernity and change, on the other. This paper first depicts the initial assumptions the narrator Blackthorne starts with in the onerous context in which he finds himself, assessing the culture shock that us as Europeans have in the face of some Japanese actions and practices. Then, as we move along, we explain the way gruesome appearances may be/are contradicted upon a more thorough analysis of the rationale behind certain habits and way of thinking. The aim is to reach, with the presentation of Japanese specificity, the idea that not only is spirituality present in Japanese mentality and acts, but it is also paramount. Despite the initial impression that cruelty and heartlessness characterize the Japanese, an understanding of their identity helps the reader discover in them a type of spirituality that can be deemed as more pervasive and applied in everyday life than in European communities.*

Keywords*: identity, stereotype, otherness.*

1. *Ab Initio* – Stereotypes

Captain John Blackthorne leaves England aboard the Erasmus to go through Magellan Straits, but is thrown on the coast of Japan by a storm. Taken prisoner along with his crew, they withstand humiliation. Thrown in a pit, left hungry without water and light for days, many of them ill with scurvy, they refuse to surrender the weakest of them to be sacrificed so that the others may live. Blackthorne accepts the embarrassments of a samurai urinating on his back and of living by the Japanese habits in a traditional home to save his men. The opposition between the Europeans as civilized good Christians versus the Japanese as cruel (they put the European Pieterzoon in a cauldron, boiling him to death), vengeful, "animals" (Clavell, 2009: 303), thieves (as they appropriate the goods on the ship) instinctual and shameless in their lack of discretion in what involves sexual matters will later be contradicted, as Blackthorne is immersed in their world and sees them with different eyes.

2. Japanese Identity – Practices and Lore

First of all, there is the issue of titles, which are extremely important in Japanese culture. This is visible from the first pages of the novel, where Blackthorne's new name is discussed. Omi-san, Yabu-sama's vassal, the first Japanese he comes in contact with, names Blackthorne Anjin (Pilot) when the others cannot pronounce the Englishman's real name, while explaining to him through an intermediary – a Portuguese priest – that they will call him "san" when he deserves this appellative: "Priest, tell him from now on his name is Anjin—Pilot—*neh*? When he merits it, he will be called Anjin-san." (*ibidem* 318). There is a distinction between *san* and *sama*, pointed out as Blackthorne is corrected by the others in this respect while addressing them and his future concubine, Fujiko: "*Sama*, meaning 'Lord', was an obligatory

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politeness when addressing a superior" (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 206). Also, an explanation for the term "*san*" is provided by Father Sebastio, the Portuguese Jesuit who speaks Japanese, even if not required by Blackthorne, precisely because etiquette is very important: "Here they always put their surnames first. 'San' means 'honorable,' and you add it to all names as a politeness. You'd better learn to be polite—and find some manners quickly. Here they don't tolerate lack of manners." (*ibidem* 81) However, Susan Matisoff warns that *san* and even *chan* – its "diminutive or intimate equivalent" are anachronistic and did not exist in 1600, "being modern colloquialisms" (Matisoff, 1980: 83).

The samurai, the warrior chaste, were the most respectable, with the highest rank. They have distinctive identity markers: "the top of the head shaved and the hair at the back and sides gathered into a queue, oiled, then doubled over the crown and tied neatly" (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 86); also, "Only samurai could wear the two swords—always the long, two-handed killing sword and the short, daggerlike one—and, for them, the swords were obligatory." (*ibidem*). The ancient lord Taikō had decided the chaste system still valid in their days: "samurai above all, below them the peasants, next craftsmen, then the merchants followed by actors, outcasts, and bandits, and finally at the bottom of the scale, the eta, the nonhumans" (*ibidem* 136) because they "dealt with dead bodies, the curing of leather and handling of dead animals, […] [and] were also the public executioners, branders, and mutilators" (*ibidem*). A lesser category of samurai were the wandering *ronin*: "*Ronin* were landless or masterless peasant-soldiers or samurai" who were dishonored or lost their master (*ibidem* 213) and offered their services to anyone who wanted to buy them – an equivalent of modern mercenaries. A different kind were the *ninjas* – kamikaze warriors, apparently regarded as the worse, since they obeyed no code and resembled killing machines with no affect or empathy for their victims. This is how they appear in the attack they perform on Blackthorne, Mariko and Toranaga's samurai while they are guests at the court of Ishido. A *hatamoto* was a title that honored one more than that of samurai: "A hatamoto was a special personal retainer of a *daimyo* who had the right of access to his lord and could wear swords in the presence of his lord." (*ibidem* 324)

