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THE PORTRAYAL OF SUICIDE  
IN POSTMODERN JAPANESE LITERATURE  
AND POPULAR CULTURE MEDIA

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Honors Thesis Final Draft, Spring 2014  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

Within Japanese society, suicide has been a recurring cultural and social concern explored extensively in various literary and artistic forms, and has evolved into a serious societal epidemic by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This project investigates contemporary Japan's suicide epidemic through an analysis of the portrayal of suicide in post-1970s Japanese literature, films, and popular culture media of *manga*<sup>1</sup> and *anime*<sup>2</sup>, and in comparison to empirical data on suicide in Japan as presented in peer-reviewed psychology articles. In the analysis of these contemporary works, particular attention was given to their targeted demographic, the profiles of the suicide victims in the stories, the justifications for suicide, and the relevance of suicide to the plot of each work. Although suicide statistics in Japan indicate that most suicides occur in three key targeted demographics (the youth, middle-aged, and elderly), my research finds that there is a disproportionate amount of representation of the youth demographic in the media. Accordingly, findings have been divided between those relating to youth and non-youth instead, with subdivisions for the works relating to the youth. Before delving into more detail on how suicide is presented in these works, I first review suicide statistics in Japan from an empirical perspective.

## **THE JAPANESE SUICIDE EPIDEMIC: AN OVERVIEW OF STATISTICS**

Japan has the 8<sup>th</sup> highest suicide rate in the world, 2<sup>nd</sup> largest of OECD<sup>3</sup> nations (Bosc), with 27,766 deaths accounted for in 2012 (The Japan Times). Though this marks

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<sup>1</sup> Japanese comic books or graphic novels.

<sup>2</sup> Japanese animation.

<sup>3</sup> Essentially the "First World" countries, defined as nations in support of free market economies.

the first time since 1998 that the suicide rate has been below 30,000 deaths per year, suicide in Japan continues to be alarmingly common and a matter of great concern.

Suicide rates steadily increased in Japan in the 1990s largely in response to the nation's sudden terrible economic downturn. Whereas the suicide mortality rate was around one in 5,000 in 1988, by 1995 the number had jumped to one in 4,000 (from 20,000 to 25,000 deaths per year) (Liu et al. 325-30). According to 2007 findings by the World Health Organization, middle-aged men (35-64 years) have the highest suicide rate in Japan (WHO), a trend that has continued through 2012 with a strong correlation between suicide and unemployment (Motohashi 1282-3) with more than half of suicides in 2007 committed by those who were unemployed (Kuroki 683-91). Though the high suicide rate among the middle-aged is by and large job-related, there is also suspicion that the declining marriage rate and increasing divorce rate are also factors increasing suicidality for this demographic (Chang et al. 1322-31). Thus, the social stigma associated with being a "failure" both professionally and romantically is thought to be one justification for taking one's life (Chen et al. 140-50).

The elderly demographic come in with the second highest suicide rate in Japan. In 2010, it was reported that 37.8% of suicide victims (11,982 individuals) were 60 years of age or older (National Police Agency 1-26). One key risk factor associated with suicide among the Japanese elderly is mood disorders (Kato et al. 119-22), presumably due to changes in the Japanese family structure (Watanabe et al. 121-29). Researchers Watanabe et al. (121-29) suggest that the cultural shift from the role of the extended family as a support system for the elderly, to a more western nuclear family structure that does not regard its senior members as highly, may especially account for the higher rates of

suicide among seniors in rural settings. Not only are the elderly socially isolated and given little medical assistance, they are also failing to adapt to the nation's rapidly changing values and their newfound role in society as a burden rather than the traditional view of figures deserving respect.

To add to this problem, a study conducted in 2012 found the middle-aged and elderly— mostly unmarried men living in rural settings— hold problematic traditionalistic views of suicide as an acceptable form of dealing with one's troubles, revealing a deep-rooted basis for the high suicide rate (Kageyama 105-12). Specifically, individuals aged 40-59 believed suicide to be a matter of self-choice, and both unpreventable and permissible. In addition to thinking suicide to be unpreventable, those aged 70-74 also saw it as a weak-minded choice, but reported feeling more shame than other demographics for seeking help. So in conjunction with struggling to adapt to cultural changes, the elderly maintain a destructive and archaic view of suicide in both their acceptance of the act and reluctance to pursue treatment that puts them especially at risk.

The smallest suicide demographic is the youth, with those between the ages of 5 to 34 comprising 18.7% of suicide victims in 2007<sup>4</sup> (WHO). Unlike middle-aged and elderly suicide victims who are mostly men, the difference in suicide rate between the sexes is much smaller for this age group. This suggests that youth suicide is caused by factors unassociated to gender norms, not directly related to economic problems in a male-dominated workforce or the expectation that men be strong and refuse outside help. While youth suicide victims overall account for fewer casualties than do the older

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<sup>4</sup> Based on calculations from data provided.

members of society, in 2003 suicide was found to be the second most prevalent cause of death among those aged 15-19 years, and the leading cause of death for those 20-29 (Kuroki 683-91).

One commonly given explanation for suicide among Japanese youth is the high academic pressure on students, who must take multiple entrance exams and compete among themselves for limited school openings throughout their academic career (from junior high to college, and in a few cases even elementary schools). Many students even attend cram schools following their normal school hours to better prepare for these exams and stay academically competitive respective to their peers. Researchers Zeng and Le Tendre (513-28), however, contest the notion that academic pressure leads to youth suicide, highlighting that while academic attendance and cram school enrollment in Japan has increased since World War II, the adolescent suicide rate has actually decreased over the years. The implementation of the exam system also had little notable effect on the suicide rate. In fact, the researchers note that the adolescent suicide rate in a yearlong span is at its highest in months of little academic pressure (September for high school students and August for junior high students) rather than during the exam season (early Spring).

Nevertheless, Zeng and Le Tendre do not completely discount the role of academic pressure in youth suicide. They suggest, instead, an indirect connection between the two: it is the *perception* of a cause-and-effect relation between academic pressure and suicide as propagated by the media and school officials— and not the pressure itself— that causes the youth to be hyper aware to the stresses in their daily lives. This unsubstantiated connection is then ultimately accepted by the youth as the

source of their anguish, and accounts for teen suicide victims' frequent attributions of "school" or "exams" as justifications for killing themselves. In other words, while academic pressure and youth suicide in Japan may not be a direct cause-and-effect relationship, there *is* an indirect link at play. Bullying, drug abuse, homosexuality, and low self-esteem, on the other hand, represent a number of risk factors that *are* directly associated with attempted suicide among Japanese urban youth (Hidaka et. al 752-7).

Indeed, both bullying and academic pressure are two of the most prevalent reasons given for youth suicide by the mass media (that is, in news reports, television shows, *manga*, *anime*, etc.). Suicide among the middle-aged and the elderly, on the other hand, is seldom mentioned or portrayed in these mass media forms, and when mentioned, they are sensationalist cases of *shinjū* (love suicide) or *inseki-jisatsu* (suicide to atone for one's shortcomings) that are a rare occurrence in contemporary society. This highlights the need to properly analyze specifically how and why suicide is portrayed in contemporary literature and popular media, and what possible impact these representations have on Japan's suicide epidemic. An analysis of anime, manga, and literary texts can be revealing of prevailing social trends that may otherwise go unnoticed by scientific studies. Not only can it serve as a reflection of the current mindset of Japan's society, oftentimes it can also influence or predict movements in the future.

Furthermore, popular culture media like *manga* and *anime* may also serve authors and consumers as release from their own anxieties and distress. The merits of these media in providing insight on Japan's suicide will be more thoroughly discussed next.

## ON THE MERITS OF MANGA AND ANIME

This main goals of this project are to examine the incongruities between contemporary media representations of suicide and the analysis of suicide within peer-reviewed scientific articles, investigate why these differences exist, and consider what they reveal about suicide in 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan. In that regard, *manga* and *anime* as popular culture media were especially indispensable for this investigation because of their undeniable presence and influence in contemporary Japanese society.

As an example, Jennifer Prough, in one of the later chapters of her book *Straight from the heart: gender, intimacy, and the cultural production of shojo manga*, demonstrates how *shōjo manga*<sup>5</sup> can simultaneously reflect and shape the social trends and interests of its readers. Prough analyzes the *manga Gals!* in the context of the *kogyaru*<sup>6</sup> fashion trend and the *enjō kōsai*<sup>7</sup> phenomenon of the 1990s. While the *manga* condemns “assisted/compensation dating,” it glorifies the *kogyaru* movement and the materialism and heightened sexuality endemic of the movement under the guise that this was what girls wanted to see and read about. Through *Gals!*’s hypersexualization of schoolgirls and their portrayal as trendsetters and consumers, the *manga* had an active role in *shaping* what girls should want and strive for rather than merely catering to the interests of the fanbase through its reflection of then recent societal trends.

Japanologist Frederik Schodt further argues that, besides holding the same social status as novels and films in Japan, *manga*’s sheer popularity makes it “one of the most effective ways to reach a mass audience and influence public opinion” (Schodt 19). One

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<sup>5</sup>*Manga* genre intended for girls (ages 10-18).

<sup>6</sup> A then predominant fashion trend that incorporated the sexy and risqué with the cute and girly.

<sup>7</sup> “Assisted dating” market brought about by teenage girls, ranging from platonic dates to full-blown prostitution.



reason for *manga*'s popularity relates to their production: *manga* magazines are printed in a weekly or bimonthly basis and sold at a relatively cheap price. This constant stream of accessible new content keeps both the audience perpetually engaged and the subject matter up to date.

The *manga* industry also garners artists of all walks of life. Compared to films, *manga* require relatively fewer resources and little to no outside help to produce, but also hold much more mass-culture appeal than conventional literature. For these reasons, Schodt argues the medium acquires an “unselfconscious freedom of expression” (29) and a largely unfiltered view of the artist's mind:

[*Manga* offers] an extremely raw and personal view of the world... They speak of people's hopes and fears. They are where stressed-out modern urbanites daily work out their neuroses and their frustrations. Viewed in their totality, the phenomenal number of stories produced is like the constant chatter of the collective unconscious— an articulation of the dream world. Reading *manga* is like peering into the unvarnished, unretouched reality of the Japanese mind. (31)

Schodt's interpretation of the inner workings of *manga* production is admittedly idealistic. As Prough reveals in *Straight from the heart*, *manga* artists work one-on-one with editors to create a final product that very rarely retains the original artistic vision. Like other forms of mass media, the purpose of *manga* and *anime* is in the end to satisfy an audience and make money. Having said that, many of those who turn to these popular culture media do so as an escape from their mundane everyday lives, and in that regard *manga* and *anime* content may serve as fantastical representations of Japanese society's repressed desires.

On the merits of *anime* specifically, Susan Napier goes so far as to argue in her book *Anime: from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* that the medium is unmatched in its potential to adequately express the problems of an industrialized society:

*Anime* may be the perfect medium to capture what is perhaps the overriding issue of our day, the shifting nature of identity in a constantly changing society. With its rapid shifts of narrative pace and its constantly transforming imagery, the animated medium is superbly positioned to illustrate the atmosphere of change permeating not only Japanese society but also all industrialized or industrializing societies. (12)

As Napier puts it, Japanese animation is a symptom and a metaphor for a society obsessed with change and spectacle, and the medium's attention to metamorphosis makes it the perfect vehicle for expressing the postmodern emphasis on a fluctuating identity.

Thus, along with postmodern literature and films, the resources investigated in this project provide a well-rounded representation of the contemporary Japanese media. These media, in turn, convey contemporary society's perspective on its suicide epidemic from the viewpoint of the masses to individual perspectives. A brief background on cultural motions and attitudes towards suicide in Japan will be given next.

### **SUICIDE IN JAPANESE CULTURE AND SOCIETY**

It could be argued that ideas of honor and cyclical reincarnation derived from Japan's religious beliefs undermine the value of a material life, and provide a rationale for committing suicide. Both Buddhism and Shintoism suggest life to be cyclical, a continuous return to nature in one form or another upon each passing. Buddhism especially highlights the notion that the physical world is not real, and although suicide is a frowned upon means of escape, self-sacrifice is less stigmatized than personal egotism. Moreover, Shintoism represents a spiritual belief addressing Japan and its people

exclusively, and strongly emphasizes preservation of honor and loyalty to the Japanese community (Kaneko, Yamasaki, and Arai "The Shinto Religion and Suicide in Japan"). These ideals were the cornerstone of *Bushido*, or the samurai's moral code, which was then applied to Japanese military culture and later used to justify the *kamikaze* acts during World War II. Remnants of these ideas derived from religious philosophy still linger in the popular media and literature of today.

Nevertheless, it would be an oversimplification to say suicide is taken lightly in Japan. On the contrary, it is precisely the severity of the act that makes an expression of honor, guilt, or protest through self-sacrifice so powerful and symbolic. As a result, culturally inflicted versions of suicide emerge due to its symbolic status in Japanese society.

The duality of *on* and *giri* in Japanese culture, as described in Takahashi and Berger's 1996 study on culture-bound suicide in Japan, also generates pressures that can contribute to suicide. *On* denotes one's gratitude towards their benefactor or group, which is acknowledged through *giri*, an obligation or duty for reciprocity. Suicide can also be representative of *on* and *giri* at play. This is a distinctly Japanese form of suicide known as *inseki-jisatsu* (literally "responsibility suicide"), a version of *seppuku*<sup>8</sup> in which one's wrongdoing is atoned for and alleviated by self-sacrifice to prevent shame or fear of being rejected by the group. Suicide as a means of taking responsibility is still occasionally committed in contemporary Japan, mainly among Japanese politicians and CEOs in times of controversy. In such cases, the suicide itself is the *giri*, an obligatory compensation by the leader for steering the group in the wrong direction.

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<sup>8</sup> Also known as *hara-kiri*, a traditional method of disembowelment practiced by warlords as a display of atonement.

*Shinjū* (literally, “center/inside of the heart”) is another type of suicide particular to Japan that also manifests from separation anxiety. Traditionally, *shinjū* referred to the double suicide among lovers bound by a forbidden love, popularized in early kabuki and puppet theater plays of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, typically based on actual incidents of double lovers suicide. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> to present 21<sup>st</sup> century, *shinjū* has splintered into a number of different subtypes, from the rare instances of the “traditional” *shinjū* between lovers, to the less rare but still uncommon murder-suicides, usually between a parent and their children or even among the whole family. *Shinjū* may be either voluntary or involuntary among all the individuals involved, but it always represents both one’s fear to die alone and a reluctance to leave others behind (in the case of mother-child *shinjū*, the mother’s fear that her child has no hopes of surviving on his/her own) (Takahashi and Berger 248-58).

Because of suicide’s symbolic ties with Japanese tradition, it is no surprise that it should be a recurring theme in works from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a period in which Japan transitioned into modernity<sup>9</sup>. In such works, suicide is carried out as a means to protesting modernization, exalting traditional ideals, or simply as the culmination of hopelessness and despair. Natsume Sōseki’s (1867-1916) *Kokoro* (1914) is one renowned modern novel in which suicide has the pivotal role of a means of escaping man’s loneliness in the modern world.

The victim in *Kokoro* is a man referred to as *Sensei*, a lonely figure who feels eternally guilty for the suicide of one of his friends in his youth. He eventually commits

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<sup>9</sup> That is, shifting from a feudalistic system to imperial rule and an increasing presence in international affairs.

suicide himself, following the self-inflicted death of General Nogi<sup>10</sup>. In truth, *Sensei* does not kill himself out of sympathy for the general; he admits to having too modern an outlook, not being the type to engage in such acts of sacrifice. But at the same time, *Sensei* resents modernity, at one point exclaiming, “You see, loneliness is the price we have to pay for being born in this modern age, so full of freedom, independence, and our own egotistical selves” (Sōseki 30). *Sensei* is too corrupted by modernity to embrace his nation’s past, but is also unable to identify with the future. For this reason, he fears a solitary existence, akin to the one lived by his friend lost to suicide. *Sensei*’s suicide effectively juxtaposes the vestiges of tradition in the backdrop of modernity, and raises the question of what the changes undergoing the country meant to the Japanese identity.

*Kokoro* is only one of a number of other works featuring suicide as a vehicle to exploring what it means to be “Japanese” in the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While it would be inappropriate to say that Japanese culture is one in which suicide is condoned, there is no doubt that over the years it has been the subject of obsessive fascination by Japanese society. As Ruth Benedict states in her 1946 ethnography *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*, “[The Japanese] play up suicide as Americans play up crime and they have the same vicarious enjoyment of it. They choose to dwell on events of self-destruction instead of on the destruction of others... [Suicide] meets some need that cannot be filled by dwelling on other acts” (167). Admittedly, this is an account made almost seventy years ago, and Benedict’s study has been harshly criticized on many accounts, the most prominent critique being that her reports were heavily influenced by militaristic propaganda promoted at the time (Watsuji 23-7).

