

# A SHORT STUDY OF SIMILES USED BY MICHENER AND KAWABATA

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with thanks to Hisako Mori and Hiroko Yamamoto

Similes are figures of speech which compare two things which are essentially unsimilar. They are used by a writer to make clearer the precise way he wants his subject regarded, to imply associations not present in exact description, and to make his writing more vivid and tangible. Similes are distinguished from other figures of speech such as metaphors and personifications since the subject of the simile is compared with its analogue directly using either of the words "like" or "as."

Similes are likely in universal use. Certainly they are present in American and Japanese literature.

This paper focuses on the use of similes by two popular writers—one American, one Japanese. They are James A. Michener in his book Sayonara and Yasunari Kawabata in his book The Sound of the Mountain (Yama no Oto) as translated into English by Edward G. Seidensticker. I chose these books because both were written by respected authors; both are about Japan so differences in the analogues are less likely to be caused by environmental differences; and both were written in the early 1950's though The Sound of the Mountain was not published in English until 1970.

I realize that a simile found in the English translation may not always represent a simile in Japanese. However, based on Mr. Seidensticker's credentials and independent comparisons of the Japanese and English texts by two Japanese readers, I believe the English is a true enough representation to justify my comparisons.

To begin, observe how both authors use similes to clarify the way they want their subjects regarded.

Early in Sayonara, Michener's main character, Major Gruver, states, "Like a warning flash and without actually thinking the word I blurted, 'Kobe?'" Here, Michener calls to mind the automatic blinking flashers that are temporarily installed along a roadway usually when repair work is being done. Of course, these mechanical flashers do not think, they simply blink on and off according to the pulse of electricity to the bulb. There is no connection or influence from anything else near them. The impression then, that the reader is supposed to gain from the reactions of Major Gruver as he is given a favored military assignment is that surprise makes him respond like a machine.

Later in Sayonara we read, "And then like the wind on a stormy day I completely changed and felt disgusted with myself." If we recall the wind on such a day, we remember how it seems to switch directions often. Just so, the reader realizes that Major Gruver is not always resolute when faced with a problem.

Hence, two aspects of Major Gruver's character, mechanical reactions and vacillation are made clearer.

In comparison, in The Sound of the Mountain we read "...after Kikuko came into the house Shingo's memories were pierced by

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moments of brightness, like lightning." Here, Shingo Ogata, who is Kawabata's major character, experiences uncontrolled bursts of memory. Shingo's memories come less automatically and mechanically than Major Gruver's reactions, but Kawabata uses this simile to clarify the way the bursts happen to Shingo so that the reader has a criterion to assess Shingo's behavior later. More importantly, that we are given an indication of irregular occurrences so we know that Shingo is becoming senile, and thus his patterns of life are no longer regular.

Another time, Shingo hears the "sound" of a mountain, believes it is emanating from a nearby mountain, and thinks, "So small a mound of a mountain, that it was all in Shingo's garden; it was like an egg cut in half." In this simile, the comparison basically concerns shape and size. The mountain is not rugged with jagged peaks, but worn and smooth probably not having any other but the rounded top peak. Also, at least in Shingo's mind, it has diminished in size, seeming to him no bigger than an egg. A size easily fitted into his garden. However, we realize that though the subject of the simile is the mountain, the exaggerated relationship to its analogue reflects the irrational state of Shingo's mind.

So just as Michener's similes reveal aspects of Major Gruver's character, Kawabata's reveal aspects of Shingo's character, and both authors establish some criteria for understanding their protagonists.

Further, Michener and Kawabata both use the simile to convey associations not otherwise present.

Once, when writing about the Takarazuka girls, Michener says,

"...I was told they lived more like nuns in a secluded dormitory." Superficially, Michener is suggesting that these girls are subject to strict rules similar to those observed by nuns in some religious orders. Rules such as not being allowed to have boyfriends or to go out in public alone. But, beyond this, it seems he wants to point out the sense of devotion to the theater that the Takarazuka girls have and to suggest that some have given up much to come to Takarazuka though they have also gained much.

In another simile Michener speaks of Fumiko, the girlfriend of an officer, and he says, "She laughed at this and her voice was high and tinkling like that of a child playing with dolls." Of course, the first impression is to be the immaturity of a child's voice, but we are also given the impression that there may be another childlike quality about Fumiko, perhaps tenderness or innocence.

