Reading and Feeling with Japanese Literature
The Makioka Sisters by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō

Zoë Pafford, Nina Scarboro, Maddox Fox and Dr. Matthew Mewhinney

FSU | FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

FSU UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY PROGRAM
CENTER FOR UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH & ACADEMIC ENGAGEMENT

Introduction and Background

Esteemed scholar of English literature Suzanne Keen has famously argued that the novel invites the reader's empathy. The research project investigates Keen's argument in the case of Japanese literature. Research assistants read representative works of modern Japanese fiction in English translation, exploring how a Japanese author can invite the reader's sympathy/empathy.

Research assistants were assigned to read *Light and Dark* (1916) by Natsume Soseki, *The Makioka Sisters* (1948) by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, and *Fires on the Plain* (1952) by Ōoka Shōhei . The team kept a digital reading log, where research assistants typed out passages from the text that fit the literature review criteria, learning valuable proper citation skills in the process.

The excerpts reproduced on this poster are our data, illustrating how the Japanese author succeeds inviting sympathy/empathy. During meetings with research mentor Dr. Mewhinney, research assistants sought to figure out what rhetorical devices and literary techniques the Japanese author employs to invite sympathy/empathy from the reader.

Methods

The purpose of the project is twofold: to explore how readers can feel sympathy/empathy through the process of reading literature, and to learn about the current state of this field of research on reader response. Students first read *Empathy the Novel* by Suzanne Keen.

Students read *Light and Dark* (1916) by Natsume Sōseki, *The Makioka Sisters* (1948) by Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, and *Fires on the Plain* (1952) by Ōoka Shōhei.

Students created a reading log in which they wrote down their thoughts about the novel and what literary elements and devices evoked sympathy/empathy:
- Environmental imagery and how it reflects the mood or feelings of the characters
- Human loss and how the characters mourned these losses
- Forms of renewal
- Descriptions of internal thoughts
- Emotional and cognitive relatability

Every two weeks research assistants met with the research mentor to discuss and reflect on the novel.

Resources (Citations)

Keen, Suzanne. Empathy and the Novel. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Natsume, Sōseki. Light and Dark: A Novel. Translated by John Nathan. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013. Originally published as Meian `(1916).

Ōoka, Shōhei. Fires on the Plain: A Novel. Translated by Ivan Morris. Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2001. Originally published as Nobi (1952).

Tanizaki, Jun'ichirō. The Makioka Sisters. Translated by Edward G. Seidensticker. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. Originally published as Sasameyuki (1948).

THE MAKIOKA SISTERS

JUNICHIRŌ

TANIZAKI

"A masterpiece of great beauty and quality." — *Chicago Tribune*
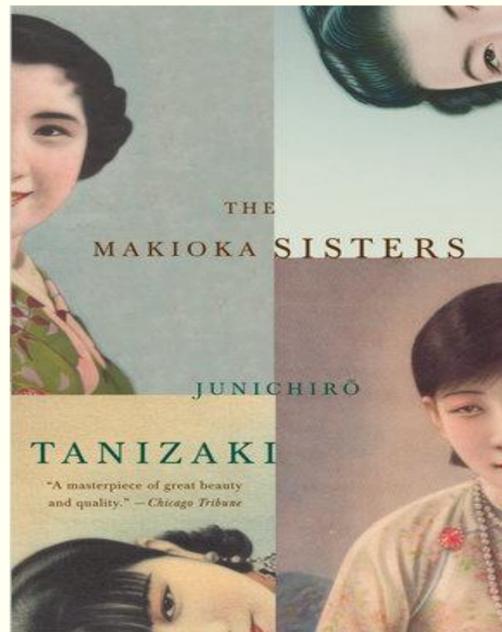
In Osaka in the years immediately before World War II, four aristocratic women try to preserve a way of life that is vanishing. As told by Junichiro Tanizaki, the story of the Makioka sisters forms what is arguably the greatest Japanese novel of the twentieth century, a poignant yet unsparing portrait of a family–and an entire society–sliding into the abyss of modernity.