A symbolical "Bible" of the Japanese samurai was the traditional *bushido*, or code of conduct. Its precepts are resumed by the samurai Yabu-sama, while he is considering breaking them, as he is a hybrid, a man of progress as well, dreaming of modern warfare in which men could be trained as a unit and allowed to use fire weapons. He is torn between tradition and change, and not the only one in this situation. The main principles enounced in the code are honor, loyalty and courage: "The use of guns was considered cowardly and dishonorable" (*ibidem* 182) and "*bushido*, the Way of the Warrior, […] bound samurai to fight with honor, to live with honor, and to die with honor; to have undying, unquestioning loyalty to one's feudal lord; to be fearless of death" (*ibidem*).

Part of the code and a prerogative of the samurai chaste, so an honor in itself, was killing oneself by cutting open one's insides with one's sword. It was done in order to redeem a sin or shame, shame or dishonor being something that no samurai should and was allowed by his lord to live with – unless the lord wanted revenge and let him live in indignity. Women and children could be samurai as well and were educated, together with men, from early infancy, to perform this ritual killing, both for themselves if necessary and for others seconding them. This form of suicide was called *seppuku* or *hara-kiri* (*ibidem* 191) (the Western world word) and for women took the lighter form of stabbing themselves in the throat with a knife. Seconding one meant cutting the

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sacrificing samurai's head off subsequent to the disembowelment. However, timing was important in this beheading, as the seconding person was supposed to wait a sufficient amount of time so as to highlight the samurai's courage, but not so long as for the latter to enter agony and cry out or physically struggle with pain, manifestations that would be considered as cowardly and unseemly. The significance of *seppuku* is spiritual, despite the gruesomeness of the spectacle. It basically meant the display of the intestines (*hara*) for the others to see – as it always took place in the presence of witnesses – because they were deemed the site where the spirit dwells, and, by showing them, one proved his spirit was pure (Smith, 1980b: 95).

One's sword is endowed with great significance and weight. When during a severe earthquake Toranaga loses his sword in the ground, Blackthorne capitalizes upon this situation in his favor and is able to do so only because of the importance assigned to this object in Japanese lore. Knowing the spot where the sword disappeared in the ground, he tells this piece of information to Mariko's husband, helping him to retrieve it and give it back to Toranaga as a gesture of good faith, which of course contributes to his image before Toranaga. Blackthorne does that in order to extract his own leverage. He means to gain Buntaro's graces, to stop the undying hatred and jealousy he feels coming from the Japanese because he feels his life is in danger, along with his plans as long as the other is watching his every step. Blackthorne means for this constant surveillance and ill feeling to stop.

Superstition says that a sword can be the carrier of bad luck, just as it can represent positive attributes – of Japanese identity, manliness, honor, rank, power – in which respect we can say it is fetishized. The masseur Suwo recounts Yabu-sama the story of Lord Yoshi Chikitada's demise when he was killed by a much younger man with a Murasama blade: "that's what started the superstition that all Murasama blades are filled with unluck for the Yoshi clan" he says (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 209).

Eating habits are particularly divergent. The Japanese eat raw fish and rice, soup and pickled vegetables, as Mariko explains to Blackthrone (*ibidem* 1037-8). They are a numerous population and the reserves of the land are scarce for such numbers of mouths to feed, as only one fifth of the land can be cultivated. The other reason for eating light is that frugality represented a virtue. It went hand in hand with values such as self-restraint, appreciation of life's favors even when they are small and rare, delicacy, politeness etc. meat eating was also implicitly forbidden by Buddhism, through the imperative against taking life. This imposition was closely observed only by the Buddhist clerks, and adapted to their needs by other segments of society, who were disallowed to consume meat coming from four-legged animals; samurais sometimes served hunting game meat (Smith 1980a: 117-8). However adaptable the diet of the Japanese might have been in the reality of the 16th century, it stood in stark contrast with the Europeans', whose excesses are depicted in Clavell as well (for instance when Mariko visits the Portuguese ship) (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 1216).

