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Changing Tides

In Yukio Mishima's *Spring Snow*, a theme of social and cultural shift in Japanese life is viewed through the love story of two individuals. Prior to when the story takes place, a feudal societal structure in which Samurai Warriors were on top was established. However, following the end of the Meiji dynasty, this structure along with Samurais were made obsolete by the new systems and radical changes modernized Japan and reinvented the country in the mold of Western civilizations. As the country became more westernized, cultural and social changes were accompanied with the development resulting in a mindset of Japanese thoughts and ideologies, but western technologies. The changing values and class division in the novel is represented by three characters who are born into different classes of Japanese society.

Spring Snow is a story that takes place in the early 1900's and tells the tragic love story between Kiyooki and Satoko and touches on the conflicting points of intersection between Japanese tradition and western influence. Kiyooki, is the son of Marquis Matsugae, the head of a family who were once Samurais. The young man is vividly described as someone who holds remarkable beauty, and stood out from the rest of his family as a result of western ideas and individualism. His former Samurai family has successfully become established as minor nobility, yet the security of their social position is a source of uneasiness for his father. One of his only few friends, Honda is an aspiring lawyer who represents the middle-class as the son of a judge. Throughout the novel he is seen as a sensible person who wants nothing but the best for Kiyooki

and narrates this tale of what he believes are the successive reincarnations of his friend. And lastly, Satoko is a young woman who is the daughter of the Ayakuras, a family of high aristocracy and lineage who held close ties with the Matsgae family. Her wealth is that inherited from true aristocracy bound by custom.

Throughout the beginning of the novel, Kiyooki struggles with accepting his feelings for Satoko who is slightly older by two years. Satoko, who had feelings for Kiyooki ever since they were young, was waiting for him to make his approach but when her family decides she mustn't wait any longer, Satoko is offered and accepts a marriage proposal to the prince of the Imperial family. This event marks the start in which Kiyooki begins to change and finally accepts his feelings towards Satoko. His pursuit succeeds and they begin sexual relations starting the two lovers tragic affair.

In the Novel, passages analogous to class divisions and the changing period after the last moments of the Meiji Era are often seen. One such example is through the perspective of Hondas after Kiyooki took a rare visit to his home; “The age of glorious wars ended with the Meiji era. Today, all the stories of past wars have sunk to the level of those edifying accounts we hear from middle-aged noncoms in the military science department or the boasts of farmers around a hot stove. There isn’t much chance now to die on the battlefield. [...] But now that old wars are finished, a new kind of war has just begun; this is the era for the war of emotion. The kind of war no one can see, only feel — a war, therefore, that the dull and insensitive won’t even notice. But it’s begun in earnest. The young men who have been chosen to wage it have already begun to fight. [...] And just as in the old wars, there will be casualties in the war of emotion, I think. It’s the fate of our age” (Mishima 198).

This quote explicitly shows how Japan had started to change since the end of the Meiji era. If the characters in the novel were to follow tradition, it would demand that Satoko find a husband appropriate to her family's position without acknowledging her feelings for Kiyooki. This is because rather than individual emotional attachments and affection, marriage to a prince had more to do with tradition and was seen as important prior to western influence. But instead, the course of events between the love of Kiyooki and Satoko and the start of their affair breaks the mold and goes against this definition of this particular tradition of Japanese culture. As Honda is the speaker of this quote, it characterizes him as another person influenced by western thinkers and ideologies. He represents the conviction that behind the cycles of history there is a universal and eternal principle of natural law that never changes alluding to the beliefs of english philosophers such as aristotle. Throughout the novel, the influence of attending an elite school is stressed for nobility including foreigners such as the Siamese Princes.

In conclusion, Spring Snow at its heart is the tale of a couple's love story and the tragic events that prevent Kiyooki and Satoko from being together. But at the same time, the novel captures the moments before when the Meiji era ended and how Japan increasingly became more modern and westernized at the cost of undermining some of the nation's traditions. Because of the time period that the story takes place, the intersection of Japanese culture and Western ideologies is able to easily be seen through the novel's usage of Kiyooki, Satoko, and Honda; three characters that embody different classes of Japanese society to show this change.