Tsuruko, the eldest sister, clings obstinately to the prestige of her family name even as her husband prepares to move their household to Tokyo, where that name means nothing. Sachiko compromises valiantly to secure the future of her younger sisters. The unmarried Yukiko is a hostage to her family's exacting standards, while the spirited Taeko rebels by flinging herself into scandalous romantic alliances. Filled with vignettes of upper-class Japanese life and capturing both the decorum and the heartache of its protagonist, *The Makioka Sisters* is a classic of international literature (Cover copy).

Author Methods for Invoking Reader Empathy (Results)

Vivid and Affective Imagery

Readers feel sympathy/empathy for fictional characters through vivid description of a natural disaster, human struggle, and word choice.

> **That waves were thundering from the mountain, piling one on another and breaking over in a violent backwash: that all manner of debris was coming down with them: that nothing could be done to help the people clinging to bits of matting and wood in the torrent** (*The Makioka Sisters*, Book Two, 172).

- The use of imagery and vivid description of **"waves thundering from the mountain"** and **"piling one on another"** creates a powerful visual of an unstoppable, destructive force. The chaotic movement of the water makes the situation feel overwhelming and hopeless.
- The word choice of **"all manner of debris"** emphasizes the destruction, suggesting that homes, belongings, and even bodies are being swept away. The phrase **"nothing could be done"** highlights the despair and helplessness, making the reader feel the agony of watching others suffer without being able to help.
- The presence of human struggle through the image of **"people clinging to bits of matting and wood in the torrent"** portrays the victims' desperation. The fact that they are holding onto fragile, insignificant objects rather than secure life-saving devices amplifies their vulnerability, invoking deep empathy in the reader.

Self-Identification and Socioeconomic Relatability

> **As Itakura rolled over again, the screams were as terrible as before. This time "it hurts" was punctuated with screams of: "I want to die. Let me die;" and "Kill me. Kill me right now."** (*The Makioka Sisters*, Book Two, 316)

- The death of Itakura is meant to be relatable to the reader and to cause a greater impact on the empathy we feel for both Itakura and Taeko.
- By demonstrating Itakura's humanity, with his flaws (in Sachiko's eyes) and vulnerabilities, we can relate to the character more closely.
- By creating a relatable character, who is less of a high social standing than his counterpart, his death evokes more empathy from the reader.
- The word choices in this quote, with the starkness and bluntness of Itakura's words, **"'I want to die. Let me die;' and 'Kill me. Kill me right now.'"**, emphasize the gravity of the situation and force the reader to confront the difficult reality that Taeko's lover is most likely going to die in immense pain and agony.
- It is human instinct to sympathize with someone in pain, and in this situation, someone who is on the edge of death.

Descriptions of Internal Thoughts and Emotional and Cognitive Relatability

> **Sachiko herself and Yukiko sometimes found Taeko treating them as if they were younger than she. It had been wrong of Sachiko, in an excess of affection and concern for Yukiko, to neglect Koi-san. From now on she would give the two of them Impartial care. Koi-san could not die. If she would but come home safely, Sachiko would talk Teinosuke into agreeing to the trip abroad, and they would let her marry Okubata if she liked.** (*The Makioka Sisters*, Book Two, 190)

- The internal thoughts of Sachiko help the reader understand her emotional turmoil and guilt, making her a more emotionally and cognitively relatable character, thus increasing the empathy felt by the reader.
- The tone of the phrase **"Koi-san could not die"** is urgent and desperate, which mirrors the reader's anxiety of her fate.
- The shift in the structure of her thoughts reflects a universal human experience: the bargaining that happens in situations or moments of crisis.
- This reflects the larger theme in Japanese literature that the more relatable a description or experience is to the reader, the stronger the sympathetic/empathetic response is.

Conclusion

Authors can invoke sympathy/empathy in readers through various strategies, such as the use of vivid and affective imagery, fostering self-identification with characters, highlighting socioeconomic, emotional, and cognitive relatability, and providing insight into characters' internal thoughts. These techniques work together to evoke powerful emotional responses, thereby deepening the reader's sense of sympathy/empathy. Future studies could compare passages with highly descriptive, immersive language (like the flood scene) with more neutral descriptions to measure differences in reader engagement and emotional response.