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<sup>10</sup> A Japanese general who committed *hara-kiri* following the death of the Meiji Emperor in 1912. His death is symbolic of a reluctance to accept the changes undergoing in a modernizing Japan.

Indeed, in the years surrounding the war, right wing nationalists disproportionately promoted sacrificial suicide as a Japanese ideal and an act of patriotism. The distinguished modern author Yukio Mishima (1925-1970), an ultranationalist himself, perfectly characterizes the militaristic mindset perpetuated during this time. Mishima fully embraced Japan's prewar identity and vocally denounced its postwar self. In addition to having written and produced countless distinguished plays and literary works, Mishima directed, produced, and performed in the short film *Yūkoku* (in English, "Patriotism"), in which he plays a nationalist lieutenant and member of the Palace Guard who, after a failed coup d'état, opts to kill himself over fighting against his right wing comrades. The film graphically depicts his character preparing for and committing *seppuku*, foreshadowing Mishima's own death when he performed ritual suicide following a failed coup in an attempt to inspire reinstatement of the Japanese empire after World War II.

Mishima's was an extreme case, however, and very much a shocking act to the Japanese as well. The ultranationalist propaganda— and with it, the image of suicide as an act of sacrificial devotion towards the empire— became much less rampant over the years. Nevertheless, Benedict's controversial statements mentioned earlier still stand, as the Japanese fascination with suicide, beyond its ties to patriotism, persisted well after the war. Suicide's prevalence in major works of Japanese literature from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century until after World War II suggests that, as taboo a subject matter as it may have become, it still was very much salient in the Japanese psyche. Not only was suicide the subject

matter of a number of modern novels and short stories, other renowned modern authors besides Mishima also went on to take their own lives<sup>11</sup>.

Osamu Dazai (1909-1948) was one such author, though his suicide was wholly different from Mishima's. Dazai was a severely depressed individual, and his personal hardships were the source of inspiration for many of his works. His 1948 semi-autobiographical novel *No Longer Human* is a notable example. It represents the diary of protagonist Yozo, a poor, depressed and paranoid alcoholic and morphine addict who fails twice at committing suicide. It highlights the struggles of the main character to understand human behavior and the meaning of his existence, and others' inability to relate to his suffering. Whereas Dazai's suicide motive was much more culturally odorless than Mishima's in that it was purely driven by his hopelessness, loneliness, and despair, the same cannot be said for his methodology. Dazai ultimately committed *shinjū* with a mistress, demonstrating that traditional perceptions of suicide still had (and may continue to have) an influence on suicide in postwar Japan.

Though *No Longer Human* released over 60 years ago, it and other works by Osamu Dazai have earned newfound popularity among the Japanese youth of today. A 2011 episode of NHK's *BEGIN Japanology* series on Dazai and his works featured a number of such fans claiming his novels to be very relatable to contemporary struggles. The program also provided evidence suggesting readership of *No Longer Human* to be longitudinally correlated with social anxiety caused by major societal changes. Professor of modern Japanese literature Ishikawa Takumi notes how the frequency of submissions

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<sup>11</sup> Besides Mishima, Yasunari Kawabata and Osamu Dazai are also thought to have committed suicide. Kawabata, a friend of Mishima's, is suspected of killing himself after Mishima's death; and Dazai, after many failed attempts, finally succeeded in committing a double-suicide with a woman whom he abandoned his wife for.

about *No Longer Human* in literary competitions for junior high and high school students is correlated with periods of major economic changes. Namely, there was an increase in submissions during Japan's rapid economic growth in the 80s, following the housing bubble burst in the early 90s, and again in 2008 (though what accounts for this recent spike is unexplained). Ishikawa also adds,

People today are pressured into adapting to societal demands. In a sense we are expected to exhibit an inordinate ability to adapt. Today's high school students who are psychologically affected by this find resonance between their own feelings and those depicted in *No Longer Human*.  
(*BEGIN Japanology*)

Thus, the internal struggles from Japan's past continue to be relevant today especially in times of extreme economic changes, a phenomenon that will be better explained in the following sections.

Rather than modern works, the next sections are devoted exclusively to deeper analysis the portrayal of suicide in *contemporary* literature and popular culture media. The first demographic to be investigated will be the youth, from pre-adolescents to young adults.

### **SUICIDE AND THE YOUTH IN POSTMODERN WORKS**

Of the suicidal demographics observed in various contemporary works, the Japanese youth are by far the most represented. This may not have been the generation that lived through the traumatic events of World War II, but it did witness or experience firsthand the aftermath of another significantly traumatic event: the hopes and dreams spurred by Japan's economic boom in the 1980s come crashing down in the "The Lost Decade" that were the 1990s.



In 1993, a comprehensive how-to guide for committing suicide known as *Kanzen Jisatsu Manyuaru* (translated as *The Complete Manual of Suicide*) released to much success and controversy. In its foreword, author Tsurumi Wataru (1964– ) expresses how his generation came to garner a jaded outlook on life. It begins with Tsurumi mentioning a list of major occurrences that his generation lived through (the Japanese student protests during the 60s and 70s <sup>12</sup>, escalating conflict with Soviet Russia, the Apollo moon landing, etc.) that deceived him and his peers into believing they had the same potential as the World War II generation to make a significant impact on the world. Yet the world remained relatively unchanged— at least in comparison to the global-scale war that had broken out mere decades earlier—despite all the promise ushered by these seemingly transformative events. This period of then unprecedented stability was a reality check to Tsurumi’s generation: to them, their hopes of making a difference, regardless of whether it be good or bad, were wholly idealistic.

Tsurumi goes on to mention the 1980s, and the Cold War threats of a looming nuclear holocaust and the end of the world. His generation yet again became restless with excitement, hoping for revolutionary change. But once more nothing happened. When he wrote the foreword in the early 1990s, he concluded that the nation was stagnant, the economic climate was quickly souring, and it was more and more evident that his generation was doomed to live dull, ordinary, routine-bound and ultimately inconsequential lives up until their unceremonious deaths.

Though today’s youth did not live through the same events as Tsurumi’s generation, these cynical attitudes seem to be shared by all postwar generations. Take the

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<sup>12</sup> In line with the protests occurring around the world during those times, the reasons for such rallying ranged from radical leftist activism, protest against the Vietnam War, and demand for university reforms.

accounts in *The Complete Suicide Manual*'s sequel, *Bokutachi no Kanzen Jisatsu Manyuaru* (in English, *Our Complete Manual of Suicide*), as evidence. *Our Complete Manual of Suicide* released a year after the original and, unlike its predecessor, focused exclusively on objectively presenting how the first manual was received by society. It includes scans of fan and hate mail received by the author and a demographical breakdown of who had purchased the manual to begin with. From its data, one can see that the majority of readers were those in their teens and 20s, and some of the fan mail expressed feelings identical to Tsurumi's.

In addition to professing feelings of unimportance, Tsurumi's foreword also notes on the insignificance of their individual lives in society. As a result of Japanese culture's collectivistic inclination of emphasizing the group over the individual, a single person only represents a single brick in the wall that is society. Easily replaceable and unimportant on its own, the wall will not fall from a single missing brick. He later clarifies that, while he does not see suicide as an inherently negative act, *The Complete Suicide Manual* is not intended to incentivize self-sacrifice. Rather, it is only a tool for those determined to commit suicide to do so in an effective manner; or to provide peace of mind to those still willing to live in knowing that, if their pain ever becomes unbearable, self-sacrifice is now a much more tangible reality. If the manual's success is anything to go by, the comforting thought of death was particularly sought after by the 90s youth.

Besides Tsurumi's manual, a vast number of other contemporary novels, films, *manga* and *anime* also capture the pessimistic views adopted by the Japanese youth of this time period and beyond through exploring the issue of youth suicide in Japan. These

works can be separated into three categories: macro-level works, micro-level pieces, and narratives focusing on post-death and the will to live. The term “macro-level” is used for works that comment on suicide within society as a whole, whereas “micro-level” narratives provide a more personal look on the matter and serve to confirm or discount issues raised by their macro-level counterparts. “Post-death and the will to live” constitutes the third category, and denotes works that present suicide in the context of life after death, or use suicide as a plot device to explore what makes life worth living through the characters’ own will to live.

### **I. MACRO-LEVEL WORKS**

Works focusing on suicide in the context of the Japanese youth often include critiques of the nation’s commercialism, blind conformism, and its overreliance on technology at the expense of meaningful interpersonal connections. Furthermore, the bulk of narratives featuring youth suicide in the societal context as opposed to a personal viewpoint do so through dystopian storylines, rationalizing the suicide epidemic through fantastical and over-the-top reasons such as a suicide virus, subliminal messages in pop songs, governmental conspiracies, and even alien mind control. These media forms paint a picture of suicide in Japan at the macro-level and reveal some of the Japanese youth’s shared preconceptions, rationalization, and innermost feelings regarding its suicide epidemic. Works portraying suicide at the macro-level will be the focus of this section.

Rather than exploring personal struggles with suicide, many macro-level works include suicide simply to be provocative or sensational in the hopes of attracting more attention. Horror movies are especially guilty of this, as they mostly double down on gore

and risqué subject matter to capitalize on the ensuing controversy. However, these sources are still worth taking into consideration, as they may not offer “deep” insights or commentary on the high suicide rate but they do oftentimes reveal how suicide is generally perceived by or portrayed to the masses. A classic example is the film *Suicide Manual*, directed by Fukutani Osamu (1967- ) and inspired by Tsurumi’s *Complete Manual of Suicide*.

In the film, a reporter investigating the recent rise in suicide rate among the Japanese youth discovers the culprit to be a mysterious DVD that compels the viewer to die (the film’s version of the original manual). Although *Suicide Manual* is very clearly a B movie attempt at piggybacking on the success of *The Complete Manual of Suicide*, it does provide insight on commonly perceived suicide motives among the Japanese masses. Justifications for suicide given by some of the characters in the film include bullying, overwork, and general apathy as described in Tsurumi’s foreword, rationalizations not completely out of line from what is discussed in the peer-reviewed psychology articles. Additionally, *Suicide Manual* also sheds light on the ensuing paranoia following the release of *The Complete Manual of Suicide*, capturing the then prevalent fear that the manual (in the film’s case, the DVD) was corrupting the youth and brainwashing them into killing themselves. In reality, and as evidenced by the fan letters included in the book’s follow-up *Our Complete Manual of Suicide*, a number of those who purchased the manual did so out of morbid curiosity or ironically due to the media backlash it was receiving, with no intention of committing suicide themselves. Thus, it may not have had nearly as sinister an effect as the film suggests, but the sensationalistic nature of *Suicide Manual* is valuable in that it underscores how contemporary Japanese

society continues to overwhelmingly view suicide as taboo, in spite of the high prevalence of suicide cases.

*Manga* and *anime* from the *shōnen* (meaning “young boy”) genre— by far the largest category of *manga* and *anime*— may also be more suited to illustrate how suicide is understood by the masses than to provide any deep philosophical insights on the issue. John Ingulsrud and Kate Allen define *shōnen* in their book *Reading Cool Japan: Patterns of Manga Literacy and Discourse* as the “unmarked category” of *manga* and *anime*, with other categories of *manga* and *anime* differentiated in how they contrast to it (8).

Although traditionally targeted at males from childhood age into adolescence, *shōnen manga* and *anime* have very much become the industry standard. The popularity, mass appeal, and target demographic of *shōnen*, along with pressure to appeal to the largest audience possible means little freedom for radical, serious, and complex investigations into social issues such as suicide. Like horror films, it appears that the few *shōnen* works that do target a taboo subject matter as suicide typically do so precisely because the topic is taboo. Oftentimes in these cases, the portrayal of suicide is equally as crude, and accompanied by other racy subject matter to capitalize on the vulgarity.

Take, for instance, the 2004 *manga* series *Ghost Talker's Daydream* (in Japanese, *Teizokurei Daydream*, literally “Vulgar Ghost Daydream”) by artist Okuse Saki (1966- ). It tells the story of Misaki, a government employed necromancer and spirit medium by day, and a dominatrix at an S/M sex club by night. She travels around Japan solving suicide cases in suggestive S/M-inspired costumes along with her sidekicks Mitsuru, her perverted government worker assistant, and Ai, a disturbed schoolgirl with paranormal powers. Misaki eventually discovers that there is an overarching source to all of the

deaths: a vengeful spirit who preys on other depressed or desperate individuals, leading them to their deaths. In other words these victims do not kill themselves out of their own volition, but rather are led astray by a vindictive ghost. This detail may be suggestive of Japan's sympathetic stance towards suicide as an unavoidable and unpreventable act. Nevertheless, as cautioned earlier, it is generally not advisable to interpret most *shōnen* works beyond what is presented, as they are primarily mass-produced stories designed solely for entertainment value and any underlying social commentary may be unintentional.

In truth, suicide very much takes a backseat through most of *Ghost Talker's Daydream*. The main sell is very clearly sex, violence and ghosts, interspersed with a generous amount of fanservice (panty shots, "nip slips," etc.). Still, *Ghost Talker's Daydream* is similar to the film *Suicide Manual* in that it provides insight into the popular perceptions of suicide and of those who commit suicide. Like in *Suicide Manual*, some of the victims killed themselves because of bullying or pressure from work, along with other justifications like parental abuse and homosexuality. Even traditional love suicides are referenced. In one example, spirits of a transgendered couple who committed *shinjū* try to lead a lesbian woman to her death. And later on, Misaki and Mitsuru are asked if they are planning a love suicide when seen together at a popular suicide spot. Thus, even though *Ghost Talker's Daydream* may not offer much in the way of deeper reasons behind suicide, it still provides a look at the most superficial understanding and associations Japan has with its suicide epidemic, including the continued discussion of traditionally Japanese notions of suicide such as *shinjū* in contemporary society.

There do exist, however, some rare examples of macro-level *shōnen manga* that go beyond merely mentioning widely held notions of suicide in Japan. One such example is the series *Araibu – Saishū Shinkateki Shōnen* (translated as “Alive: The Final Evolution,” henceforth referred to as *Alive*), which provides a profoundly insightful look at both suicide itself and the existentialist anxiety spawning from the inevitability of death. Surprisingly, *Alive* also fits a subgenre I like to call “classic *shōnen*.” That is, *shōnen* media targeted at its traditional age group of boys from childhood to adolescents, and said to contain three archetypal tropes: emphasis on friendship, perseverance, and “winning.” Classic *shōnen* plotlines tend to be incredibly formulaic, following the typical pattern of a “young man going through multiple trials and setbacks as he ventures onto a bright and colorful future” (Ingulsrud and Allen 8). In that regard, *Alive* is decidedly classic *shōnen*, but due to exceptional circumstances regarding its artist Kawashima Tadashi (1969–2010), the series also manages to deeply consider the meaning of life and death.

The story revolves around an orphan boy Taisuke as he fights a group of spirit-like aliens hell-bent on destroying the world. These aliens are described as having developed over millennia into the highest evolved living beings in the universe, but in a nihilistic twist they learn that in fact death is the highest evolutionary form of life. Upon reaching Earth, the alien spirits proceed to possess humans, inhabit the “holes in people’s hearts,” and drive them to suicide in order to attain their “final evolution.” The result is a global-scale suicide epidemic.

There are, however, those whose holes in their hearts are deep enough (i.e., experienced some sort of trauma in their lives) who, rather than killing themselves, gain

various superpowers instead. These individuals— not dead but still under control of the aliens— are termed the “comrades,” and work together to ensure nobody stands in the way of the alien spirits’ plans for world destruction. Protagonist Taisuke is the exception to the rule, as his traumatic experience of witnessing the death of his parents grants him superpowers but for some reason still retains his consciousness.

Perhaps due to the series incredible popularity (it ran for seven years, from 2003 to 2010), one progressively gets the feeling that *Alive*’s plot was purposefully drawn out for the sake of greater monetary profit. New, seemingly arbitrary plotlines are introduced one after the other without precedent, to the point where the narrative as a whole is absurdly convoluted and largely incoherent. The story is no longer about suicide— it is rarely ever mentioned after the initial few chapters— but instead a chaotic, action-packed war between the “good guys” and the “bad guys” for little justification other than one group is “good” and the other “bad.”

