

An Analysis of the Different Attitudes and Factors of the Characters in The Setting Sun Towards the Changes in Circumstances Caused by the Decline of Aristocracy

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Abstract: *The setting sun*, time from one work, because the two different endings in which is an excellent work, telling the story of an old aristocratic family in Japan who gradually fell down after World War II. People can further infer the different degrees of adaptation of Japanese people to the new society at that time. The article made me really obsessed, which is why two characters have almost the same experience but end up in completely different endings, one decides to revolutionize himself and the other decides to commit suicide. Therefore, to investigate what might have caused these two characters' different attitudes toward the fall of the aristocracy became the topic. After reading and researching articles and literature for many times, figuring that gender factors, self-cognition, all these things have a big impact. In this work, through my research, people would get a closer glimpse of the situation of Japan at that time, which also represents the different acceptance of the new world by Japanese people at that time.

Keywords: Japan aristocracy, The setting sun, characters, gender, experiences

1. Introduction

After World War II, the Japanese government made a decision to abolish the aristocracy. Since then, the old aristocracy in Japan has gradually declined. In Japan at the time, the theme of the fall of the aristocracy was the inspiration for many famous writers. *The setting sun* is one of them. In this paper, I have studied the factors that caused the personality difference between the two people, and have found out the main points that caused the personality difference between the two people, and have a preliminary speculation on the adaptation of the Japanese people to the new world at that time. But there are still some questions that have not been studied, such as how exactly these factors make a difference, and there are some small factors that I have not explored. I feel that there are still many points that can be explored and studied in this work, and this article is just a beginning [1-5].



Figure 1: Women of the Japanese aristocracy

2. Background information

In this image, several relaxed women are seen sitting on the ground, engaging in activities like playing the piano and practicing calligraphy. This snapshot captures the early Japanese aristocracy. Yet, this era was short-lived. On September 18, 1931, Japan's actions triggered the September 18 Incident, sparking World War II. Scarce food, soldier casualties, and national misery followed. By 1947, sixteen years after the war began, the Japanese Constitution led to the abolishment of Chinese nationality and other aristocratic institutions, including the Chinese nationality order. During that period, Japanese writers also wrote many works about the decline of aristocrats: 'The Tale of Genji,' 'The River Ki,' and 'The Setting Sun' by Dazai Osamu.



Figure 2: A photo of Japan during World War II

2.1. *The setting sun*

"*The Setting Sun*" is a novella written by Japanese author Dazai Osamu. The novel is set against the backdrop of the postwar chaos in Japan and depicts the life of the falling aristocracy as the sun sets on it.

The story unfolds through the first-person account of Wako and her brother Naoji's diary and suicide note. The main plot revolves around Wako, who has been divorced from her husband for six years. She lives in a villa in the mountains with her mother, who has contracted tuberculosis. Her brother, who was enlisted in the army, returns after a period of absence. However, he leads a wild life and is addicted to drugs.

Kawako falls in love with a married, unsuccessful writer and dreams of bearing his child. Eventually, her mother dies due to illness, and her brother Naoji leaves a suicide note. Wako declares that even if she is abandoned, she will give birth to and raise the writer's illegitimate son, aiming for a moral revolution.

In the novel, Naoji's character is portrayed as dark and depraved. After his return from the war, he spirals into addiction to drugs and alcohol. He indulges in drinking, drug use, and visits to prostitutes. Naoji's language also reflects his strong dissatisfaction and contempt for those who identified themselves as aristocrats in the society of that time.

For instance, he remarks, "Why must he wear such clothes, a simple evening dress? Using honorifics incessantly is sickening... He's just pretending." (p.89) The text repeatedly touches upon aristocracy, underscoring Naoji's fixation on the term. He even writes in his suicide note, "I am an aristocrat."

Naoji refrains from revealing his genuine thoughts to others. When confronted with his bedridden and sick mother, he initially feigns indifference. Yet, his true sorrow emerges upon learning of his mother's tuberculosis. According to the article, he responds with tears in his eyes, asking, "Isn't there any other way?" (p.132)

On the whole, he looks like a surplus in this changing society. Naoji's heart is in pain, and in pain he actively seeks a way out of it. He tried to buy peace of mind by joining in with the world, but his obsession with the aristocracy would not allow him to achieve peace. In the end, the emotional darkness overcomes the light, and Naoji can no longer bear it and chooses to commit suicide.