The rituals of bathing in very hot water in bathtubs are followed by the equally ritualistic massages. The ritualistic-spiritual component and the fact that baths are not merely destined to clean the body are suggested by the way the Japanese first sit on a chair where their whole body is being soaped and rubbed, only afterwards entering the tub. This pleasure and leisure activity is therefore not only for the senses, but also a type of spiritual cleansing. The massage that usually follows is again a form mixing physical satisfaction with a relaxation of the mind. It targets very practical ends: keeping one's body fit, so as to withstand the daily perils; relaxation before and in preparation of/enabling a continuous state of guard and readiness for confrontation and war;

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maintaining a balance of one's mind to keep it clear. Besides, during the massage, one has the occasion to meditate, against the unique background provided by a state of wellbeing, which is more auspicious for that than states of distress, when judgment can be impaired. That massage is an art and a form of medical (and not only) investigation is what we are suggested as a result of the diagnosis that Suwo, the old blind man giving Yabu-sama this treatment, is able to give only after a few minutes: "His fingers were telling him to beware of this man, that he was dangerous and volatile, his age about forty, a good horseman and excellent sword fighter. Also that his liver was bad and that he would die within two years. Saké, and probably aphrodisiacs […]." (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 207-8) This almost obsessive cleanness of the Japanese opposes the practices of the Europeans in the same area of living. Blackthorne remembers the shabby house where he lived with his wife, Felicity, and children, how they never changed their clothes or bathed, ending up dirty, ill and dying before their time, oppressed by an obsession with sin and leading their lives in misery and dirt convinced they were paying for their transgressions, in the religious sense of the term (*ibidem* 1992-6).

Along the same line of preservation of body health and comfort in order to gain a balanced mind, sexuality holds an important role. Firstly, the Japanese keep indeed an official wife, but are permissive as far as hiring the services of prostitutes. Moreover, they see no harm or deviance in homosexuality, multiple sexual partners simultaneously or even zoophilia. Yabu engages in sexual activities with Kiku and a boy at the same time. When Mariko offers Blackthorne a boy to sleep with, causing the latter to almost have an attack because he feels furious and insulted with what in his view is sodomy, "Her smile was guileless, her voice matter-of-fact" (*ibidem* 936). How great is the cultural gap is visible in Oan-san's reaction upon witnessing Blackthorne's fury as a result of the question asked. He cannot understand the European's anger and the only thing he can think of is putting it down to a potential lack of politeness in Mariko's manner of asking, Blackthorne's not having "pillowed" for so long (*ibidem* 937), or impotence (*ibidem* 940). One of the older samurai, sharing Omi-san's cultural gap with the Englishman and trying to help, makes another suggestion with the same honest naivety: "Oan-san, perhaps he's one of those that likes dogs […] dogs and ducks. […] Maybe he wants a duck." (*ibidem* 940-1)

Sexual practices involve various "pillow instruments" (*ibidem* 1980) – the equivalent of modern sex toys – which are resorted to naturally and commonly. No sense of shame accompanies any of the above. Mariko shows some of them to Blackthorne. About *harigata*, or ivory and plastic penises, she explains to him how they are the best part of a man without the bad parts (*ibidem* 1984), exceeding men in "sufficiency", devotion, the fact that they can be "rough or smooth" and "they'll never tire of you, like a man does". Then she introduces the "*konomi-shinju*, Pleasure Pearls", for both men and women – four jade beads on a silk thread (*ibidem* 1985); the "*himitsu-kawa*, the Secret Skin", a ring to prolong erection (*ibidem* 1988) and the "*hiro-gumbi*, Weary Armaments, thin dried stalks of a plant that, when soaked and wrapped around the Peerless Part, swell up and make it appear strong" (*ibidem* 1988-9).