However, *Alive* is exceptional in that artist Kawashima Tadashi was diagnosed with lung cancer while working on the *manga*, going on to finish it in his deathbed. His unfavorable prognosis gave him greater incentive and artistic liberty to include an authentic and personal reflection of his life under the guise of classic *shōnen*, elevating the series above its genre’s trademark superficiality. The latter parts of the story are indicative of Kawashima simultaneously following classic *shōnen* tropes while at the same time philosophizing on the futility of his existence.

In *Alive*’s final chapters, Taisuke and his crew must prevent the comrades from getting ahold of “Akuro’s heart,” an unspecified object that in the wrong hands could lead to the world’s demise. This item’s appeal is in its ability to refill the gap in the hearts



of traumatized individuals, and a number of the power users willingly sacrifice themselves just for the brief chance to touch the artifact. In the end, Taisuke's party is victorious, but not without questioning what it means to be alive. Fragmented across a number of speech bubbles, an unspecified voice— possibly Taisuke's, possibly Kawashima's— concludes the series in disjointed speech:

Life or death, thoughts alone can't explain them. Within your own time, somehow, you just go back to your daily life, and deal with the problem yourself. Only life will give you the answer, probably... But it's not something you'll just bump into one day. Like the pain in my heart, time will eventually cover them up. Yet I won't be able to forget them. It won't be easy. Despite that, I'll continue to live. (Kawashima)

One can interpret these final words as Kawashima reluctantly coming to terms with his fate and, as painful it may be, his need to accept his trauma and inevitable death as intrinsic and permanent parts of his identity.

Despite the bittersweet message, *Alive* ultimately offers support and encouragement to those that may be struggling with trauma or may be suicidal, as if saying, “You may be having a hard time, but know that the challenges you face can only make you stronger. And with your newfound superpowers, you may just be able to overcome the death aliens compelling you to suicide, no matter how futile an effort it may seem.” A classic *shōnen*-esque message indeed.

The dark comedy series *Welcome to the N.H.K.* by Takimoto Tatsuhiko (1978- ), first released as a novel in 2002 and adapted into *manga* and *anime* in 2006, is another *shōnen* work that breaks its genre's conventions by opting out of a fantastical plot laden with heroes and villains in exchange for a much more grounded depiction of issues faced by the contemporary youth. The series echoes the idea of other macro-level works that the suicide epidemic is caused by forces larger than one's self and an issue beyond

control. In this case, however, rather than it being an alien invasion, vengeful ghost, or haunted DVD, it is the delusions of a *hikikomori*<sup>13</sup> that explain the societal challenges that lead many to suicide. It is a much more realistic, albeit darkly comedic, viewpoint of Japanese society, from the outlook of a group of people who withdraw from a world they cannot adapt to.

*Welcome to the N.H.K.* features three main characters, each with their own set of personal problems. The first is Satō, a 23-year-old *hikikomori* who blames his personal as well as society's problems on a government conspiracy known as the "Japanese *Hikikomori* Association" (in Japanese, *Nihon Hikikomori Kyōkai*, or "NHK" for short). It is no coincidence that the acronym NHK is the same as that of Japan's largest public broadcaster<sup>14</sup>, as Satō believes its programming is subliminally designed to produce *hikikomori*.

The second character is Misaki, an innocent teenage girl who vows to help Satō overcome his problems through nightly counseling sessions. Though she seems emotionally balanced and secure throughout most of the series, she is revealed to have had suffered through a very traumatic upbringing. Misaki's stepfather was abusive and an alcoholic, and pushed her mother to commit suicide, an act Misaki witnessed first hand. She had moved in with her aunt and uncle following this incident but suffers from PTSD and could not adapt to her new life. Thus, she obsessed over helping Satō out of feelings of finally having found someone who truly needed her and gave her life meaning.

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<sup>13</sup> Term used for Japanese suffering from severe social withdrawal.

<sup>14</sup> Which stands for *Nippon Hōsō Kyōkai*, or "Japan Broadcasting Corporation," instead.

The final character is Yamazaki, Satō's neighbor and past high school underclassman, now an *otaku*<sup>15</sup> enrolled in game design classes. In terms of psychological wellbeing, Yamazaki is the most well off of the trio, but also the most outspoken when it comes to his cynical views of society. He is especially vocal with regards to his skepticism in matters of love and resentment towards the rigidity of society, so unwelcoming of his *otaku* self.

The outcast protagonists of *Welcome to the N.H.K.* may be exceptional cases in Japan, but their feelings of incompatibility with the external world is generalizable to the Japanese youth as a whole. Satō's belief that the government is directly and intentionally responsible for his nation's social problems echoes many of the sentiments of incompatibility and futility from Tsurumi's accounts. Together, Satō, Misaki, and Yamazaki go through a long journey towards recovery and self-discovery, taking them through many trials common in 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan. A couple of these challenges include Satō becoming addicted to an MMORPG<sup>16</sup> (very popular in Japan and Asia in general, used as an escape from the real world by many) and the group getting caught up in a pyramid scheme (which have proliferated as a get-rich-quick scheme after Japan's economic downturn).

Additionally, like *Suicide Manual* and *Ghost Talker's Daydream*, *Welcome to the N.H.K.* provides a glimpse at popular attributions to suicide in Japanese society, even going beyond the youth demographic. It also brings up the very much contemporary issue of the role of the Internet in the suicide epidemic, a trope that emerges in other macro-

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<sup>15</sup> Term used to describe anyone with an obsession, typically in reference to nerdy things like *anime*, *manga*, and video games.

<sup>16</sup> Standing for Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game, online games where one takes on the role of another character and goes on adventures with other online players.

level works (and will be discussed in more detail shortly). One of *Welcome to the N.H.K.*'s more important arcs involves Satō unwittingly getting involved in a group suicide. One day he runs into Hitomi, a high school upperclassman whose own cynical view of society greatly influenced Satō. Hitomi is severely depressed due to her neglectful fiancée and unfulfilling job as a civil servant, which she treats by haphazardly downing antidepressants as if they were candy. She frequents an online suicide message board and plans a group suicide with other members at a secluded island, which Satō inadvertently joins. Among the group is a young teenager victim of bullying; a former medical student who could no longer take the academic and family pressure to become a doctor; and an older gentleman whose wife and kid left him after his company went bankrupt. Thus, the series suggests common causes of suicide to be bullying, and academic and familial pressure for the youth, and being a failure both professionally and as a family man for the middle-aged. These are all more or less in line with what is presented in the peer-reviewed psychology articles.

Ultimately, the suicidal individuals' plans are foiled when Satō's friends and Hitomi's fiancée find out and intervene. The *anime* then goes on to severely condemn suicide by presenting how each of the characters could have dealt with their problems in a more constructive manner, and of the many repercussions their suicide would have had within their families and the community. Nevertheless, *Welcome to the N.H.K.* does not offer a silver-bullet solution to Japan's suicide problem. In the end, Satō is still a recovering *hikikomori*, working part-time as a traffic conductor and tutoring Misaki for her college entrance exams. He is still unhappy with his life and blames the "NHK" for his shortcomings. The only comfort offered by the series is the final message that no

matter what happens, life goes on. It may be helpless to resist but at least everyone is in it together.

Though *Welcome to the N.H.K.* portrays suicide and other cotemporary social issues in a fairly realistic manner, the plot's occasional zany twists and silly humor justifies its *shōnen* label. For an overall more mature observation of macro-level suicide in popular media, rather than *manga* and *anime* of the *shōnen* genre, one should look instead at *seinen*.

*Seinen* (meaning “young man”) is another genre of *anime* and *manga* produced for males, but unlike *shōnen*, *seinen* is targeted at an older age group, from young adults to older gentlemen. Admittedly, the *shōnen* genre is now so broad that in reality there exists great overlap between *seinen* and *shōnen*. Ingulsrud and Allen support this outlook, declaring that *manga* and *anime* genres have become increasingly blurred (7).

Traditionally speaking, however, *seinen* differs from *shōnen* in being more replete with highly violent and sexual content, and having a greater number of stories that deal with serious subject matter. As classic *shōnen* is not as appealing to older men, niche subgenres typical to *seinen* like psychological thrillers or stories surrounding everyday life provide new outlooks on societal problems seldom seen in *shōnen*<sup>17</sup>. Though fewer in number than in the past, true *seinen* works still exist, some of which also deal with suicide.

One notable example is Usamaru Furuya's (1968- ) 2002 *manga Jisatsu Saakuru* (in English, *Suicide Circle*). The plot of *Suicide Circle* involves an apocalyptic scenario

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<sup>17</sup> That is not to say these subgenres are unexplored in *shōnen*, as the *shōnen* genre is so broad that it basically includes a little of everything. However, it is undeniable that these subgenres comprise a much larger portion of *seinen manga* and *anime* as older audiences find them most appealing.

and pending dystopia not unlike that found in *Alive*, but it differs from the *shōnen* series in that it concludes on a much bleaker tone that ultimately suggests suicide to be both unavoidable and endemic to the Japanese people. It also offers a cynical perspective of many qualities of 21<sup>st</sup> Japan, including the negative effects of technological advancements, increased consumerism, and the repercussions of Japan's traumatic history on its psyche.

*Suicide Circle* tells the story of Saya, a young schoolgirl and sole survivor of a mass suicide event in which a group of female students jump in unison in front of a train. Saya's childhood friend Kiyoko learns that a cult known as the "Suicide Circle," of which Saya had become a part of, was behind organizing the event. Saya, who exhibited blunted affect following her failed suicide attempt, becomes increasingly cheerful as she starts referring to herself as "Michiko" (the same name of the cult's now deceased leader) and recruiting other girls to form a new Suicide Circle.

The suicide epidemic is later revealed to be the result of a suicide virus incidentally called "Mitsuko," and Saya's miraculous survival of her first suicide attempt was due to her being chosen by the self-aware contagion as the new club leader. In other words, she was selected to start a new iteration of the Suicide Circle and organize another mass suicide event. In contrast to *Alive*, *Suicide Circle* concludes not with an eradication of the suicide virus and the promise of a brighter future, but with a new cycle of destruction about to unfold. In the end, Kiyoko unwillingly becomes a part of Saya's new Suicide Circle, joining them in their mass suicide attempt, but now being the sole survivor herself, destined to become the new Mitsuko.

Though this series also offers no solution to breaking the suicide cycle, it does hint at two of its causes. The first is the adverse effects of Japan's increasing consumerist culture. The fact that most of the suicide victims in *Suicide Circle* are teenage schoolgirls is particularly symbolic of this. The schoolgirl has become a sort of sex symbol in contemporary Japan, resulting in her frequent appearance in popular media (such as in *Ghost Talker's Daydream*) thanks in part to the mantra that "sex sells." But more importantly, she is also the icon of consumerist culture for her role of the trendsetter in Japanese society. Cultural anthropologist Anne Allison notes how the schoolgirl earned this new image in the 1970s, when girls were becoming larger consumers of luxury goods and developed into the "counterweight to the enterprise society: a self-indulgent pursuer of fantasies and dreams through the consumption of merchandise" (Allison 139). Thus, the schoolgirl reflected an emerging consumerist culture, and is nowadays the physical representation of commercialism in contemporary Japan. *Suicide Circle's* portrayal of the schoolgirl as the source of the epidemic, then, suggests Japan's capitalistic and consumerist tendencies are literal hosts to the suicide fever that is sweeping the nation.

The second implied cause or catalyst of the epidemic is the newfound role of technology as a suicide enabler. Japanologist Susan Napier argues in her book *Anime from Akira to Howl's Moving Castle* that works with dystopian storylines like *Suicide Circle* are expressions of a pervasive social pessimism induced by Japan's traumatic experiences in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As she puts it, they are suggestive of a "society with profound anxieties about the future" (29). *Suicide Circle* epitomizes and gives contemporary context for this anxiety in noting that while the Mitsuko virus had always

been prevalent in Japan, it has proliferated much more readily in recent times thanks to the introduction and popularization of the Internet.

Without question, the Internet has ushered a new venue for suicide to spread, thanks to the emergence of countless online suicide forums that allow easy orchestration of group suicide among individuals (typically young individuals) too afraid to die alone. This form of suicide has been dubbed “*netto shinjū*” (net *shinjū*) and is particularly common among those 20-30 years of age (Ikunaga, Nath and Skinner 280-302). Ikunaga, Nath, and Skinner found in their 2013 qualitative analysis of a Japanese suicide forum that users’ justifications for suicide subscribe to both Western explanations and a Japanese sociocultural basis. That is, suicidal forum users described feeling psychological pain, hopelessness, and a desire to escape (common grounds for suicide as perceived by the West), as well as an emphasis on lack of support and interpersonal concerns, roused by Japan’s collectivistic culture.

*Suicide Circle* is actually based on the 2001 film *Suicide Club*. Although their plots drastically differ, both discuss similar themes like the detrimental role of the Internet in the suicide epidemic and cynicism towards consumerist and work-obsessed culture, particularly in their compromising of self-understanding and the development of meaningful relationships with others. Film director Sion Sono (1961- ) is infamous for his incredibly abstract and long-winded films that oftentimes deal with taboo subject matter. *Suicide Club* is no exception, as it is full of symbols and metaphors allowing for multiple interpretations.

Like *Suicide Circle*, *Suicide Club* opens with the mass suicide at the train station, but the plot similarities end there. Rather than a sole survivor, detectives sent to



investigate the scene (one of which is lead protagonist Detective Kuroda) find instead a bag containing a roll of unusually tattooed strips of skin stitched together, later revealed to have come from the suicide victims. The detectives then receive a call from a woman who refers to herself as “The Bat,” a computer-addicted NEET<sup>18</sup> sharing a trashed and rundown apartment with her father (“The Bat,” then, is an appropriate nickname, hinting at a recluse who never leaves her “cave”). She tips off to the detectives that the source of the suicides may be found online, referring them to a website that tracks the number of women and men suicide victims through red and white dots respectively. Once again, the Internet plays a part in mediating suicide, reaffirming the role of modern technology in enabling its orchestration en masse.

Eventually the suicide craze has extended beyond just schoolgirls, hitting all members of society from moms mid-cooking to comedians mid-act. A young woman named Mitsuko is then introduced as a new character. Mitsuko is on her way to her boyfriend Masa’s apartment when his body collapse right in front of her, having plummeted to his death from the balcony above. She consequently gets called in for questioning, and the police learn that Mitsuko has a tattoo identical to those on the strips of skin found earlier.

The police begin to suspect a terrorist group known as “Suicide Club” to be behind the suicides, when a mysterious child stranger calls Detective Kuroda informing him there will be another mass suicide at the train station the next day. Naturally, the police act fast to prevent this from happening, only to realize it was a hoax when nothing happens. Later, after sharing a subway ride with passengers that are all visibly sad and

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<sup>18</sup> Acronym that stands for “Not in Education, Employment, or Training,” referring to individuals who do nothing but stay at home, living off of other family members.

lonely, Kuroda returns home to find his whole family had commit suicide, and receives another a call from the child stranger. The boy criticizes Kuroda for his inability to sympathize with others and for only thinking of himself, and cryptically asks the detective if he “feels connected to himself.” Following the call, Kuroda shoots himself.

In its last arc, the story cuts back to Mitsuko, visiting Masa’s apartment one last time when she learns that Masa was a fan of the fictional girl group Dessert. While looking at a Dessert poster in Masa’s room, she decodes a subliminal message that reads “*jisatsu*” (suicide). At that moment, the mysterious child stranger calls her, inviting her to a secret Dessert concert. Mitsuko arrives at an empty theater where she is led to a room full of baby chicks and a group of children waiting for her. The children ask if she is connected to herself and if she is capable of making connections with others, to which she answers “yes.” They then shave off strip of skin from Mitsuko’s back along with her tattoo. The film ends with the disbandment of Dessert and Mitsuko at a train station, who the viewer is led to believe will jump into the tracks only to get on the train instead.

Like all of Sono’s films, much of *Suicide Club* is up to personal interpretation. One take on it is that Dessert’s songs were subliminally coercing people to commit suicide. Indeed, in many instances where people kill themselves, one of the group’s songs surreptitiously plays in the background, whether in the radio, the TV, or the person humming to themselves. This would suggest that modern Japan’s commercialistic character—with its flashy and trite pop idols and celebrities getting all the attention— is one of the contributing factors for suicides in Japan. People are so concerned with fitting into a shallow society that they have lost touch of themselves and others.

