

Views Of Suicide In Modern Japanese Literature: A Positive Portrayal In *Nami No Tou*

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[Editor's note: Roxanne Russell, a 2005 Honors graduate of Mary Baldwin College in Asian Studies, received a Fulbright award for a year of research and study in Japan. She is studying the phenomenon of suicide in contemporary Japan, especially as it is portrayed in postwar Japanese literature. Here Russell analyzes the presentation of suicide in one of the stories by noted detective story writer Matsumoto Seicho (1909-1992).]

In the novel *Nami no Tou*, by Matsumoto Seichou, the act of suicide is portrayed in a positive manner through the use of sympathetic characters, natural imagery and language. The suicide of the heroine at the end of the book is highly idealistic and is further aesthetically enhanced by the qualities of her character. Associations of death and beauty combined with the love story preceding the suicide also contribute to the overall romantic quality of her death.

Nami no Tou depicts the love affair of a young prosecutor, Onogi Takao, and Yuuki Yoriko, a mysterious woman who refuses to reveal any information pertaining to her life. From their first meeting they are drawn to each other, and as they grow closer they come to rely on each other completely. They are both weary of life; Onogi's job gives him no solace and Yoriko is trapped in a lonely marriage with a man involved in unlawful political dealings. In their love for each other, Yoriko and Onogi finally find something worth living for.

However, Yoriko's marriage casts a shadow over their relationship, as she cannot get her husband to seriously consider talk of a divorce. As Yoriko and Onogi's relationship becomes more serious, a political scandal involving Yoriko's husband is brewing in the background. When Onogi is assigned to the team that is prosecuting Yoriko's husband, things take a change for the worse. Onogi and Yoriko's affair is made public and they become the targets of harsh criticism and public outrage. Onogi is removed from the investigation team and eventually resigns from his job. Yoriko divorces her husband. With Onogi's resignation and Yoriko's divorce, the two end their lives up to that point.

Without any hope left in life except for Yoriko, Onogi considers committing double suicide. He recommends this to Yoriko as the “best option” available to them. Yoriko agrees at first, but decides to die alone in the end, unable to bear the thought of Onogi’s death. The location that Yoriko chooses as the stage of her suicide is a primeval forest near Mt. Fuji called Jukai.

There is a strong association between death and beauty in *Nami no Tou*. In particular, the use of a natural setting as the stage of Yoriko’s suicide makes her death very beautiful. The quiet forest and tranquil lake give the final chapter a sense of peace and solitude. The presence of Mt. Fuji is also an important element of the beauty of the scene. During her journey to the forest, Yoriko is told that birds and rabbits live in Jukai. The forest is presented as a peaceful place; there is nothing scary about it. It is ideal for a final resting place.

Yoriko’s character also serves to beautify her suicide. She is the sympathetic heroine of the story and a very refined, likeable character. Her beauty and appeal as a character serve to further enhance the beauty of the act of suicide itself. The tragedy of her death also adds an appeal. Had she been a less charismatic person, her suicide would have lacked that quality. In addition, she clearly sees death as something desirable and even describes her own death as beautiful. Her view of death is very idealized and romantic.

Yoriko’s suicide is highly idealized. She shows no fear or anxiety in the face of death. Matsumoto uses the natural setting to add to the calm, peaceful atmosphere of the scene before Yoriko enters the forest. The book ends with Yoriko running into the forest rather than with her actual death. It is as if she simply disappears into nothing. In doing this, Matsumoto glosses over the gruesome reality of dying in the middle of a forest and makes Yoriko’s death much more idealistic.

The romantic aspect of Yoriko’s death comes from both its ideal nature and the association between suicide and love. Yoriko initially intended to commit suicide with Onogi. In her mind, that was the only option left to them as a couple. However, she decides that she does not want Onogi to die and chooses to die alone in order to save his life. On some level, her death could even be described as self-sacrificial. Her love affair with Onogi is ultimately the reason for her decision to die, as it was their love for each other that destroyed their lives and drove them into a corner. This connection between her love for Onogi and her decision to die gives her suicide a romantic appeal.

Yoriko's suicide is the conclusion of *Nami no Tou*. There is a mixture of beauty and tragedy in her death. Language, setting and Yoriko's character all contribute to the romantic atmosphere surrounding her death. The association of suicide with positive qualities such as beauty is a trend that can be found in many works of Japanese literature, and is a reflection of an aesthetic value that is present in Japanese culture.