Not only are the sexual encounters described above a common practice, but the Japanese also relate them to spirituality and art. The women from the Floating World/Willow World are meant to help men and themselves to both celebrate life and remember the transitory and dream-like nature of their existence. They are educated, and the members of the hired services are, more often than not, singing, playing an instrument and impressing with the delicacy and accuracy of their manners and ladylikeness. These elements are all part of the cult they have for beauty and detail.

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Using sexual toys to prolong the climax is a duty, as during that brief moment "we mortals are one with the gods" and "any means to stay one with the gods for as long as possible is our duty, *neh*?" (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 1981).

Interest in detail is also manifest in the tea ceremony (*chanoyu*). Evolving from *za* group arts, ostentatious medieval social events, the necessity for *yûgei* or "elegant pastimes" emerged, people being expected to be competent in aesthetic activities such as the tea ceremony (Surak, 2011: 177). For political and military leaders it constituted a statement of power, and a way to acquire legitimacy through association with aristocratic values and practices and concepts such as authenticity and good breed (through the use of precious utensils passed on as inheritance from one generation to another) (*ibidem* 178). At mid-sixteenth century, the practice extended from elite tea salons, where truly valuable utensils were used, to the commoners who used rougher dishware.

The *temae*, or steps taken in the making and serving of tea (*ibidem* 183), are visible in Buntaro's ceremonial when he prepares tea for Mariko. Also, the "innovative incorporation of found objects" (*ibidem* 185), meant to show the organizer's creativity and originality, as the arrangements had to be unexpected, is mastered by Buntaro, showing him a more sensitive side and making him a round character, showing him in a different light than that of a brute. Buntaro uses specific utensils that are exquisite not by their material value, but by being extremely old and authentic, like the "small earthenware tea caddy of the T'ang Dynasty" (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 2195). The movements and gestures have to be both delicate and accurate. There is a sequence that needs to be followed properly: he adds a spoonful of cold water to cool the drink for Mariko, she takes symmetrical sips, finishing the amount in her cup in two series of three. The second portion is politely refused for Buntaro to drink, as politeness requires, and after the third and the fourth cups, which she accepts, she refuses the others out of the same polite etiquette that needs to be observed (*ibidem* 2196). Beforehand, Buntaro cleans the floor, the flagstones that compose the little path to the outside door on the veranda and the garden: "He scrubbed and broomed and brushed until everything was spotless, letting himself swoop into the humility of manual labor that was the beginning of the *cha-no-yu*, where the host alone was required to make everything faultless." (*ibidem* 2201) Then, he sprinkles water on the flagstones to make it emulate fresh dew and rearranges some lanterns to create the perfect lighting; the pieces of charcoal are meticulously placed in the form of a pyramid and there are small pieces of iron put in the kettle to intensify the hissing sound of the boiling water (*ibidem* 2202). We find out, from his thoughts, that the second perfection required by the *cha-no-yu* after cleanliness is simplicity, and the third suitability for the guest in question (*ibidem* 2203). He uses only white flowers with a single drop of water on one leaf, placing them on red bricks, which suggests the alternation of summer and autumn, of death/sorrow and physical and spiritual rebirth, the single water drop reminding one that there are tears but they eventually vanish (*ibidem* 2203-4). Mariko ritually washes her hands before entering.

In preparing tea for Mariko, Buntaro both asserts and denies his superiority. On the one hand, he appears as the better of the two, as his gesture reinforces male authority by functioning as a reminder that the tea ceremony was destined initially exclusively to males (Surak, *op. cit.*: 190-1). On the other hand, it is a leveling between them, making them of the same status: "At a *cha-no-yu* all were equal, host and guest, the most high daimyo and merest samurai. Even a peasant if he was invited." (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 2203)

Instances of philosophy and spirituality are *wa* "*wa*, your harmony, your 'tranquility,'" (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 1855) and karma. Karma is described by Clavell himself:

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> Karma was an Indian word adopted by Japanese, part of Buddhist philosophy that referred to a person's […] fate immutably fixed because of deeds done in a previous life, good deeds giving a better position in this life's strata, bad deeds the reverse. Just as the deeds of this life would completely affect the next rebirth. A person was ever being reborn into this world of tears until, after enduring and suffering and learning through many lifetimes, he became perfect at long last, going to nirvana, the Place of Perfect Peace […]. (*ibidem* 615-6).