Indeed, in the film a disregard for others seems to be at the core of the nation's suicide epidemic. Detective Kuroda, for instance, is too engrossed on the suicide case to pay any attention to his wife and children, or even the depressed people on the subway. The Bat also habitually tells her father off, preferring instead to surf the Web by herself or with another disillusioned friend in a dark corner of her room. Additionally, those who commit suicide in the film are always content, perhaps highlighting that it is those who we least worry about who are the ones who are suffering the most.

*Suicide Club* also contains some of the nihilistic feelings of futility and irrelevance presented in Tsurumi's foreword from *The Complete Manual of Suicide*. At one point in the story, The Bat gets abducted (and her father murdered) by a group of thugs who take her to their lair and introduce her to their leader, a sadistic and narcissistic punk called Genesis. The delinquents want to be recognized as the powerful terrorist group behind the deaths, and so force The Bat to contact the police and say the Suicide Club has abducted her. Thus, Genesis and his gang are a part of a generation desperate for the illusion of importance. They feel so powerless and inconsequential that they would rather be blamed for Japan's suicide disaster than lead lives devoid of meaning.

As for the children and the chicks that Michiko meets, they represent the start of a new generation, unsullied by the ways of their consumerist and impersonal society. It is appropriate, then, that they be the ones to question society if its citizens feel connected to themselves and to each other. Those who do claim to feel connected to themselves (the individuals most prone to suicide, branded by the mystifying tattoo), literally have a strip of their skin connected to that of others, and go on to commit suicide, implying they have nothing else to live for. However, there is a certain degree of autonomy to the decision as

evidenced by Mitsuko not killing herself in the end, in spite of having gone through the same process as previous suicide victims. Thus, director Sono argues that whether or not someone commits suicide is entirely dependent on that individual's desire to live, regardless of whether or not their lives are perceived to have a purpose.

A film sequel to *Suicide Club* debuted four years later in 2005 called *Noriko's Dinner Table* (in Japanese, *Noriko no Shokutaku*), also directed by Sion Sono. It expounds on many of the ideas presented in the preceding film through a plot that is possibly even more convoluted and symbolic, and with a more opinionated and disheartening final message as well. *Noriko's Dinner Table* metaphorically portrays the youth's search for purpose, and comments on the disintegration of the family ideal and its effects on the younger generation. The film follows the same storyline as *Suicide Club*, only this time through the perspective of four other characters: Noriko, a teenager who runs away from her countryside home to Tokyo; Yuka, Noriko's younger sister, who eventually follows Noriko's footsteps by running away herself; their father Tetsuzo, who goes in pursuit of them; and Kumiko, a girl Noriko meets in Tokyo.

Noriko, who lives in the countryside with her family, strives to move to Tokyo and become an independent woman. She resents her strict father, a local newspaper reporter who only covers banal local happenings, for personifying the dullness of their lifestyle. Noriko finds a release from her mundane life by frequenting an online chat room, the same website from the first film that kept track of the suicide victims. There, she befriends member "Ueno Station 54" from Tokyo and soon later runs away from home to meet Ueno Station 54 in person.

Ueno Station 54 is found to Kumiko, a girl working for an acting company that deals with “family rental.” In other words, she is an “identity prostitute” of sorts, adopting a specific persona for her customers (usually lonely people or those who have not overcome the loss of a loved one) for an allotted amount of time. Kumiko recruits Noriko into the company, who now only answers to her online pseudonym “Mitsuko.”

In the meantime, Noriko’s younger daughter Yuka also becomes disillusioned with her life. She stumbles upon the same chat room Noriko frequented, begins posting on the message board, and eventually runs away to Tokyo as well. However, unlike Noriko, Yuka leaves clues behind for her father about her whereabouts, proclaiming, “I managed to reach my sister’s heart. Would dad reach mine?” (*Sono Noriko’s Dinner Table*) Once in Tokyo, she runs into Noriko and Kumiko who recruit her into their bizarre acting gig as well.

*Noriko’s Dinner Table* is an obvious metaphor of the youth’s uncertainty of their role in society, as the characters literally take on multiple identities in an attempt to understand who they truly are, presumably due to feeling ignored and misunderstood. Kumiko’s involvement in the family rental business in particular is not surprising after we learn of her traumatic past. Abandoned as a baby in a train station locker, she is unable to form real connections with others and holds a cynical view towards the concept of family. As evidence, when her biological mother reaches out to Kumiko years later, Kumiko dismisses her, mocking her for her “bad acting” as if she were part of the family rental business. Seemingly alone in the world, Kumiko is forced to question her existence and her being.

It is also telling how easily Noriko and Yuka are recruited into the business as well, as unlike Kumiko the two of them seemingly led fairly ordinary, albeit mundane, lives. For them, it was not childhood trauma that compels them to join, but rather the result of lack of familial support. In reality, Noriko and Yuka felt just as lost and alone as Kumiko: their parents, despite their best intentions, were not in tune with the needs of their daughters. This is evidenced in a flashback where Noriko's family takes a family portrait while on the trip. The girls are very clearly depressed in the photo, but the parents cannot see it. Their mother, not noticing (or perhaps actively ignoring) the frowns, later recreates the photo into a painting with everyone smiling. The father too is neglectful: much like Detective Kuroda in *Suicide Club*, Tetsuzo prioritizes his career over family.

Noriko and Yuka's mutual disappearance finally drive their parents into action. After their mother commits suicide in despair, their father Tetsuzo decides to go to Tokyo and look for his daughters when learns of their involvement in the "acting company." Since neither Yuka nor Noriko remember their original identities any longer, Tetsuzo hires their "services" in hopes of snapping them out of it. He is partially successful but is ultimately also engulfed into the whole affair, starting a new fake family with his daughters and Kumiko as the mother as they sit around the dinner table having supper.

The dinner table is frequently featured throughout the film as a symbol of the family. Noriko's family in the beginning of the film argues incessantly around it during their meals. While this is contrasted in the film's final minutes with Noriko's fake family being all smiles as they eat together, their happiness is clearly a farcical acting display. Thus, Sono argues that Japan's once strong family values are disintegrating: the modern Japanese family is either completely dyssynchronous, or only pretend to care for each

other. And as *Noriko's Dinner Table* suggests, the youth are the ones most affected by the weakening familial support.

Noriko and Yuka are not the only ones who are disillusioned. Kumiko had also roped the schoolgirls who take part in the mass train station suicide into the family rental business due to their own insecurities. But unlike Noriko and Yuka, who only had to assume the identity of a stranger, the schoolgirls were in charge of assuming the role of suicide victims due to— according to Kumiko— an alleged demand for suicide victims in contemporary society.

Kumiko elaborates on this idea through a chilling speech she gives to the girls prior to their jumping in front of the train. She claims that everyone has a specific role in society. Like in nature, some will kill and some will be killed. In her words, some are lions while others are rabbits— that is the circle of life. She also laments how everyone is so selfish in wanting to be lions all the time, a desire incompatible with a capitalist society. “Everyone wants to be champagne, not the glass. A flower, not the vase. But the world needs glasses and vases. These roles need to be filled. Like a master/servant relationship. Maybe that’s how capitalism is?” (Sono *Noriko's Dinner Table*). A society built on competition will inevitably have its share of “losers,” but when the stakes are so high— or at least perceived to be high, as Zeng and Le Tendre contend with regards to academic competition— failure is not a viable option. Kumiko circumvents this problem by persuading others to assume and succumb to their shortcomings in the most extreme way possible.

By the end of the film, Yuka and Noriko become aware of their previous lives, but Noriko considers it just another role in her past. Yuka, on the other hand, opts to run

away, feeling like a completely new person. The story concludes with Noriko bidding farewell to her sister, the online chat room, and her own adolescence, finally admitting she is Noriko. The film's ending provides a bittersweet message in that it recognizes the potential for personal growth but questions how much it matters in a society that is fundamentally broken. Yuka was not yet sure of who she was and sets off on a new journey; but older sister Noriko, who had had more time to experiment with her identity, had finally found herself by the film's conclusion. This suggests that the youth *are* capable of understanding who they are if they devote the time towards self-exploration. This is similar to *Suicide Club*'s message, which expressed suicide as ultimately being a choice left to the individual. Unfortunately, *Noriko's Dinner Table* also highlights how feeling connected to one's self does not change society in any way. Noriko will still have to put up with a fake family and a fake lifestyle. This is the reality of contemporary Japan: in the grand scheme of things, knowing one's true identity merely allows one to cope with an oppressive reality.

Besides the disintegration of the family and feelings of disconnectedness within a shallow, contemporary society, another factor that adds to the disillusionment of the postmodern youth is the emergence of and dependence on technology. A few of the previously discussed works have already provided glimpses of this anxiety, but these feelings are more transparently conveyed in Yoshitoshi ABe's (1971- ) *anime* series *Serial Experiments Lain*. Released in 1998, *Serial Experiments Lain* debuted at a time when the Internet was just becoming mainstream, and the doubts about its future influence in society more salient. This *anime* in particular explores escapism through the



use of technology, and is yet another highly abstract and schizophrenic piece of work that brings up more questions than it does answers.

The story takes place in a cyberpunk setting where people use a multipurpose information terminal known as a “Navi” to connect to the “Wired,” the *anime*’s version of the Internet. The protagonist is a young girl called Lain who is spurred to explore the Wired after receiving an email from a classmate who had killed herself earlier. According to this girl, she had only given up her physical body, but continued to live through the Wired. Her curiosity piqued, Lain asks for a more advanced version of a Navi from her computer-savvy father who happily obliges. She also installs a chip called “Psyche” onto her Navi allowing her to connect her mind directly to the Wired.

Many uncertainties emerge as the plot unfolds: Lain starts being pursued by a group of men in suits; finds another version of herself in the Wired; hears of a mysterious organization in the Wired known as “Knights;” and learns of secret parapsychological Wired-related experiments of which she may be the product of. The line between reality and the virtual world is constantly blurred, and there is ample reason to suspect that Lain is either software designed to facilitate connections between the human unconsciousness and the Wired, or even that Lain may be God.

While there is never a clear answer as to what exactly is occurring, in the most superficial terms *Serial Experiments Lain* represents the existential woes and questioning of what is real and who we are, all in the context of virtual reality. The youth especially take advantage of the Navi to connect to the Wired and break free from reality, many of whom live exclusively in this virtual reality after killing themselves in the physical world. The story also addresses the idea of human connection through virtual reality. Lain

confronts a figure in the Wired claiming to be God, who says the next step in human evolution is for everyone to collectively connect their unconscious and live together as one through the Wired. Lain, however, dismisses this idea, defeats this “God,” and returns society to its state before the suicides started taking place. She also disagrees with the notion that the Wired is the storage of all information in the universe, as “God” had suggested. Instead, Lain insists the Wire could not possibly store it all and so cannot be the “upper limits of reality.” What *are* the upper limits or reality is never revealed, but the Wired is certainly not as meaningful or as important as initially thought. In other words, *Serial Experiments Lain* argues that while one can easily escape reality through the Wired or any other virtual world, it is no replacement for the *real* world. This seemed like appropriate words of advice for a lost generation who would grow more and more exposed to these sorts of technological advancements.

Through their dystopian settings and narratives that expose society’s shortcomings, these youth-focused macro-level works attribute Japan’s suicide epidemic to its capitalistic and consumerist culture, disintegration of the family ideal, lack of freedom or significance in their lives, and the effect of technology on the development of interpersonal connections. While the *manga*, *anime*, and film series discussed above are useful for observing how society as a whole perceives or justifies suicide, works that examine the act at the micro-level provide a more personal look at suicide and affirm that societal opinions also reflect individual opinions. Such works will be the focus of the next subsection.

## II. MICRO-LEVEL WORKS

In contrast to the previously discussed macro-level works, the following novels and *manga* do not rely on delusions or mass-scale disasters to explain Japan's suicide epidemic. Instead, they focus on few characters and their personal accounts as the basis for the plot, exploring the issue of suicide and attempting to make sense of their world.

If the *shōnen* and *seinen* genres of *manga* and *anime* are best suited for macro-level representations of suicide, the *shōjo* genre serves as their micro-level counterpart. *Shōjo* is targeted at the female audience specifically and, unlike the *shōnen* and *seinen* genres, does in fact have a clearly defined identity that it rarely deviates from: a focus on affect and human relationships. *Manga* scholar Fujimoto Yukari describes the typical *shōjo* plot as a continuous search by the protagonist for one's place in society, a search that is primarily conducted through one's relationship with others (qtd. in Ingulsrud and Allen). For this reason, the *shōjo* genre has great potential for shedding light on the social element surrounding suicide in Japan in observing how the act affects its citizens at the individual or familial level. Two exemplary *shōjo manga* that deal with suicide are Takano Ichigo's (1986- ) *Orange* (in Japanese, *Orenji*, released in 2012) and Suenobu Keiko's (1979- ) *Life* (or *Raifu*, first serialized in 2002).

*Orange* is a still ongoing *manga* about high school girl Naho Takamiya and her love for the new transfer student Kakeru, a pretty-boy who fits the typical role of primary love interest for *manga* targeted at schoolgirl readers. It is suggested that Kakeru will eventually commit suicide, overcome with guilt over the self-inflicted death of his mentally unstable mother. Before he too kills himself, however, Naho receives a mysterious letter from herself ten years in the future revealing to her Kakeru's fate. The

story subsequently revolves around Naho trying to comfort Kakeru without revealing to him his future, and deals with the very real emotions surrounding coping with the loss of a loved one, overcoming regret, and moving on.

Family history of suicide attempt is a well-known risk factor for suicide, a claim also applicable to Japan (Nakagawa et al.). *Shōjo*'s more personal subject matter allows it to tackle these issues at the individual level of affect. Though grieving pretty-boys do not make up the bulk of suicide victims in Japan like *shōjo manga* of this sort would have you believe, *Orange* presents suicide to young girls in the context of affect, both in the advent of the act and in its aftermath.

Suenobu's *manga Life* portrays many of the commonly known contributing factors for youth in the context of the *shōjo*'s day-to-day life. *Life* follows the academic life of Ayumu, a first year high school student who is bullied at school and practices self-harm. Ayumu is the ultimate helpless protagonist in a story steeped in hyperbole and worst-case scenarios: her bullies villainized to a ridiculous degree, at one point going so far as to even trying to kill her; her mother a neglectful single parent more concerned with the wellbeing of Ayumu's younger sister; and teachers who turn a blind eye to the bullying crisis because the main bully is the daughter of an influential politician. There are a few suicide attempts throughout the story, such as by Ayumu when she first starts to be bullied, a past bully who comes to regret her actions after she is bullied herself, and the bully ringleader once she is finally held accountable for her actions. Nevertheless, *Life*'s final message is clear: we must be strong, never run away from our problems and, above all, live.

Precisely because of its ridiculously hyperbolic plot and black and white relationship between protagonist and antagonist, Ayumu's unwavering determination, courage and eventual triumph over her struggles makes *Life* the ideal source of catharsis for individuals who have found themselves in similar situations. A recent cross-sectional study found that the prevalence of self-harm among Japanese adolescents was more than four times as high among girls than among boys of the same age group (Watanabe et al. 550-60), the exact demographic this *manga* targets. Another study noted that around 40% of those adolescents who self-harmed did not seek help, and the act was associated with suicidal ideation (Watanabe et al.). The series *Life* was wildly successful, running from 2002 to 2009 and even remade into a hit television drama. Its popularity goes to show the extent to which the themes in the *manga* resonated with the *shōjo* audience. It reflects real conflicts and insecurities present in the daily life of the average schoolgirl who may be turning to *manga* such as *Life* (and *Orange*) as a means to emotional release rather than opening up about their problems to others.

Though the *shōjo* genre is by definition more prone to micro-level portrayals due to its focus on relationships and affect, the broadness of the *shōnen* genre allows it to occasionally take a micro-level inclination as well. Such is the case with Kumeta Kōji's (1967- ) 2005 hit *manga* series *Sayonara Zetsubō-Sensei* (literally "Good-bye, Mister Despair"), which parodies Osamu Dazai and his works' depressing nature. The story revolves around a comically suicidal junior high school teacher obsessed with killing himself while his motley crew of students tries to convince him otherwise (and occasionally become suicidal themselves).