2.2. Character Naoji

The image of Naoji is the one closest to Dazai himself in the book. Tazai Ji is also, grew up in the old bourgeois aristocratic deep house compound, strong class consciousness. However, his family is rich by speculation, is an exploiting class, and does not belong to the real sense of nobility, which makes him always have a sense of sin in his mind. However, the rich family made it difficult for Dazai to give up the aristocratic class treatment he had received since childhood, so that his noble complex was very serious, and he could not accept the reality was an inevitable result in the era of aristocratic decline. He is also, like Naoji in the article, addicted to alcohol, women, and drugs. Try to disconnect from reality. Tazaiji, like Naoji, was a victim of his time.

When discussing victims, there are also survivors.

Naoji's sister, Wako, stands as a survivor. The book portrays her yearning for noble beauty, her defiance against societal norms, and her desire for life. She undergoes a transformation from an aristocratic daughter to a revolutionary woman of the new era.

After selling her Tokyo residence, she relocates with her mother to a villa. With the departure of their servant, the once-provided clothing and meals become a thing of the past. All household duties now fall upon her and her son. Upon their initial arrival at the villa, an oversight on Wako's part leads to ashes being stacked near the wood stove in the bathroom, resulting in a fire. Faced with this crisis, she is left with no choice but to seek help from a neighbor.

2.3. Character Wako

Wako had an unhappy marriage before, one that was not based on love. Before meeting Uehara, who does not understand love, has been in a state of being blinded by the words of "big men" - love or revolution, all are shameful things.

The accident exposed the lack of life experience, leaving Wako's son helpless in the face of desperation. Yet, what truly shatters Wako's reality is money dwindling, her mother's death, and her brother Naoji's reckless spending. Seeking escape from life's struggles, Wako turns to novelist Jiro

Uehara. She values his money and her feelings for him. Wako's past marriage lacked love. Until Uehara, she was confined by societal norms defined by "important men" and their notions of love and revolution.

For Wako, challenging norms and initiating change becomes her only way out. After a battle, she succeeds, becoming pregnant with the married writer's child. This marks her moral revolution and the awakening of her female consciousness, breaking free from traditional ideals.

3. The first difference

While reading the work, I noticed that the siblings, despite growing up in a similar old aristocratic environment and witnessing their family's decline, have vastly different attitudes and actions afterward. I'm curious about the underlying reasons.

Firstly, Wako and Naoji have contrasting views on aristocracy. Naoji finds the aristocratic corruption unbearable, leading to his alienation from societal trends and eventual marginalization. He expresses his desire for a solitary death rather than being part of a collective downfall.

Naoji believed the actions of that time were self-destructive. He resisted wrongdoing, opting for a solitary path to death. Frustrated by being misunderstood, he felt out of place.

He was aware of aristocracy's corruption and the dark future, pushing him to integrate with the common people. Feeling trapped, he protested through death, seeking solace in his final line, "I am a noble."(p.246)

In contrast, the sister's desire for nobility is a longing for beauty. Her haggard face beams with a beautiful smile. Describing her mother's death, she envisions the Virgin Mary in the Pieta, longing for genuine aristocratic beauty from her mother.

3.1. The second difference

Another significant factor I believe is the influence of gender. This is evident in Naoji's behavior. Despite having limited funds, he would insist on treating others when drinking. His suicide note emphasizes his pride with the words, "I am an aristocrat." (p.270) This reflects his strong sense of self-esteem, unwilling to accept his family's decline and the loss of his noble identity.

The concept of self-esteem is often associated with men and has deep historical roots. Traditional norms favored sons over daughters, valuing men's roles as providers and workers outside the home, while relegating women to domestic chores. This notion of male superiority persisted even as societal views evolved. Today, it's considered embarrassing for a man to depend on a wealthy woman, or to be a stay-at-home father, among other examples. Psychological studies have also established a strong connection between being male and having high self-esteem.

When analyzing the reasons behind Naoji's mindset, his self-esteem is a crucial consideration. He strives to avoid the shame of being financially lacking.

3.2. The third factor

Another pivotal differentiating factor lies in the extent to which they've attuned to their authentic selves.

Naoji, the younger sibling, returned from war to confront the abrupt demise of his family's stature. He initially harbored the notion that this transition might allow him to shed the aristocratic disposition he had long resented. Yet, upon immersion within the common class, he found himself grappling with feelings of helplessness and disillusionment, struggling to reconcile with his new reality.

