

Yukio Mishima

1925–1970 · *The Aesthetic Dimension of Fascism*

WHO WAS HE?

Yukio Mishima was one of Japan's greatest writers. He published 34 novels, 50 plays, and over 200 short stories. He was nominated three times for the Nobel Prize in Literature. His writing explores beauty, death, sexuality, and the collapse of traditional Japanese culture.

He was also a bodybuilder, an actor, a model, and the founder of a private militia. On November 25, 1970, he led four militia members in an attempted coup. When it failed, he committed ritual suicide (seppuku) at age 45.

Why Mishima Matters

Mishima makes visible something that often stays hidden: fascism's aesthetic core. He didn't hide behind ideology. He lived fascism as an art form, and he choreographed his death as a final artistic statement. He forces us to take fascism's beauty seriously.

EARLY LIFE: THE SICKLY CHILD

Born Kimitake Hiraoka in Tokyo in 1925. His grandmother, a former aristocrat, took him from his parents and raised him herself. She was overprotective to the point of isolation: he wasn't allowed to play outside, engage in physical activity, or spend time with other boys.

By his own account, he grew up feeling separated from his body, from masculinity, from life itself. He was frail, bookish, and withdrawn.

Why This Matters

Mishima's later obsession with the body, with masculinity, with warrior culture, was compensation for a childhood where he felt weak, isolated, and 'wasted by words.' His fascism grew from a wound.

↘ **Mishima felt 'separated from his body' as a child. How might this early experience shape someone's later politics? What might they be trying to reclaim?**

LITERARY CAREER: THE PRODIGY

His first novel, *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), made him famous at 24. It explores a young man's struggle with hidden desires and his sense of being fundamentally false: wearing a mask to survive in a world where he doesn't belong.

The novel's most famous scene: the narrator's intense reaction to a painting of St. Sebastian, a beautiful young man pierced by arrows. From this moment, beauty and suffering became fused in Mishima's imagination. Mishima describes this as the moment of his first sexual awakening, looking at a painting of a beautiful man in agony. This fusion of desire, pain, and death would shape everything he wrote and, eventually, how he chose to die.

↘ Mishima wrote about wearing a 'mask' and feeling fundamentally false. How might this sense of being an outsider connect to political extremism?

PHYSICAL TRANSFORMATION: THE BODY AS ART

At 30, Mishima began an obsessive bodybuilding regime. He transformed himself from a slight, pale intellectual into a muscular figure who posed for photographs, practiced kendo (Japanese fencing), and cultivated a samurai aesthetic.

He wrote about this in *Sun and Steel* (1968): the body had to be sculpted into a vessel worthy of a beautiful death. Words alone were not enough. The flesh itself had to become art.

The Paradox

Mishima built his body knowing he would destroy it. The muscles were not for living. They were for dying beautifully.

↘ Mishima sculpted his body specifically to destroy it. What does this tell us about how he understood the relationship between beauty and death?

REHEARSING HIS DEATH: PATRIOTISM (1961/1966)

In 1961, Mishima wrote 'Patriotism,' a short story about a military officer who commits seppuku after a failed coup.

In 1966, he made it into a short film. He played the officer himself. The film shows the seppuku in graphic detail, with Mishima performing the death he would later actually carry out.

Nine years before his actual death, Mishima filmed himself dying the exact death he would later choose. His life was a work of art building toward a final scene he had already scripted.

↘ Mishima rehearsed his death on film nine years before he actually did it. What does this tell us about how he understood his own life?

POLITICAL TURN: THE MILITIA

In 1968, Mishima founded the Tatenokai (Shield Society), a private militia of about 100 young men. They wore uniforms he designed, trained with Japan's Self-Defence Forces, and pledged to defend the Emperor.

What he was against: Western liberalism, democracy, materialism, postwar pacifism, the 'spiritual emptiness' of modern Japan.

What he was for: The Emperor as divine symbol, warrior culture, self-sacrifice, beauty through discipline, death before dishonour.

NOVEMBER 25, 1970: THE FINAL ACT

That morning, Mishima mailed the final pages of his last novel to his publisher. His affairs were in order. He had planned this for years.

Mishima and four militia members entered the headquarters of Japan's Eastern Army Command. They took the general hostage and demanded that soldiers assemble to hear Mishima speak.

From a balcony, he gave a seven-minute speech calling for the military to rise up and restore the Emperor. The soldiers jeered and laughed.

He knew they would. He had told others the coup would fail. That was never the point.

Mishima went inside. He committed seppuku. His closest follower beheaded him, as tradition required. He was 45. His body was at its peak. He destroyed it at the moment of maximum beauty.

WHAT NEED WAS HE FILLING?

Mishima was brilliant, famous, wealthy, admired. What did fascism offer him that success couldn't?

Intensity: Normal life felt pale to him. Only the proximity of death made him feel fully alive.

Meaning: He believed modern life was spiritually empty. Fascism offered a cause worth dying for.

Transcendence: He wanted to escape the prison of the self, to dissolve into something larger: the Emperor, the nation, death itself.

Beauty: He wanted his life to be a work of art, and he believed the most beautiful art required destruction.

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

These questions connect Mishima to the unit's central themes.

- 1.** Mishima was brilliant, successful, and admired. What was he looking for that success couldn't give him? What does this tell us about what fascism offers?

- 2.** Susan Sontag wrote that 'fascist art glorifies surrender, exalts mindlessness, glamorizes death.' How does Mishima's life illustrate this?

- 3.** Can you understand why someone might find Mishima's vision appealing, even if you reject it? What does that understanding tell you?