The *manga* is a satirical take on traditional Japanese culture in general, and

suicide culture specifically. Many of the chapter titles are quotes or puns from works by famous Japanese modern writers—a number of which were victims of suicide—including Osamu Dazai, Kenzaburō Ōe, Sachio Itō, and Yukio Mishima. Furthermore, everything about the story is imbued in Japanese tradition: the aesthetics and clothing worn by *sensei* are heavily inspired by those from Japan's Taishō Period; there are endless instances of Japanese imagery like cherry blossoms; and frequent plot references to Japanese folklore and religion. *Sensei* himself symbolizes traditional Japanese ideals: he suggests to one of his students who had an argument with her boyfriend that she commit a love suicide; is afraid of foreigners for their directness; and falls in love with a *hikikomori* with pale skin and long hair (traditional Japanese beauty aesthetics) from never leaving home and suggests that they commit *shinjū* together.

In essence, *Sayonara Zetsubō-Sensei* is also all about contrasts. *Sensei*'s traditionalism juxtaposed with his 21<sup>st</sup> century surroundings is an example of this, and one that is especially revealing in that, by incorporating a traditional Japanese figure in a contemporary setting, the *manga* highlights both how much Japan has changed over the years, and more importantly how much has remained the same. Suicide in the series continues to be an integral part of the Japanese identity, so much so that the humor stems from both the absurdity of the scenarios *sensei* puts himself in as well as in the kernel of relatability and accompanied social commentary. While the suicidal tendencies of the likes of Osamu Dazai are not representative of society as a whole, *Sayonara Zetsubō-Sensei* suggests suicide is as traditional and timeless as the cherry blossom. This stance calls to mind *Suicide Circle*'s assertion that the suicide virus has long been a part of Japanese society.

Such micro-level insights are not exclusive to *manga*. A number of novels opt for a micro-level point of view as well, and further validate the findings in macro-level works in demonstrating how many justifications for suicide at the societal level resonate at the personal level as well. Kirino Natsuo's (1951- ) 2008 novel *Real World* indicates the desire to escape from an oppressive reality is a sentiment that also emerges in the micro-level. It covers some of the same anxieties addressed previously in macro-level works, including the disintegration of the family ideal, the increasing generation gap and, of course, escapism. The story revolves around an elite student who after killing his mother receives help from his neighbor and her friends to run away, all of whom live vicariously through his actions. Like *Noriko's Dinner Table*, *Real World* is told through different chapters, each through the perspective of a different character.

The novel starts from the perspective of Toshiko, or Toshi for short, the neighbor of a brilliant but strange boy nicknamed Worm. When she hears rumors that Worm possibly murdered his mother during a heated argument, she enlists the help of her three friends to help him escape: Terauchi, the introspective "brain" of the group; Yuzan, a closeted lesbian; and Kirarin, a cute and cheerful girl. They give Worm a bicycle and a cellphone and he takes off, coercing Kirarin to come along as a hostage. After some time, Terauchi has enough of Worm's antics and rats on him to the police, resulting in Worm's capture and consequently Kirarin's death. The story concludes with a suicide letter from Terauchi to Toshi, whose guilt over Kirarin's death serves as the catalyst for her suicide.

The four girls go to great lengths to help Worm because they all share something in common: the desire to escape. In retrospect, Worm justifies killing his mother out of a subconscious wish to cut all ties with society and disconnect himself from the world.

Indeed, the girls all feel the same disdain for their livelihood. Toshi, for instance, laments all of the hassles unique to her generation— having to constantly watch out for perverts, marketing analysts, bullies, and people trying to scam her— all of which she believes her parents are blind to. “The sense of danger we feel is something my mother can’t comprehend... [My parents] can’t really sense how their child’s been assaulted by commercialism ever since she was little, how she’s lived in fear of being eaten alive by the morons around her. They just don’t get it” (Kirino 15). Toshi even takes on the alias of “Ninna Hori” in public to get around others’ probing.

Toshi’s friends feel no different. Kirarin’s bubbly nature is also a fake persona, as she herself reveals during the chapter told from her perspective. She willingly goes with Worm because, as Terauchi puts it, “[She] has this whole illusory image of him and hopes she’ll be changed by being with him” (140). Yuzan, on the other hand, is perhaps the one who most exposes her true self to others, though even she keeps her sexuality a secret from her friends. She winds up being the one who most helps Worm escape, projecting her own persecution complex as a lesbian onto Worm.

As for Terauchi, she feels family life is becoming more problematic and individualistic: her father always works until late and her mother has an affair, leaving their daughter to deal with her problems on her own. Terauchi finds an escape from the real world by being cold and distant, holding back her true feelings and manipulating the system to get what she wants. But Kirarin’s death proves to be the final drop and too much to bear, and Terauchi becomes too exhausted to go on. In her suicide letter, Terauchi notes how the whole experience shattered her notion of reality, and the only *real* thing left in this new meta-reality was death.



Toshi and her friends are not the only ones who look up to Worm. Terauchi's younger brother exclaims how Worm is regarded as a hero in his school because he is "an elite kid who fell." They all dream of falling out from a society in which they are misunderstood and left to fend for themselves. *Real World* offers the same unsatisfying conclusion as *Noriko's Dinner Table*. In the end, Toshi decides to no longer use an alias and live in the "real" world. Rather than trying to change society, she concludes there is only room for adaptation and accepting their grim reality. But unlike *Noriko's Dinner Table*, *Real World* does not rely on a deeply metaphorical and dystopian depiction of society to express the youth's desire for autonomy and freedom. Rather, the characters in Kirino's novel are blunt in expressing their dissatisfaction and leave little room for alternate interpretations. This is the real world, the world they live in.

Besides *Real World*, the works of renowned postmodern novelists Murakami Haruki (1949- ) and Banana Yoshimoto (1964- ) also provide ample opportunity for analysis of suicide and the Japanese youth, as common themes of their novels include death, trauma, and coping among young adults.

Murakami's 1987 novel *Norwegian Wood* is one of his most famous and also relevant to the discussion of youth suicide. The novel was an unexpected hit among the East Asian youth upon its release, presumably in part because they identified with the protagonists' despondent view of their generation ("The Asahi Shimbun"). Though set in 1969 (so not technically indicative of the *postmodern* youth), *Norwegian Wood* takes place in the context of the student riots mentioned in Tsurumi's *The Complete Suicide Manual* foreword, and so sheds light on the youth mentality that was the precursor to the societal apathy and pessimism of today. Murakami himself was part of the *Dankai no*

*Sedai* (or Baby Boomer Generation), and *Norwegian Wood*'s setting may be drawn from his own postwar experiences.

The story opens with Toru Watanabe, a man in his mid 30s, overcome by recollections of his past as a teenager in the late 1960s upon hearing the Beatles' song "Norwegian Wood." He specifically remembers the suicide of his best friend Kizuki, and the impact his death had on his life and that of Kizuki's girlfriend Naoko. Naoko and Watanabe bond over their grief and grow closer romantically, but she ultimately cannot get over Kizuki's death and is moved to a sanatorium. Meanwhile, Watanabe starts falling for his classmate Midori while paying frequent visits to Naoko at the sanatorium. As a result he grows closer to both Midori and Naoko, as well as Naoko's middle-aged roommate Reiko. Naoko eventually kills herself, sending Watanabe into a hysterical frenzy in which he wanders aimlessly throughout Japan before being found and comforted by Reiko. After recollecting his thoughts, Watanabe finally realizes he is in love with Midori, and the story concludes with him calling her from a phone booth.

The primary focus of *Norwegian Wood* may be to explore how the death of others impacts one's own life, but it also provides some information about the post-war generation and how it compares to that of today. While Tsurumi mentions in his preface how the student protests of the 60s gave them a false sense of importance, *Norwegian Wood* suggests that many of the youth of the time were already disillusioned. Watanabe is constantly scoffing at the protesters, pointing out their hypocrisy at rebelling for campus reforms while at the same time attending classes and worrying about their grades. He himself pays little mind to his academics, sleeping around town with his womanizing friend Nagasawa in lieu of studying. Watanabe also has a hard time adjusting to the

outside world after visiting Naoko at the sanatorium, a place where everyone can freely admit to their shortcomings. That is to say, he feels pressured to put on airs when out in the real world, both in terms of his strength in overcoming the death of his friend and in projecting the “importance” of his generation.

Reiko, who used to be a piano teacher, recalls one type of student that was the hardest to train: despite being talented, they were spoiled and lacked discipline, and could get away with talent alone without putting any effort. She thought these spoiled and undisciplined types to be tragic figures for having no character, bypassing situations like hard work and criticism that contributed towards character building. This is an allusion to Watanabe’s generation who were born after the war, a time period when the rest of society were forced to question and come to their own understanding of what it meant to be “Japanese” in rationalizing what their nation was fighting for. The youth of the 60s had yet to have any such opportunities to truly explore their own identities and make sense of their world. With the exception of a few individuals, like Watanabe and Naoko who are reshaped by Kizuki’s death, and Midori who is an orphan, those engrossed in the student movements live shallow, meaningless existences in spite of their vain efforts at rebelling and making a difference.

Reiko further comments on a letter to Watanabe that they are all “imperfect human beings living in an imperfect world” (Murakami 322). Kizuki seemed to have understood this prior to his death and may have been his rationale for committing suicide. Naoko explains why Kizuki and she could never be together for the rest of their lives, as they tended to lose themselves in their own little world and eventually “we would have had to pay the world back what we owed it” (155). Kizuki’s— and Naoko’s— suicide

were the result of their fear of ultimately having to adapt to the outside world; having to face the challenges and harsh reality of being part of a generation that for them, lacked a satisfying sense of identity. These anxieties stemming from an existential crisis are also present in the current youth generation, as evidenced by other postmodern works such as *Noriko's Dinner Table*.

Moreover, *Norwegian Wood's* conclusion is strikingly similar to that of other discussed works examined so far in suggesting the only choice still left to the youth is the choice between life and death. Fittingly, Watanabe must choose between Midori and Naoko, two characters who respectively represent the dichotomy between life and death.

Naoko was always destined to commit suicide. She recalls half in jest how her family's history of suicide (both her sister and uncle had killed themselves) meant self-inflicted death must run her blood. Midori on the other hand, is a free spirit. She is similar to Watanabe and Naoko in that her life is also marked by the death of others, and holds similarly cynical view of her generation and future. Yet unlike Naoko, she never once resorts to attempting suicide for relief. In one conversation Midori has with Watanabe, she imagines how easy life would be if it had *deus ex machina* like in the Euripides plays they were reading: "If you felt stuck or trapped, some god would swing down from up there and solve all your problems. What could be easier than that?" (228). To Naoko and Kizuki, suicide was their *deus ex machina*, but to Midori it is only wishful thinking. She opts to go on living instead, and Watanabe ultimately joins her in spite of being fated to mourn for the rest of his life. Once again, like in a number of other works examined, the choice between life and death is said to be at the suicidal individual's discretion.

Unlike Murakami, Yoshimoto Banana was born after the Baby Boomer Generation, and so her works deal with more recent subject matter. Her writing style has been compared to *shōjo* works in that they also focus on personal relationships and affect. But like *Norwegian Wood*, Yoshimoto's novel *Amrita*— first published in 1994 around the time of the bursting of Japan's bubble economy— is another piece that plays with nostalgia and memory to expound on the identity crisis of contemporary Japanese youth. The story follows Sakumi, a young woman in her 20s who loses part of her memory after slipping and hitting her head. Sakumi's older sister Mayu was a famous actress and model who retires from acting following a nervous breakdown, and eventually dies in a car crash after driving under the influence of sleeping pills and alcohol (i.e., suicide). The plot revolves around Sakumi trying to overcome her sister's death and her amnesia.

*Amrita* metaphorically contrasts the past with the present as a way of showcasing the younger generation's continued struggle to understand their identity. In the face of its traumatic history, Yoshimoto argues postwar and post-disaster Japan has transformed into something unlike its prewar self, and it is now up to the youth of today to rediscover what it means to be Japanese. The character of Sakumi is an exemplar of the postmodern Japanese youth. While Japanese work culture is one in which the employee is expected to fully devote his life to his craft or company, Sakumi represents one of many emerging "freeters"<sup>19</sup> of her generation. Sakumi's family is also not at all representative of what is considered typically Japanese. She lives in a very unconventional household, sharing a roof with her mother (a twice married and once divorced widow), her mother's best friend Junko (who is undergoing a divorce after cheating on her husband), her cousin

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<sup>19</sup> The term used to describe those who live off of part-time work, their jobs merely a means to fuel their everyday life.

Mikiko, and her younger half-brother Yoshio. Not only does her “family” not have a father figure, none of the women fit the traditional role of subservient entities dependent on the man.

Mayu, on the other hand, was much more traditionally Japanese, and represents the long-established Japanese identity. She subscribed to traditional Japanese gender roles, having retired from her acting career with the intention of settling down with her boyfriend Ryuichiro. Her death, then, symbolizes the death of traditional values. This is evidenced by her suicide being provoked by two abortions in her past, an act contradictory of motherly behavior expected from the traditional Japanese woman.

Yoshimoto incorporates some fantastical elements in *Amrita* as well, such as Yoshio being clairvoyant and a couple of Ryuichiro’s friends having the ability to communicate with the dead. This magical realism not only blurs the lines between time and reality, it also allows Sakumi and Yoshio to directly interact with entities from the past. For instance, in one of her bouts of self-exploration, Sakumi goes to Saipan to reflect on her life and amnesia, a disorder that divides her into her present and past self, both of which she struggles to reconcile. There, Ryuichiro’s paranormal friends Saseko and Kozumi comment how the island is steeping with spirits of Japanese soldier who lost their lives in World War II, some of whom come to them for comfort. Yoshio also has frequent visions and dreams through which Mayu communicates with him. It is in one of these dreams that she reveals her only regret in life were her abortions, and wishes she had not “hurried through life” (i.e., made such rash, hasty decisions).

In the end, Sakumi recovers her past memories (her past identity) but recognizes that she has fundamentally changed. Like Mayu— and the pre-contemporary Japanese

identity—, the past can never be recovered; only remembered. Mr. Mesmer, one of Yoshio's friends with supernatural abilities, sees Sakumi's concussion both as a gift and a curse. On the one hand, she has been given a clean slate to work with. But on the other, he can see part of Sakumi died with her lost memories. Hence, Yoshimoto suggests Japan's numerous traumatic events (from the war to natural disasters and recent economic collapse) have had a permanent impact on the national identity. Nevertheless, though Mesmer believes Sakumi to be lonely, he differentiates her from her sister through the fact that Sakumi retains hope.

In the novel's foreword, Yoshimoto claims how she intended *Amrita* to highlight the never-ending cycle of daily life that persists in spite of the occurrence of major or traumatic events. That is to say, life goes on, and the future not yet lost. *Amrita*'s closing statement is Sakumi professing, "Regardless of what might happen, things will never change. I'll continue to flow endlessly through life... And nothing will get in my way" (Yoshimoto 366). Yoshimoto's solution to the postmodern youth's search for their own identity is to recognize that Japan has invariably changed, and while the youth can look back to the past in nostalgia they must also have hope for the future and create their own identity.

The micro-level works in this subsection both confirm youth-related justifications for suicide like bullying and the underlying escapism raised in macro-level works, as well as intimately explore the youth's struggles in no longer having a comprehensive national identity. The next subsection will examine works that pit characters in post-death settings or impossible scenarios forcing them to reevaluate their lives and the will to live.

### III. POST-DEATH AND THE WILL TO LIVE

Splitting the youth-related literature and popular culture media sources into macro- and micro-level subgroups is useful in that it establishes the frame of reference through which suicide is being interpreted. There are some exceptional works, however, that are better off being analyzed in their separate subsection for following specific plot elements. These are works that force their characters to reconsider the meaning and purpose of their lives by setting them against situations where their deaths are made particularly salient. Such cases provide another angle through which to observe what factors about contemporary Japan trigger youth suicide and what motivates (or demotivates) them to keep on living.

The first of such works to be examined is the 2002 series *Haibane Renmei* (*Charcoal Feather Federation*), which began as a *dōjinshi*<sup>20</sup> before being remade into an *anime*. Writer of the original *dōjinshi* version ABe Yoshitoshi, also behind *Serial Experiments Lain*, confesses he drew extensively from Murakami Haruki's novel *Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, an author who as previously noted writes extensively about death in postmodern Japan. While ABe admits the plot to be open to interpretation, *Charcoal Feather Federation* is essentially an allegory for the afterlife, some believing it to take place in purgatory.

Winged children known as the Haibane are reborn with no previous memories (besides their dream prior to rebirth) into a town surrounded by walls known as Gile. There, they live peaceful lives until their individual "Day of Flight" arrives, in which the chosen Haibane permanently disappears from Gile and is taken to an unrevealed location.

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<sup>20</sup> Self-published works, in this case a *manga*, whose subject matter more frequently veers from the mainstream due to its independent nature.