In stark contrast, his sister, Wako, managed to navigate her altered circumstances adeptly. Initially bereft of a genuine understanding of her intrinsic self, she embarked on an indiscriminate pursuit of an idealized beauty, symbolized by her mother's aristocratic identity. The family's precipitous decline

triggered an existential query, which found its resolution through encounters with both her brother's reintegration and the presence of Mr. Uehara. However, the untimely departure of her mother inflicted a profound wound.

Resolutely refusing to succumb to despondency, Wako emerged as a distinct figure. In contrast to her brother's lamentation, "we possess no financial means, and are bereft of the capacity to summon influential individuals," Wako's proclamation echoed assertively, "I yearn for revolution." This marked a transformative juncture, wherein she reclaimed her identity and expressed an earnest desire to extend aid to kindred souls ensnared in similar tribulations.

Having achieved this self-evolution, Wako displayed unwavering determination in journeying to Tokyo, where she sought out Mr. Uehara. This undertaking culminated in the realization of her aspirations, culminating in the birth of their child. In contradistinction, Naoji's romantic inclination and Mr. Uehara were tethered to existing familial commitments. Regrettably, Naoji found himself stymied in his pursuit of personal transformation. Harboring moral constraints and subjected to the relentless incursion of the superego, he was ultimately unable to manifest his desires. This somber trajectory led to his eventual and tragic demise through suicide.

3.3. Their “revolutions”

Both embarked on revolutions of their own. Brother Naoji: A Tragic Spiritual Revolution.

For Naoji, even though he integrated into the lower echelons in a depraved manner, he remained unable to break free from the twin shackles that tightly ensnared him: the agony of being unable to reclaim his noble status, and the unwillingness to succumb completely to the debasement of the common group.

"What are we guilty of? Is our sin being born noble? Should we be sentenced to a life of fear, shame, and hardship merely due to our familial origins?"

Amidst a profound lack of self-worth and inner faith, the tormented Naoji finally sent out a mournful plea to *The Times* through the act of suicide. He left behind a declaration within his suicide note: "I am an aristocrat!"

In this unforgiving world, he grappled with his fate, but none of the avenues he pursued could grant him the life he yearned for. Failing to find self-worth and meaning in reality, they resolved to combat this crumbling world through death, defending their noble character and dignity. This seemingly sorrowful ending stands as the victory of the spiritual revolution of "being the same as the world," achieved by the noble Zhi Zhi through contemplation and exploration, even amidst the most tragic of circumstances.

3.4. Moral revolution

Sister Wako: The Rebellion of Moral Revolution.

The tragic demise of my brother thrust my sister and me, both bearing aristocratic blood, into the disillusionment of the ideal of "the integration of nobility and commoners." After much soul-searching, Kaz resolved to steer her destiny in a new direction by rebelling against society's old moral standards. She took the initiative to pen a letter, pursuing a novelist hailing from a peasant family. Even though the individual was despicable and already had a family, she persevered, ultimately conceiving each other's offspring through a determined commitment.

Undoubtedly, this marks a moral revolution that disrupts conventional wisdom. Within the traditional framework that exalts female chastity, nothing is more startling than Kazuko's actions—a fading noblewoman becoming pregnant out of wedlock and giving birth to an illegitimate child. The reason for the deep affection between Kazuko and the man lies solely in their initial encounter six

years prior. In an act of mischief, the once-despicable man bestowed an unexpected kiss on Kazuko, illuminating her challenging life with a glimmer of light.

These disparate choices are challenging to judge as right or wrong, and victory seems elusive. Yet, considering the context, it's evident that Dazai's intended message emerges: in an era of transformation, the established social and value systems have crumbled entirely. Amidst this struggle during confusion, genuine victory and complete rebirth seem unattainable. What constitutes a new life? This creation, steeped in melancholy, echoes the decadence of Dazai. But fortunately, like the setting sun, Wako's courageous defiance of moral barriers injects a touch of resplendent brightness into this otherwise somber canvas.

Just as the setting sun fades away, it also signals a new beginning.

4. Conclusion

Through the research, gender factors, as well as self-cognition, or some minor experience differences, have caused two people's different personalities and attitudes towards big changes in life. By reading the work of the setting sun many times and some literature about it, and also studied its author, Dazai Osamu, a deep understanding of this work and a comprehensive interpretation of the two characters are shown in my paper. And from this work, it can simply speculate on the overall picture of Japan at that period. However, it is far from enough. Whether it is the setting Sun or the fall of the old nobility in Japan, there are still a lot to explore. By continuing to conduct more in-depth research and read more works, hoping to discover more in the future.



Figure 3: the book: *the setting sun*

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