Buddhist teachings were gradually imported from China by the Japanese starting with the fifth century. Firstly, two of the most important implications of the theory of karma are of course reincarnation and the concept that there is no injustice in the world, since one can explain one's misfortunes and happiness in relation to one's worthiness, or rather the worthiness and level of evolution of one's soul. Secondly, there is a certain peace of mind that comes with the understanding of the concept, as well as peace before death. Thirdly, another consequence is valorizing beautiful and fleeting things and a *carpe diem* attitude of enjoyment of the moment without, nevertheless, giving it more importance than it has, but keeping awareness of its volatility. This attitude translates in the repetition of key phrases like: "leaving karma to karma", "karma is karma", or "karma, neh?", or simply invoking the word "karma", words and expressions that become leitmotifs in the story. Leaving karma to karma is connected with the Zen approach, which encourages one to leave aside pessimistic thoughts about the past evil catching up with the present and negatively influencing one's life, and to seize the moment, also because one cannot influence or has no control over what happens at present. Elements of this philosophical core are compartmentalization and a yielding attitude, of surrender to the higher forces, as Mariko advises Blackthorne (and, as he remembers her words in a difficult moment of indecision, they help him relax): "'Be Japanese, Anjin-san, you must, to survive. Do what we do, surrender yourself to the rhythm of *karma* unashamed. Be content with the forces beyond your control. Put all things into their own separate compartments and yield to *wa*'" (*ibidem* 2016)

The word karma may acquire contextually various layers of meaning. Sometimes when characters pronounce the word, the meaning appears to be rather close to that of resignation and chagrin, a stance of "it can't be helped" (*Shigata ga nai*) rather than the full understanding of the philosophical compass of meaning for the term. In other situations, the word karma is brought up with the meaning of "destiny", or "it was my/his destiny", something immutable, preordained and therefore unavoidable. An example is Toranaga's rhetorical speech at the end of the novel, when he tells the reader he was destined to be a shogun, even though, he leaves to be understood, he did not intently pursue this goal.

During a conversation Mariko sums up one important aspect of Japanese philosophy: the need to withhold from the seven emotions: "*Karma* is the beginning of knowledge. Next is patience. Patience is very important. The strong are the patient ones, Anjin-san. Patience means holding back your inclination to the seven emotions: hate, adoration, joy, anxiety, anger, grief, fear." (*ibidem* 1854)

Some exercises that Westerners may deem silly or meaningless are in Japanese culture connected with patience. Two interesting examples are watching a stone grow or drinking imaginary *sake*. Sunset watching or listening to and identifying the various sounds of rain pattering have a similar purpose. Another aim envisaged by these exercises is obtaining "privacy", as Mariko so astutely explains to Blackthorne, when she says they are taught from childhood "to disappear within ourselves" or "grow impenetrable walls" or "a limitless maze" (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 1717). The alternative, in a

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world of thin walls and crowded areas, would be to "go mad and kill each other and ourselves" (*ibidem*). Keeping the distance is achieved though excessive politeness as well, not only through exercises of imagination and patience: "Don't be fooled by our smiles and gentleness, our ceremonial and our bowing and sweetnesses and attentions. Beneath them all we can be a million *ri* away, safe and alone." (*ibidem* 1719) She resorts to a poem and the metaphor of the "Eightfold Fence" (*ibidem* 1720) to explain the symbolical distance they put between themselves and the others. Living everyday with a barrier from the other also means making peace with the idea that one is actually alone in the world. Being at peace with one's solitude and smallness in the universe entails having no great expectations and attachments, and brings along the appreciation of beautiful details, small favors and minute instances of joy.

Poem writing reflects the philosophy of the entwinement of literary interest (calligraphy and poetry composition) and military practice – the *bun* and, respectively, the *bu* (Smith *op. cit.*b: 90). The models for the interest in the art of literature were the class of Japanese courtiers and the Chinese learned people (*ibidem*). The Japanese cope with dramatic – which usually means violent – events by conferring them meaning through the practice of dedicating them poems, to mark both their existence and the lesson learnt.