Mio Bryce suggests in her article “Haibane Renmei (charcoal feather federation): an enclave for the hurt, alienated souls” that the Haibane represent the contemporary Japanese adolescent and their “self-alienation, self-denial, and suppressed desire for connection to their own selves and others” (Bryce). It is implied that the Haibane are suicide victims (the anime starts with a young girl falling from the sky before being born in Gile) and a Haibane’s Day of Flight comes once they are able to remember and accept their past.

Overall, since each of the characters has a specific trauma to overcome or sin to repent (such as leading a selfish lifestyle or involuntarily causing the death of another), not much can be generalized to the youth population as a whole in terms of their individual epiphanies on life. What one can conclude, however, is what ABe suggests is lacking from society that prevents its youth from coping or overcoming their problems in a healthy manner. What is most intriguing about *Charcoal Feather Federation* is that it refrains from expressing any opinions on suicide. It has no say in condemning or condoning the act, as the story begins only after the decision to take one’s own life has already been made. All that *can* be done, the *anime* demonstrates, is provide the victims with comfort and reassurance. Gile and its citizens do so without judgment: the Haibane carry a relatively carefree life in a quaint little town, and are given as much time as necessary to come to terms with their trauma. These are qualities that are presumably missing from the real world, a reality the youth desperately seek to escape from. In other words, Gile serves as a refuge from the constrictive and overwhelming life of the Japanese teenager.

That is not to say, however, that *Charcoal Feather Generation* takes suicide lightly. The Haibane's suicides become literal parts of their identity, with each of them taking on a new name that relates to their dream prior to rebirth in Gile. The dreams themselves are metaphorical recollections of the Haibane's method of suicide, from drowning in a river to jumping in front of a train. Still, whether the suicide was warranted to begin with is left to the individual's discretion, reflecting Japan's historical tolerance for suicide in certain scenarios (*inseki-jisatsu* during World War II) or sympathy towards suicide victims for supposedly having no other option but to kill themselves (as is often the case with parent-children *shinjū* [Takahashi, Hirasawa, Koyama, Senzaki, and Senzaki]). Unfortunately, it is only post-death that the victims earn the respect or compassion from others they had desperately sought.

*Colorful*, the 2010 novel-based film by director Hara Keiichi (1959- ) is another work that assumes the post-death perspective. It stands apart from all other sources discussed so far in that it is targeted at the pre-teen and young teen demographic rather than young adults. For this reason, the film's story and message are fairly straightforward and conventional, though it does reveal that many of the challenges faced by teens and young adults are also experienced by this younger demographic as well. *Colorful* is also a rare case for portraying youth suicide in a realistic manner, as opposed to the typical suicide-related *shōnen* work like *Alive*, which is also aimed at an audience this young but uses fantasy to tone down the severity of the problem. Because of the loaded and less ambiguous depiction of suicide, *Colorful* is understandably more concerned with promoting anti-suicide sentiments among its young audience than painting a picture of unrectifiable hopelessness and despair. Though not as noncommittal about suicide as

*Charcoal Feather Federation*, its final message is thus equally as therapeutic and supportive.

*Colorful* is the story of a soul that is given a second chance at proving its worth and avoid being permanently removed from the reincarnation cycle. It is tasked with assuming the identity of an unsuccessful suicide attempter and given six months to rediscover the will to live. Consequently, the soul gets reincarnated into the body of 3<sup>rd</sup> year junior high school student and gifted painter Makoto, still unconscious at the hospital after trying to overdose on his mother's sleeping pills. The film deals with a number of problems familiar to the teenage demographic, many of which are also present in other works analyzed, including the disintegration of the family ideal, feelings of loneliness and helplessness, and the negative impact of Japan's materialistic culture on the youth.

The soul soon learns that one of Makoto's main incentives to killing himself was his lack of a supportive family. At first glance, Makoto's family seems to be very caring, but each family member's faults are slowly revealed one by one: his salaryman<sup>21</sup> father is constantly pressured into overtime work at his family's expense; his mother is having an affair with her dance teacher; and his older brother is a self-centered genius who picks on Makoto for not being as intelligent. Makoto's grandmother was the only person he could confide in, and her passing was a major blow to his perceived social support.

What ultimately drove Makoto to suicide, however, was seeing his crush Hiroko prostituting herself. Hiroko justifies selling her body in claiming everything she wants is expensive, but later confides in Makoto that while she loves buying pretty things, she

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<sup>21</sup> The term used to describe Japanese white-collar workers.

sometimes feels compelled to smash them. The fact that a girl as young as 12-years-old resorts to designer handbags and jewelry for self-esteem is evidence that contemporary Japan's capitalistic boom brought more to the nation than short-lived economic prosperity. It also ushered consumerism as a new maladaptive means of coping. Hiroko's materialistic tendencies are clearly her way of dealing with other deep-rooted problems, perhaps a cry for attention in a society that, from the children's point of view, pays no mind to its youth.

*Colorful* also reiterates on the significant role that feelings of alienation and solitude have on youth depression in Japan. Post-death Makoto's situation dramatically improves after befriending his classmate Saotome. Slowly, the soul becomes much more optimistic about Makoto's life, admitting that Saotome helped him bring down the barriers that he had surrounded himself with. Makoto muses after first meeting his new friend,

True unhappiness is in things like having no one to say hi to, or being all on your own on your vacation or when you're moving. Just having someone who'll walk alongside you can be enough to make your heart swell with joy. To the point where you don't even care about anything else. (Hara)

Makoto's newly formed friendship also gives him newfound appreciation for his family. He finally recognizes how his parents and brother had come together in mutual concern following his suicide attempt, and despite their flaws, they all still deeply care about him. Makoto notes how people are made of multiple shades of multiple colors. That is to say, we all have our own faults and strengths and are all special for having them, and we should never resort to suicide due to our imperfections. Makoto also comes to realize that although having the support of others is important, others rely on him for

support as well. *Colorful*'s conclusion, then, is that life is by no means easy, but we must be true to ourselves and not give up, both for our sake and the sake of others.

Not all post-death works share the same optimistic tone of the last two works. Murakami's short story "landscape with flatiron" expresses not what we have to live for, but rather why it is so difficult to go on living. Unlike *Charcoal Feather Federation*'s and *Colorful*'s post-death storyline, Murakami instead tests his characters in the context of post-disaster Japan. "landscape with flatiron" is part of the 1998 compilation *after the quake*, whose narratives were written in response to the devastating 1995 Kobe earthquake, a time when the perception of death was particularly tangible. The trauma emerging from this tragedy rekindled thoughts throughout Japan about death and what it means to live. Though there is no instance of suicide in "landscape with flatiron," the story represents an allegory of life and death that no doubt continues to be relevant today, especially in consideration of Japan's recent March 11<sup>th</sup> disaster.

"landscape with flatiron" is about three individuals watching a bonfire. Junko, a third year high school student, runs away from home to Ibaraki prefecture where she meets her boyfriend Keisuke, a drifter in his early 20s whose only concern is living in the present, and befriends Miyake, a middle-aged artist from Kobe (the sight of the 1995 earthquake) obsessed with bonfires. The story describes a night where the trio is watching the flames and is full of symbolism about life and the repercussions of trauma.

The bonfire, for instance, stands for the will to live. Miyake's fixation on them represents his desperation in finding the desire to live in the face of becoming increasingly suicidal. He has a recurring nightmare about getting stuck in a refrigerator where his death is drawn out by a little bit of air that manages to seep in. This dream

clearly evokes his feelings of being misunderstood and alone in the world, fearing no escape while he increasingly wishes to die (the cold fridge an antithesis to the fire).

Miyake also mentions a painting he is working on of an iron— hot like the bonfire— in an empty room. This painting, then, represents the little motivation he still has left, juxtaposed by the overwhelming emptiness inside.

Junko becomes close to Miyake because she also wishes to die. While waiting for the fire to be lit, she remembers Jack London's story "To Build a Fire" about a man in Alaska who must build a fire to avoid freezing to death. To Junko, he actually longed to die (according to her, it was the right end for him) yet he keeps on fighting until the end. This "deep-rooted contradiction" (Murakami 29) explains why she is so enamored with London and his story. Similarly, Junko wonders why *she* goes on living, believing that she should be dead instead.

In the end, after Keisuke leaves Junko and Miyake to watch the fire by themselves, Junko starts getting sleepy and asks that Miyake wake her once the flames go out. To this he replies, "Don't worry. When the fire goes out, you'll start feeling cold. You'll wake up whether you want to or not" (45). Miyake's statement can be interpreted as one's "waking up" to the futility of their existence and the inevitability of their death.

Unlike *Charcoal Feather Federation* and *Colorful* in which the characters ultimately find reasons to be alive, "landscape with flatiron" questions the validity of their hope. After all, how can contemporary Japan in general, and the Japanese youth specifically, remain hopeful in the face of endless trauma? The nation's poor prospects for the future induced by its traumatic history seems to be a key moderator to Japan's suicide epidemic.

Mori Kōji's (1966- ) 2008 *seinen manga Jisatsutō* (translated as *Suicide Island*) and director Fukasaku Kinji's (1930-2003) 2000 film *Battle Royale* take a more imaginative approach than “landscape with flatiron” in testing the characters' will to live, but as both are also targeted at an older audience, they share similarly disconcerting outlooks. On the surface, *Suicide Island* and *Battle Royale*'s plots share some fundamental similarities in that both involve characters being abandoned in a deserted island and forced to fight for their survival. However, *Suicide Island* ultimately comes to represent an ideal society, whereas *Battle Royale* depicts an extreme conception of the current one.

*Suicide Island* is an ongoing *manga* about an alternate reality where suicide attempters are sent to a deserted island in lieu of receiving treatment. As stated on a signboard in the island, Japan's high suicide rate's toll on the nation's healthcare system has cost a fortune, and so the government opts to simply abandon the survivors instead.

The suicide attempters come from different backgrounds, some of which were sexually abused, others in debt, and still others simply “desired freedom from the shackles of society” (Mori). The lead character is Sei, a young boy in his early 20s who is hinted at possibly being a *hikikomori*. He feared the outside world and communicating with others because it forced him to recognize himself, a being he did not at all understand (in other words, he was undergoing an identity crisis). Rather than explore his identity he became addicted to computers, reaching out to a separate world behind the monitor that he falsely believed harbored the answer to his problems. At the time, Sei felt reality only got in the way of the answers, though in retrospect he believes he was

purposely trying to lose himself. He feared what he might learn had he been forced to earnestly ponder his existence.

Ironically, most of the suicidal individuals do their best to live on the island, some finding comfort in their occasional successes at coming across food or building a shelter. Others keep on living simply because there is no longer an easy or painless way to kill themselves, or because they feel dying in an island in the middle of nowhere would constitute a meaningless death. Sei, on the other hand, finds the will to live while hunting for deer. He finds the natural purity of the deer beautiful, and admires them for showing satisfaction in simply being alive. He laments humans and society for scorning those still uncertain about their future or life aspirations, and for perpetuating materialism as the key to happiness. He recalls always searching for reassurance that it is fine to simply be yourself, reassurance that he finally finds on the island.

Sei and the others begin to see the value of living merely for the sake of living, and most of the crew actually starts becoming happy. To them, the need to search for purpose in life is a societal construct; in the wild, one simply lives to live. They work together for their mutual survival— some of whom felt useless in society realize they now directly contribute to the wellbeing of others—, and come to value perseverance in a world where to stop trying means certain death. *Suicide Island* suggests that societal constructs like materialism, arbitrary social hierarchies, overreliance on technology, and pressure to “find one’s self” is the cause of Japan’s suicide epidemic because they blind its citizens of the only true objective in life: living. An ideal society would be one where these constructs are stripped entirely, forcing its people to find value in survival and bond over a common cause.



If the world depicted in *Suicide Island* is communistic, *Battle Royale*'s is radically capitalistic. The film starts off with a description of society that is not too far from reality. The nation's unemployment rate has reached 15%, leaving 10 million out of work. Students begin boycotting schools and juvenile crime rates spike. In response, the government passes the Millennium Educational Reform act, which randomly selects one class of 9<sup>th</sup> graders in the nation to take part in an event called "Battle Royale." Similar to *Suicide Island*, individuals in the Battle Royale are dropped off in an island to fend for themselves. However, unlike *Suicide Island*, cooperation is not incentivized. Rather, the students are forced to kill each other, and only the last remaining survivor is allowed off the island. This is the government's twisted solution for dissuading youth crimes and at the same time entertaining and distracting its citizens.

*Battle Royale* can be interpreted as an allegory of the destructive aspects of an overly competitive society. Each student is given a bag of supplies with random tools, ranging from shotguns and bow and arrows to binoculars or pot lids. Thus, like in real life, some members start the "game" with an enormous and unfair advantage over others. Also like in real life, some of the students opt to commit suicide rather than be forced to take part in a sadistic competition. In one symbolic scene where a couple commit *shinjū*, the boy comments to his girlfriend about the off-chance that somebody might come to save them, a thought she bluntly dismisses before jumping off a cliff. To them, there is literally no other means of escape besides death.

This sentiment is not shared by all students on the island, however, as a few of them desperately seek a way out. One of these students is main protagonist Shuya Nanahara, a boy who was raised most of his life in a foster home, after his mother

abandoned him and his father committed suicide out of unemployment. He is joined by his love interest Noriko Nakagawa and a new student Shogo Kawada, later revealed to be a past Battle Royale survivor.

Adding to the metaphor on the dangers of capitalism, *Battle Royale* comments specifically on how competition hinders the development of genuine relationships. Kawada divulges to Nanahara and Nakagawa that in his first Battle Royale he witnessed his girlfriend's murder, and explains he has returned for a second round to avenge her death. But after incurring a fatal injury, Kawada reveals that his girlfriend's final words of, "I'm glad I found a true friend," were his actual inspiration for returning to Battle Royale. He sought to once again truly connect with others, an apparently impossible feat in the outside world. The implications of this rationale are similar to those raised in *Suicide Island*. Like in the previous *manga*, *Battle Royale's* main characters bond over their unwavering will to live, though it should be noted that these individuals are the exception. Most other students turn on their classmates as soon as the battle starts, seeking their own salvation over the friendship of others.

Besides critiquing Japan's cutthroat capitalism, *Battle Royale* denounces some traditional Japanese values as well. There is a running joke throughout the film where Kawada justifies his multiple skills (in cooking, nursing, boat driving, etc.) by the fact that it used to be his father's profession (chef, doctor, fisherman, etc.). This is a cynical interpretation of filial piety in that it makes a mockery of one's upbringing and the pressure to follow in the family tradition rather than pursue one's own dreams. It also satirizes the idea of parental involvement and family unity as core Japanese ideals as Kawada's statements seem completely out of place in the film's dystopian setting. Thus,

it is once again a combination of contemporary society's competitiveness, rigidity, and trivializing of familial support that are to blame for the youth's disillusionment.

But *Battle Royale* further suggests this dissatisfaction is not exclusive to the younger demographic, as revealed when the protagonists finally face the man running the show. Later in the story, a trio of tech-savvy students eventually manages to hack the overseeing military's computer system (and get killed in the process). Nanahara, Nakagawa, and Kawada— who at this point are the sole survivors— take advantage of the fact that the military can no longer keep track of their location to invade their headquarters and confront their schoolteacher and game overseer Kitano. Surprisingly, Kitano willingly sacrifices himself to the three students. It appears he intended to die all along, evidenced by the fact that his pistol was actually a water gun as he himself willingly points out. Furthermore, Kitano looks up to Nakagawa for having been his only student serious about her studies, and upon seeing her he intentionally lowers his guard so he can be shot. It is hinted throughout the story that Kitano is severely depressed and his family in shambles. As a result, he identifies with the youth's discontentment, a sentiment he makes clear through his last words, "We're all going down together" (Fukusaku).

In the end, *Battle Royale* offers the same unsatisfying solution as all previous works: in spite of all difficulties, and the little prospect for change or improvement, one has no option but to keep on living. The two remaining survivors Nanahara and Nakagawa escape but are consequently wanted for murder and persecuted by the police. Nanahara notes they have no other choice but to move forward. This is the reality of the

society they live in, and it is no surprise that Nanahara, with his traumatic upbringing, be the spokesman for this philosophy.

The works dealing with suicide and the youth expose many of their anxieties and issues with contemporary Japan, including the adverse effects of technology; perceived lack of autonomy or influence; and their struggle to make sense of their identity in a society corrupted through consumerism, capitalism, increasing generation gap, and the collapse of the family ideal. Next, the portrayal of suicide in the non-youth demographic will be examined and their own justifications for suicide discussed.