Kawabata as well uses the simile to imply associations. For example, when Shingo looked at a Noh mask, he saw that "The mouth was slightly open, but there were no teeth ranged behind the lower lip. It was like a flower in bud upon a bank of snow." While this calls to mind a physical picture of the mouth, it also creates a paradoxical image. That a flower could be in bud on a bank of snow is at the same time vivid but illogical, and beautiful but tragic since we feel that the bud must succumb to the cold. We can feel Shingo fight the paradox in his mind. Thus the implied association is a feeling; something not even as tangible as a rule of behavior.

One of Kawabata's similes is closer to the concreteness of

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Michener's. Shingo is speaking of a friend who appeared in one of his dreams. Shingo says, "And yet he strode into the dream like a brave roisterer." Here, we are given an association with a type of person: a lively, jovial, swaggering friend. However, we are then told that the friend died sometime before, and we realize we are left only with the image of how Shingo wants to see his friend or how he now remembers him. The implied associations are muted by the simile being set in a dream.

Likely there are associations implied by the Japanese language or inherent in the culture and reflected by the language that I, as a foreigner, cannot at this point, if ever, comprehend. Other associations may have been changed or lost in the process of translation. However, compared with those in Michener's similes the implied associations in Kawabata's appear to be less explicit and less concrete.

Nevertheless, to some degree, all of the similes found in Sayonara and The Sound of the Mountain make those writings more vivid and tangible.

Michener includes one especially apt simile. Major Gruver and Mike Bailey are walking on the Takarazuka streets, and Major Gruver reflects on his progress:

"I felt like a whale swimming upstream against a flood of minnows for I towered over the people and no matter how far or how fast we walked the same number of Japanese seemed to press upon us."

Now, not all Americans are as tall as Major Gruver, but many are somewhat taller than the average Japanese, and anyone who

has walked in any Japanese city is immediately aware of a seemingly limitless number of people on many of the streets. So while the comparison of a whale and some minnows exaggerates the difference in the sizes of the people, the task of walking on the streets is depicted vividly.

Another of Michener's similes shows a tangible quality through a comparison of Joe Kelly, a man in Major Gruver's company, with a balloon. Very simply it says, "Joe collapsed like a ruptured balloon." Even without knowing the reason for the collapse, we have an excellent image of a person who was vigorous a short time ago, but who is now depressed and defeated. The effect is increased because balloons are familiar to most people.

In The Sound of the Mountain, there is a reference to a plum tree: "He crossed the bridge to the opposite bank, there to look at a plum tree shaped like an umbrella..." An umbrella is standard equipment in Japan, and while it is not standard equipment in America, it is still a familiar item. Hence, the fact that the plum tree no longer has its natural shape but has been pruned to suit the whim of an unknown gardener is made tangible to the reader.

Perhaps the most lucid similes in The Sound of the Mountain involve Shingo's observation of some sunflowers:

"They're fine specimens," he said, "Like heads of famous people."

"The petals were like crowns..."

"The petals were golden like women..."

While the petals are used for two similes which appear quite near to each other in the text, Kawabata uses two different aspects

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of them—shape and color—to keep the images separate and distinct. As with the balloons and the umbrellas, since sunflowers are a familiar flower to most people, the images are more vivid.

In short, to make their writing more sensuous, both authors chose analogues which are well recognized.

Finally, when we compare the entities used as analogues, we find that Michener uses people or some facet of people in 40% of his similes. That is, he uses analogues such as schoolgirls, janitors, or voices. Objects found in nature such as volcanoes, flowers, and ashes are found in 27%, and machinery such as airplane engines and watch springs is found in 16%. The remaining 17% employ miscellaneous items such as balloons and forts.

On the other hand, Kawabata uses people as analogues in 30% of his similes, natural objects in 33%, and miscellaneous items such as crowns and toothbrushes in the remaining 37%. Interestingly, in The Sound of the Mountain, machinery was not used for any analogue even though the book was written during a period of significant industrial activity.

In sum, Kawabata and Michener provide good examples showing of the versatility of the simile since Michener uses it primarily to provide a physical association for the reader, only occasionally being purposely concerned with the implied associations, while Kawabata usually seems equally concerned with the physical and the implied associations. Kawabata's similes also tend to be more subtle. This may be because of the differences in the cultures or the personalities of the writers, but there is also some influence from the stories. That is, Michener's characters are younger, more

abrupt, brash people, while Kawabata's are older and somewhat subdued, and so it follows that the similes would reflect this. Certainly, both writers add concreteness to their writing by using similes.



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