While in the garden, listening to the screams of a man boiling in a cauldron, Yabu notices a petal falling from a tree and thinks of a poem to capture his feeling and the two elements that compose the context he lives and his surroundings: "Beauty/Is not less/For falling/In the breeze//" (Clavell, *op. cit.*: 244). The poem expresses the fact that all life is fleeting. He actually dedicates some verse to the man's pain separately, at Omi's suggestions: "If you allow/Their chill to reach/Into the great, great deep,/You become one with them,/Inarticulate//" (*ibidem* 268). There is also the custom of making up a poem on the eve of one's death, as Yabu does, as well as Takatashi, when he realizes he will die by drowning during the high tide, after descending on the beach from the height of some cliffs, in an attempt to save the Portuguese Rodrigues, who had gotten tangled in some weeds: "How beautiful the sea and the sky and the cold and salt. He began to think of the final poem-song that he should now, by custom, compose. He felt fortunate. He had time to think clearly." (*ibidem* 509-510) Taikō's death poem is revelatory of the Japanese philosophy at large: "Like dew I was born/Like dew I vanish/Osaka Castle and all that I/have ever done/Is but a dream/Within a dream//"; it again points to the transience of human existence, to the way people are like small specks of dust in the vastness of the universe, unimportant if regarded from this angle. We find out that the game of continuing or replying to one's versified thoughts with another rhyme is popular among samurai, and witness a sample of it in the dialogue between Mariko and Toranaga (*ibidem* 1811, 1813-4). The poem told by the old Gyoko to Mariko has the value of a statement and a threat at the same time: "When I die,/don't burn me,/don't bury me,/just throw my body on a/field to fatten some empty-/bellied dog//" (*ibidem* 2397). It states the fact that she is not afraid to die, in case she reveals the affair between Mariko and Blackthorne and, as a consequence, Mariko will have her killed. Also, by defying Mariko she implicitly threatens her that she might say what she knows about the affair. Mariko's strategy, of provoking a commotion in Taikō's land, is described by Toranaga as a "poem" (*ibidem* 2923). This naming synthesizes Japanese view of poetry, as extremely rich in meaning and full of interconnections waiting to be inferred and discovered. If a poem can, metaphorically speaking, be the equivalent of a series of logical actions linked by causal relations, it can be the equivalent and mirror of life itself – brief, passing, and at the same time beautiful, harmonious full of substance.

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Death is seen as a natural, ineluctable part of life and thus fear of it becomes absurd in the eyes of the Japanese. By contrast, Europeans, who are afraid of this experience, try to make themselves as numb in the face of it as possible so as not to suffer pain for or awareness of their demise: "we have devised, especially through modern medical technology, to anesthetize ourselves as much as possible as we die. In vivid contrast, seppuku if anything heightens the dying person's awareness of his or her death: it makes dying […] unusually *conscious*" (LaFleur, 1980: 73). However, LaFleur warns against stereotyping in his discourse, saying that things are not black and white and that various shades of grey need to be taken into account when it comes to attitudes to death in both cultures. The Japanese must have had fears in the face of death despite the popularity of the *bushido*, just as Europeans must have mustered some courage before it as Christians. Human instincts for survival and self-preservation play their part as well. Consequently, us as honest interpreters should avoid obtuse generalizations, or to "blunt the edge of too sharp a contrast" (*ibidem*).

3. Conclusions

Despite its occasional deviations from the historical common knowledge about life and habits in the sixteenth-century Japan, *Shōgun* offers a tremendously rich perspective on Japanese culture and civilization of the times. It is thus fruitful reading for any fan of cultural studies, a masterpiece in the way it depicts Japanese society and interactions. The becoming of the main character, who reaches the opposite stand in his outlook on Japan, passing on from complete rejection of it to almost full identification with it, is food for thought as far as binary and stereotypical thinking. We are made aware that the spirituality that seemed to lack completely in the Japanese ways actually permeates all aspects of their lives, as ever-present as breathing. The transformation suffered by the protagonist encourages readers to put themselves in the foreigner's shoes – an exercise through reading that is as valuable as ever in our globalized world.

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