#### **SUICIDE AND THE NON-YOUTH IN POSTMODERN WORKS: THE MIDDLE-AGED AND ELDERLY**

With the exception of a few minor characters in youth-targeted media, works featuring a non-youth protagonist in the context of suicide are few and far between. Those featuring the elderly, then, are even more exceptional. Nevertheless, in the few works that do include non-youth characters, it seems a number of the younger populace's concerns are also applicable to these marginalized demographics. This is because these three age groups are in fact fundamentally quite similar. Whereas today's youth were disillusioned by Japan's economic crisis, the older generations were disillusioned by World War II. And whereas the youth struggle to reevaluate the Japanese identity in the face of increased globalization and disintegration of its cultural ideals, the now middle-aged and elderly strained to do the same following Japan's traumatic defeat in the war.

As noted before, the middle-aged may at least occasionally appear as minor characters in suicide-related *manga* and *anime*, but the elderly are without a doubt a severely underrepresented demographic in popular culture media. One notable exception

is Kusaka Riki's (1953- ) 2003 and still ongoing *seinen manga Help Man!*, which follows the challenges faced by young male nurse Momotarō Onda in caring for an abundance of seniors in Japan's aging society. The story is a bleakly realistic depiction of the many problems faced by the nation's elderly, including an instance of elderly suicide.

In one particular episode, a middle-aged bachelor moves back with his parents upon hearing that his mother is no longer capable of taking care of his bedridden father by herself. The father is portrayed as a proud and demanding old man who resents the fact he has reached an age where he is now at his son's mercy for his wellbeing. The son, however, is not at all sensitive or understanding of his father needs, and frequently abuses his father into submission. The two of them continue to butt heads until the father goes so far as to attempt hanging himself, wanting to put an end to both physical pain from old age as well as what he regards as humiliating final years. When all hope seems to be lost, Momotarō, the eponymous "Help Man," comes to their rescue, taking over for the father's care and earning his respect by treating him as a superior.

A psychology article analyzing suicide in Japan as it stood in 1996 listed elderly suicide as a characteristic form of self-sacrifice in the nation and a grave problem that was projected to grow over the years (Takahashi et al. 271-89). Author Takahashi Yoshitomo argues the main force driving suicide among seniors is a changing social climate. The elderly, accustomed to the traditional extended family structure, are now being left behind to care for themselves as Japan shifts to a nuclear family model in response to increasing economic burdens. This is especially true in rural areas where children are forced to move to cities in search of jobs. The increasing generation gap and decreasing emphasis on filial piety only serve to further exacerbate the problem.

Unfortunately for them, there is barely any exposure to these issues in the media. Japan's senior demographic is seemingly forgotten in spite of accounting in 2013 for a quarter of the nation's population ("The Times of India").

The elderly— and indeed the middle-aged as well— receive considerably more attention in literature than in popular culture media, presumably because these demographics account for a larger audience for literary works. One example of contemporary literature that takes a closer look at non-youth age groups is Kazuo Ishiguro's (1953- ) 1982 novel *A pale view of hills*.

Considering the number of traumatic events incurred throughout Japanese history, it is no surprise that a pessimism for the future seems to be trademark to the Japanese psyche. *A pale view of hills* supports this claim in multiple ways by presenting such feelings across all three demographics. A Japanese expatriate, author Ishiguro moved to England at the age of five. It is not a stretch to assume Ishiguro drew extensively from his brief experience growing up in post-war Nagasaki when writing this novel, as it specifically deals with issues of memory and what they may reveal or how they may be distorted. Hence, *A pale view of hills* can be regarded as Ishiguro's insider-outsider perspective in exploring what it means for him to be "Japanese."

The novel follows the life of Ogata Etsuko, a middle-aged widow originally from Nagasaki but presently living in England. She moved abroad a short time after the end of World War II and the bombings in Nagasaki after eloping with a British gentleman in Japan. Etsuko had two daughters: Keiko, fruits of a previous marriage with her late Japanese husband Jiro, and Niki, whom she later conceives while with her British second husband. Keiko ends up committing suicide, and the story consequently deals with

Etsuko still trying to cope with her daughter's death six years after the event. The narrative fluctuates between two timelines, one in the present time (early 1980s), and another before her departure from Japan while still pregnant with Keiko.

Etsuko recalls that a young lady Sachiko had moved in from Tokyo to their little town in Nagasaki Prefecture. Her daughter Mariko accompanied her, a strange little girl with antisocial tendencies who often claimed of having visions of others. Sachiko later explains Mariko's eccentricities in revealing that her daughter had a traumatic experience in Tokyo: one day, Mariko ran into a woman drowning her baby in a river (and who would also go on to kill herself a few days later). In spite of befriending Sachiko, Etsuko constantly judged her for her poor mothering. She privately reprimanded Sachiko for frequently leaving Mariko on her own to roam around town for hours or days on end, in spite of there being reports of a child murderer on the loose. Sachiko also eventually falls for Frank, an alcoholic American soldier whom she opts to move to the United States with, dragging a reluctant Mariko along. Though Ishiguro's writing is very open to interpretation, there are some clues to suggest that the character of Sachiko never actually existed. She is instead a fabrication of Etsuko's mind as a means of indirectly criticizing her own shortcomings as a mother. Ishiguro provides numerous clues highlighting Etsuko's and Sachiko's similarities that further support this theory.

First of all, like Sachiko, Etsuko eventually falls for a foreigner and moves abroad at a time point in which her daughter Keiko would be similar in age to Mariko. We also learn that Keiko never wanted to move to England, and that her stepfather may have also been abusive like Sachiko's American boyfriend. In addition, both Etsuko and Sachiko admit to being bad parents in similar ways for dragging their daughters abroad. Etsuko

suggests that Sachiko be a little more sensitive to Mariko's anxieties in leaving Japan, to which she replies, "Do you think I imagine for one moment that I'm a good mother to her?" (Ishiguro 171); and a later point, Etsuko confesses to knowing Keiko did not want to go abroad with, "But you see Niki, I knew all along. I knew all along she wouldn't be happy over here. But I decided to bring her all the same" (176). Finally, and perhaps most revealing, after Etsuko catches up to Mariko, who had run away in a last ditch effort to avoid going to the U.S., she comforts the girl in a way that insinuates *she* is the one moving abroad with Mariko, not Sachiko.

There is also reason to believe Etsuko may have been involved with the child murders as well. For one, she has recurring dreams in England of a little girl swinging from a rope (i.e., a noose). Furthermore, Etsuko suspiciously held a rope in the previously described instance where she chased after Mariko, a rope that supposedly got caught around her ankle while in pursuit of the little girl. As for the Tokyo woman who drowned her baby, there is no saying whether this event ever happened or if it may have also even been Etsuko herself.

One has to question the reliability of Etsuko's memories, as they all could very well have just been figments of her imagination. What is certain, though, is that these child murders very clearly represent postwar Japan's exaggerated feelings of hopelessness towards their future. The infant drowning is later paralleled to Sachiko's own drowning of a group of stray kittens so dear to Mariko, to which Sachiko later justifies in claiming there was no one around to care for them (even though a relative of theirs had offered to take them earlier). While no actual child murders may have taken place, Etsuko's distorted memories may be a manifestation of her unconscious wish that



Keiko should have never been born, so as to spare her daughter of a terrible upbringing and an inevitable future of suffering.

It is very likely that Keiko shared the same hopelessness as her mother, supporting the notion that this pessimism may now be a part of the contemporary Japanese condition. Etsuko laments how the British reporting of her daughter's death all pick up on her Japanese nationality, believing they are "fond of the idea that our race has an instinct for suicide" (10). It is no coincidence, however, that the fully Japanese Keiko should be the one to commit suicide rather than her half-British sister Niki, in spite of Etsuko recalling them being temperamentally very similar growing up. Thus, a poor outlook for the future seems to be a defining characteristic of the Japanese psyche, a fear that is inevitably magnified among its suicide victims.

In addition to accentuating the similarities in the Japanese psyche between the youth and non-youth, *A pale view of hills* also exposes a generation shift already emerging following World War II. Etsuko recalls a conversation between her first husband Jiro and his elderly father Ogata in which Ogata laments the changes undergoing in his country:

Discipline, loyalty, such things held Japan together once. That may sound fanciful, but it's true. People were bound by a sense of duty. Towards one's family, towards superiors, towards the country. But now instead there's all this talk of democracy. You hear it whenever people want to be selfish, whenever they want to forget obligations. (65)

This opinion is strikingly similar to *Sensei's* from Sōseki's modern novel *Kokoro*. The postwar youth's perceived selfishness was evidently a subject of much disdain for the older generation that lived through the war, a generation who may have also feared for

the future of their nation but for very different reasons: the weakening of Japanese ideals rather than an incurred trauma following the war.

Ogata's and Jiro's relationship is also unusual in that the father is the one who looks up to and respects the son as his superior. While Ogata is overly polite and accommodating of his son, Jiro, on the other hand, frequently ignores his father. Take, for example, their conflict over the case with Shigeo Masuda, a journalist classmate of Ogata's who writes an anti-nationalist article criticizing the old man. Ogata, fearing his family name is being sullied, asks that Jiro confront Shigeo about it, but his son cares little about his "family name" and ultimately does nothing about it. In this case, not only are the ideals of filial piety being questioned, there also appears to be some resentment among Jiro's generation (forced to fight in the war) towards Ogata's pre-war generation (responsible for its inception). Their relationship mirrors not only the one discussed in *Help Man!*, but also that of The Bat and her father from *Suicide Club*. Only in the *Suicide Club*'s scenario, The Bat's aggression towards her father may have been partly due to holding his generation accountable for Japan's economic collapse and her eventual fate as a NEET.

*A pale view of hills* suggests that the Japanese, regardless of demographic, have poor prospects for their future as a result of its numerous traumatic events and ensuing intergenerational conflict. Kenzaburō Ōe's (1935- ) 2000 novel *The Changeling* is another work that explores the pre- and postwar generations, specifically in an attempt to understand how their experiences shaped the contemporary Japanese identity. Like most of Ōe's stories, *The Changeling* is highly autobiographical piece: it explores Ōe's

memories as a teenager immediately following World War II as a means of making sense of his childhood friend and brother-in-law's eventual suicide in 1997.

The novel deals with the friendship between two gifted artists: Kogito, a renowned novelist (based on Ōe), and Goro, an esteemed filmmaker and Kogito's brother-in-law (based on Ōe's brother-in-law and filmmaker Itami Juzo). As Goro's films begin to grow in popularity, he gets increasingly busy and can no longer afford to spend time with Kogito. He solves the problem by giving Kogito a tape player and a series of tape recordings of him talking to himself, serving as a means of continuing communications with his friend in lieu of meeting in person. On the last tape, however, Goro divulges to Kogito that it is time for him to "go to the Other Side," though stressing that Kogito should not worry, as they will continue to speak with one another. Soon after, Kogito's wife Chikashi informs Kogito that Goro jumped off of his company roof, killing himself.

The story provides some clues as to why Goro commits suicide, but none of them are ever explicitly confirmed. The most likely explanation, however, relates to a traumatic experience undergone by Goro and Kogito following the war. In their teens, Kogito and Goro became involved with Daio, an ultranationalist rightwing activist and former subordinate of Kogito's father (before the father's death resulting from a botched bank robbery). Daio naturally looked up to Kogito for being the son of his late leader, but was also interested in Goro after learning of Peter, a stationed American soldier close to Goro whom Daio hoped to coerce into giving him weapons to incite a rebellion. One day after being persuaded into visiting Daio's base, Goro and Kogito realize that Peter and Daio frequently engage in sexual activities with minors, and that the two men intended to

do the same with them. Upon resisting their advances and leaving the base, some of Daio's cronies dump bloody calfskins on the boys as an act of revenge, and the whole experience traumatizes them for life.

Similar to the function of magical realism in Yoshimoto Banana's *Amrita*, Ōe's reliance on Kogito's and his wife Chikashi's memories, interspersed throughout the novel in no chronological order, forces the reader to constantly guess when such events happened and to what extent they are real. Ōe additionally incorporates his own elements of magical realism into the story, further muddling the distinction between fact and fiction.

For instance, Kogito— now a famous liberal writer in spite of his father's conservatism— claims to still frequently receive visits from Daio and his crew, whom every time they capture Kogito they drop a small cannonball on his big toe in protest of his leftist works. Considering Daio's expected old age at this point in time, and the ridiculous premise surrounding the execution of such a ludicrous means of inciting terrorism, the likelihood that these acts are real is more than dubious. Still, regardless of its credibility, Daio is nevertheless symbolic of Japan's prewar nationalistic ideology that continues to permeate in Kogito's present life, be it in a physical or metaphysical sense.

Moreover, Kogito recalls how in Goro's last tape he hears a thud *before* his friend delivers his last words, raising the suspicion that Goro does in fact continue to communicate with him from the afterlife. Chikashi reinforces the belief that Goro is not actually dead when she likens Maurice Sendak's fantastical children's story *Outside Over There* to the events undergoing in her life. The story is about a young girl who goes to her baby sister's rescue after the child is abducted by goblins and substituted by a doll made

of snow (known as a changeling). Chikashi believes that on the night of Goro's traumatic experience, her brother never returned from the "goblins' world." In spite of this, she asserts she can still rescue the true Goro by raising a new child the same way her brother had been raised.<sup>22</sup>

This notion of inconclusiveness in death is repeated multiple times throughout the novel. Some notable examples include when Kogito, in a jetlagged haze after a trip from Germany, believes he is beside Goro in the Other Side; when his very old mother describes no longer being able to distinguish between spirits and still living entities; and when Kogito recalls being very sick as a child, and his mother telling him not to worry for she could always raise another version of him. Thus, *The Changeling* proposes the idea that life and death are not isolated principles, and that the dead live on in the living or in the yet to be born. This may also be a commentary on the postmodern Japanese identity as being a changeling or simulacrum of its prewar self.

Japan's defeat in the war fundamentally changed the nation into an inauthentic recreation of its past. Nevertheless, Goro, whose trauma was a direct consequence of the remnants of nationalistic thought of prewar Japan, may have been too disturbed in realizing the society he lived in was still in many ways a copy of its former self. He consequently kills himself, only to eventually be reincarnated in spirit as another child and continue the farce that is the contemporary Japanese condition.

Incidentally, two other works portraying non-youth suicide feature couples engaging in the traditionalistic love suicides. These are Yoshida Sueko's (1947- ) 1984 short story "Love Suicide at Kamaara" ("*Kamara Shinjū*") and Watanabe Junichi's

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<sup>22</sup> In practical terms, she hoped the child of one of Goro's pregnant lovers could be raised and molded into a "new Goro."

(1933- ) 1997 novel *A Lost Paradise (Shi tsurakuen)* . Though *shinjū* has appeared or been referenced in some of the previously discussed youth-targeted popular media, love suicides take center stage in these two narratives. How this traditional form of suicide is portrayed in a contemporary context can better inform how it fits into and how it is perceived by a 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan.

The short story “Love Suicide at Kamaara” by acclaimed Okinawan author Yoshida Sueko is especially revealing in that it showcases the difference between the Japanese and American psyches. The story takes place in the Kamaara district of Koza, Okinawa’s second largest city after the capital of Naha. While the Okinawans are frequently marginalized as lesser Japanese, it is evident that they too have internalized suicide (and in this case, the traditionally Japanese form of sacrifice that are love suicides) as a part of the Japanese and Okinawan self.

“Love Suicide at Kamaara” tells the story of middle-aged prostitute Yafuso Kiyō who falls for Sammy, an 18-year-old marine private stationed in Okinawa who is on the run for stabbing a sergeant. They first meet on the night Sammy abandons the base, after he spends the last of his money on Yafuso’s services. Once Yafuso learns of Sammy’s predicament, she reluctantly allows him to stay at her place for a few days while he waits for money being sent from home, but eventually falls for him and houses him indefinitely.

During this period, their relationship becomes increasingly lopsided. Yafuso idolizes Sammy, at one point likening his bearded silhouette to that of Christ. She recalls how she came to be a prostitute after abandoning her children and alcoholic husband, and greatly suffers from separation anxiety. For that reason, she is constantly worried that she

will find Sammy missing one day, and so desperately finances his stay at her apartment in spite of her depleting funds. According to Yafuso, this was the price an unwanted person such as herself had to pay to be with someone like him.

On the other hand, Sammy grows to regret ever having started relationship with Yafuso, disgusted by the mere sight of her. Fed up with his situation and finding no other way out, he finally decides it best to just turn himself in. Upon hearing of Sammy's intentions, Yafuso becomes desperate, fearing that she will once again be unwanted and unneeded. As a result, that very night she kills them both by blowing up her apartment after filling it with propane while Sammy slept.

Note how Sammy was resolute in turning himself in, but Yafuso opts for their love suicide instead. The story's juxtaposition between an American and Japanese mindset suggests that suicide—specifically love suicides—is an act distinctly Japanese. Yafuso's "Japanese-ness" is further reinforced when she chooses to wear a *Kumejima kimono*<sup>23</sup> on the night of their death instead of the gaudy pink dress she initially intended. Evidently, though neither of them shared good prospects for the future, this bothers Yafuso much more than it does Sammy, as she may have felt her life to be truly hopeless. Once again, Japan's traumatic history may account for this mindset. After all, the Okinawans had their own (arguably bigger) share of trauma due to the devastating Battle of Okinawa, a major issue for a number of contemporary Okinawan writers.

Watanabe Junichi's *A Lost Paradise*, on the other hand, presents a much more popular rendition of love suicides. Indeed, the novel became an instant hit upon its release, even receiving its own film and TV series adaptations. *A Lost Paradise* and its author were the subject of much contentions as well, both for the story's highly erotic

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<sup>23</sup> A traditional kimono from Okinawa.

content and for its sexist portrayal of women as submissive entities. The novel's popularity with its original audience of middle-aged men<sup>24</sup>, and its plot culminating into a love suicide may therefore be due to Watanabe's own controversially conservative and traditionalistic views.

The story involves the forbidden love affair of two middle-aged individuals. One of these is Kuki, a 55-year-old man who gets demoted to a dead-end position at work. Having always devoted his life to his job, Kuki now finds a great deal of free time in his hands when he no longer has any incentive to work hard. This leads him to realize how much his relationship with his wife had suffered over these years, and how he never once loved her. This motivates Kuki to start an affair with Rinko, a 37-year-old woman whose husband is a neglectful medical professor at Tokyo University.

*A Lost Paradise's* presentation of love suicides is reminiscent of famous classic *shinjū* stories by the likes of Chikamatsu Monzaemon and Ihara Saikaku in that it closely associates itself with classic Japanese culture. For instance, as is typical of classic Japanese literature, the importance of the seasons is extensively highlighted in the story. It is no coincidence that Kuki and Rinko commit suicide in the autumn, a time of year when the beauty of the leaves is tinged with melancholy at the realization of their impermanence and the transience of life. References to Japanese tradition and classical imagery are also everywhere in *A Lost Paradise*: Rinko is a calligraphy teacher who occasionally wears a kimono; the two lovers recite classic love poems and haiku to one another; and they discuss classic Japanese novel *The Tale of Genji* and the difference between traditionally Japanese symbols like the cherry and plum blossoms. This heavy

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<sup>24</sup> *A Lost Paradise* was initially serialized in the Nikkei financial daily newspaper, whose readership is overwhelmingly older men.



usage of tropes shows a conscious understanding that *shinjū* is very much a part of traditional Japanese culture. Though nowadays suicide is a taboo topic, Watanabe argues *shinjū* should at the very least be appreciated for its classical roots and affective beauty. The novel's wild success may suggest that many agree with his sentiment.

Still, *A Lost Paradise* does not follow all tropes common to traditional *shinjū* tales. Unlike classic love suicides where the protagonists are forced to commit suicide due to a love so forbidden they risk death at being caught, the stakes are not nearly as high for Kuki and Rinko. After all, they could have easily divorced from their respective partners and started a new life together. Yet simply living together was clearly not enough. Consumed with passion, they yearned for eternal solitude between themselves, a complete detachment from society. So they resort to suicide, acknowledging that nothing in the physical life could ever surpass the love they had for one another. In other words, life could bring them no greater satisfaction, so there was no point to go on living. Thus, their suicides were not a result of despair emerging from emotional oppression but rather absolute romantic achievement. The novel's dramatic tone likely resonated with its readers, who may have felt their everyday lives to be equally as unfulfilling as the couples' before their affair.

René Duignan comments in his 2012 documentary on suicide in Japan *Saving 10,000 – Winning a War on Suicide*, how a major contributor to the nation's suicide epidemic is Japan's rigorous work culture, where companies expect their employees to devote their lives to their jobs. He specifically mentions a chain of events very similar to what Kuki experiences: upon retirement, many salarymen learn their relationship with their loved ones are in shambles, and realize what little they have left to live for. Hence, it

makes sense that love suicides should more prominently feature middle-aged men, who one would expect fantasize about a life of full romantic devotion. In some regards, this reflects the same sort of disillusionment as presented in works aimed at younger audiences. The middle-aged are not at all satisfied with Japan's rigid and demanding work culture, and yearn for the freedom to engage in something besides their work.

Thus, the middle-aged and the youth are comparable in that their disillusionment stems from feelings of repression by an inflexible Japanese society. The disillusionment of the elderly, on the other hand, stems from a feeling of disconnect with the current generation. As evidenced in *Help Man!*, *The Changeling*, and parts of *A pale view of hills*, they look down on Japan of the present and long for Japan of the past. Whereas the youth and middle-aged struggle to find a new Japanese identity or make sense of its current one, the elderly wish it had never changed in the first place.

## **DISCUSSION**

In short, both works relating to youth and non-youth demographics depict suicide in the context of struggling with the Japanese identity. Specifically, the youth and middle-aged strive to understand or recreate a new identity in the face of an increasingly consumerist and culturally diluted nation. The elderly, on the other hand, lament the changes undergoing their country and the reformulation of its ideals, looking fondly instead to the past.

Japan's turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century undoubtedly contributed to the disillusionment now characteristic of the contemporary Japanese psyche. *The Changeling*, "landscape with flatiron," and *A pale view of hills* are three featured narratives that frame suicide or death

in the context of trauma, and present protagonists from all ages reflecting on their lives in post-war or post-disaster settings exemplary of those faced by Japan over the past century. Japan is still a nation fascinated with suicide, but there has been a shift in the portrayal of suicide as an act of sacrifice or making amends for wrongdoings to that of a means of escaping a hopeless future. This is a perception that is arguably more culturally neutral but also one that impacts society as a whole, perhaps exacerbated by the nation's traumatic history and collectivistic inclination.

Other examined works reveal anxieties relating to different contemporary problems, including overdependence on technology at the expense of interpersonal communication; feelings of solitude as a result of an increasing generational gaps and the dissolution of the traditional family structure; the consequences of the nation's rigid and demanding work culture; and perceived lack of influence or presence in society. This hopelessness is most frequently framed in the context of the Japanese youth, who may be struggling to come to terms with a disconnect between the nation's traditional values and the realities of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan.

Japan's (relatively) recent adoption of a capitalistic societal structure directly challenges one of its principal cultural tenets that is the promotion of group harmony. Japanese companies expect utmost loyalty and dedication from its employees at the expense of the family or other interpersonal relationships (and in some cases even of one's life<sup>25</sup>). The increased competition stemming from school entrance exams up to job-hunting and the corporate world further renders feelings of expendability and futility. As evidenced by such works as *Suicide Club*, *Noriko's Dinner Table*, *Real World*, *Battle*

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<sup>25</sup> There even exists the term for this: "karōshi," or death from overwork.

*Royale*, and *Colorful* to name a few, adolescents are particularly sensitive to the lack of familial and interpersonal support and tend to be more vocal on the repercussions of capitalism, in spite of many of them turning to consumerism as an ineffective means of coping.

Countless youth-centric works examined also highlight or at least allude to the increasing role of technology in promoting disconnection from the rest of society or facilitating the orchestration of mass suicide. This portrayal of technology is symptomatic of the youth's jadedness in contemporary Japan and symbolizes their anxieties for the future. The Internet in specific is represented as a means of escaping a reality where one feels misunderstood, often counterproductively resulting in greater social isolation and despair (as is the case with Sei from *Suicide Island*, Satō from *Welcome to the N.H.K.*, and Lain from *Serial Experiments Lain*). Online suicide pacts known as *netto shinjū* are also frequently referenced, accurately reflecting a growing trend among the Japanese youth of organizing group suicides through online message boards (Ikunaga, Nath and Skinner 280-302).

The overrepresentation of younger demographics in suicide related works—especially in the popular culture media of *anime* and *manga*—contradicts Japan's actual suicide climate in that the youth are much less prone to killing themselves than the middle-aged and elderly demographics. One obvious explanation for this discrepancy is that younger individuals comprise most of the audience for these popular culture media, and so needless to say are more frequently the focus of such works. The disparity may be also be due, however, to the fact that the youth are simply more willing than the traditionally minded middle-aged and elderly to dabble in taboo topics such as suicide.

They may be more readily consuming these suicide narratives as a means to exploring and alleviating their own problems, as suggested with the *shōjo manga* *Life and Orange*, the *dōjinshi* *Haibane Renmei*, and the film *Colorful*.

In contrast to the youth, the middle-aged and elderly are not nearly as represented in suicide-related media. Works that do feature older protagonists tend to be mostly literary sources, and proportionally more frequently associated with traditional forms of suicide. Still, *shinjū* continues to be a topic of interest and a popular justification for suicide over all media facets and all age groups, often appearing or being referenced throughout films (present in *Suicide Club*, *Suicide Manual* and *Battle Royale*) and *manga* and *anime* (*Sayonara Zetsubō-Sensei*, *Ghost Talker's Daydream*, and *Welcome to the N.H.K.*), as well as taking center stage in the contemporary novel *A Lost Paradise* and short story “Love Suicides at Kamaara.”

A 1993 study found that *shinjū* accounted for only 1.6 percent of the total suicide rate (Inamura 173-84). Admittedly this is a very outdated finding, and a more recent investigation should be undertaken to see if *shinjū*'s prevalence in contemporary media implies more people are engaging in the practice. Still, its popularity as a suicide trope among all works— and especially those targeted at a traditionally minded older audience— does suggest *shinjū* to still be a way of understanding suicide in Japan, if only in terms of entertainment value through its dramatic implications and romanticism. *Inseki-jisatsu*, on the other hand, is seldom featured in literature or popular culture media. This may be because it represents the rashness of traditional ideals that the younger generation is increasingly shying away from, or maybe because it cannot be as easily

integrated in contemporary works without evoking associations with Japan's hubris during World War II or traditional pre-war Japan.

This study's most surprising finding, however, was the extent to which the salaryman— accounting for the majority of suicides in Japan— was underrepresented in the suicide-related works examined. As Duignan notes once again in his documentary *Saving 10,000 – Winning a War on Suicide*, many of these salarymen commit suicide not because they are miserable due to debt or overwork, but rather to collect life insurance payments to provide for their family (a form of *inseki-jisatsu*). Why then is this image of the salaryman largely lacking or misrepresented in these contemporary works analyzed?

It may first of all be due to the aforementioned reason that *inseki-jisatsu* is perceived as an embarrassing vestige of traditional and ultra nationalistic ideals, so naturally such issues are less frequently addressed in suicide-related works. Or it may be that there is simply no audience for such works. The youth may be perfectly comfortable with and willing to explore their difficulties through suicide-related media as a whole, but the middle-aged and elderly, who hold more conservative views, are not as open to the idea (even if they may be more receptive to the nationalism and tradition of which *inseki-jisatsu* represents). Similarly, salarymen may prefer to distract or transport themselves away from their lives of overwork and societal conventions rather than ruminate on their problems.

As proof of this, a series that *was* a hit with salarymen is Hirokane Kenshi's long-running *seinen* franchise about white-collar worker Shima Kōsaku. It is the story of a typical employee of fictional conglomerate Hatsushiba Electric who climbs up the corporate ladder to become a successful businessman and irresistible ladies' man (from

series *Kachō Shima Kōsaku* [Section Chief Shima Kōsaku] to *Shachō Shima Kosaku* [Company President Shima Kōsaku] and beyond). The series' popularity can be attributed to it satisfying every salaryman's fantasies of professional and amorous fulfillment, and not because of a grimly realistic portrayal of their reality.

One may think Watanabe's *Lost Paradise* contradicts this theory. After all, the novel was a huge hit among middle-aged men and features a salaryman committing suicide. However, although *Lost Paradise* does exhibit a white-collar protagonist dissatisfied with his life, and negatively portrays the demandingness of Japanese work culture, there is no evidence to suggest that the man's suicide was a direct result of this dissatisfaction, nor that its audience bought the novel because of their own suicidal ideations. Rather, Watanabe notes how the inclusion of a love suicide into the story was in fact for aesthetic reasons<sup>26</sup>, not as social commentary on the repressed self-destructive desires of salarymen. Instead of serving as catharsis for suicidal middle-aged males, *Lost Paradise* may have been so successful for the same reason as the *Shima Kōsaku* series: it satisfied their romantic and sexual fantasies, and not their depression and desire to die.

As for a final theory to why salarymen are infrequently represented in suicide-related contemporary literature and popular media, it may be that their needs are *already* taken into account by the feelings portrayed in the extant suicide narratives. That is to say, these contemporary works are in fact representative of Japan's suicide epidemic despite lacking the salaryman figure. Following the logic of researchers Zeng and Le Tendre who contested that it is the perception of academic pressure and not the pressure itself that leads to adolescent suicide, it is possible that bullying, the economic climate, or

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<sup>26</sup> Commenting on love suicides and its presence in *Lost Paradise*, Watanabe said, "In the Japanese life view and aesthetic, to retreat and to choose death can be just as beautiful as to advance forward in life... To die at the very peak of love is also beautiful" (Efron).

depression do in fact account for Japan's high suicide rate as per empirical data, but not directly. These sociological issues are not in and of themselves the true cause of suicide. Rather, they may merely be manifestations of an overarching struggle for identity and pessimism for the future— as extensively portrayed in contemporary literature and popular culture media— that are ultimately responsible for suicide in contemporary Japanese society.

But even if these risk factors *are* in fact directly involved in the nation's suicide epidemic, this still does not discount the fact that a high suicide rate implies many are not effectively coping with their problems. Japan has a particularly strong stigma against mental illness and suicidal ideation, meaning fewer of its citizens seek psychiatric treatment than those in western societies (Abe, Shioiri, and Someya 1013). Duignan further claims that even those who *do* receive treatment are oftentimes overmedicated and not given any sort of personalized counseling (an issue alluded to in *Welcome to the N.H.K.* through Hitomi downing pills willy-nilly) because there are simply not enough trained professionals to care for everyone.

On the one hand, these contemporary works containing suicide should be commended for their general accuracy in exposing common risk factors to suicide in Japan. But on the other, the vast majority of the works examined merely critique the current situation. They offer no constructive means to addressing the suicide epidemic or pragmatic venues for societal change (a nationwide devolvement into a communalistic society in accordance to *Suicide Island*, for instance, is wholly unrealistic<sup>27</sup>). Rather,

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<sup>27</sup> Still, this did not stop a small group from trying something similar. Born out of youthful ambitions emerging during the student protests of the early 1970s, world-renowned Japanese taiko performing ensemble Kodo moved to Sado Island in 1988 (off the coast of Niigata in the Sea of Japan) to build a school for traditional Japanese arts and crafts. To this day, Kodo Village continues to offer lessons on



individuals in anguish are expected to simply accept the way things are, carry on and do their best.

Of course, that is not to suggest there even exists a cure-all solution to Japan's suicide epidemic. This issue is far too complex and nuanced to unfairly condemn an entire nation as one that mishandles or coerces its citizens into committing suicide. In truth, many of the justifications for suicide emerging from the literature and media may not be Japan-specific. A disdain for competition endemic of a capitalist society or perceived lack of cultural identity in the advent of increased globalization may very well be outlooks rampant all throughout the world, and something the whole world will at some point have to address. Nevertheless, we should be mindful that this is a serious problem that must be dealt with sooner rather than later.

A high suicide rate is in many ways a predicament of the future. Whereas physical health related fields continue to evolve and receive funding internationally, relatively little attention is given to the advancement or promotion of mental health care practices. Consequences of such a discrepant approach to health care are evidently already emerging and only expected to worsen. Regardless of whether suicide stems from a deep-rooted existential crisis due to a fleeting cultural identity, "nationwide PTSD" resulting from a traumatic history, or simply a high number of depressed individuals emerging from a poor economic climate or troubles at school, how Japan deals with its suicide situation in the following years will be a matter to be observed with great care by the rest of the world.

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puppet theatre and taiko drumming and hold a number of traditional festivals throughout the year ("Kodo Village & Sado Island").

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