

Mishima: Primary Sources

Excerpts for Analysis

FROM SUN AND STEEL (1968)

In this autobiographical essay, Mishima reflects on his relationship to his body, to words, and to death.

“

The body had existed before words... it was the very essence of existence before words. Gradually, I came to realise that the flesh must be nourished by words—even, in extreme cases, destroyed by them.

PLAIN ENGLISH:

The body is more fundamental than language. But eventually I realised that words and flesh are intertwined: words can feed the body, and in some cases, words must destroy it.

“

I cherished a romantic impulse towards death, yet at the same time I required a strictly classical body as its vehicle... A powerful, tragic frame and sculpturesque muscles were indispensable in a romantically noble death.

PLAIN ENGLISH:

I was drawn to the idea of a beautiful death, but I believed you needed a beautiful body to die beautifully. A weak body couldn't have a noble death.

✂ **Mishima says a 'sculpturesque' body was 'indispensable' for a noble death. Why would the appearance of the body matter for how you die?**

“

The goal was to achieve a beauty that was both hard and glittering, a sublime and empty shell that was untouched by human warmth.

PLAIN ENGLISH:

I wanted to make my body into something cold and perfect, like a statue: beautiful but without human softness or vulnerability.

✂ He wanted to be 'untouched by human warmth.' Why would someone see warmth and vulnerability as things to eliminate?

“ *Only through the group, I realized—through sharing the suffering of the group—could the body reach that height of existence that the individual alone could never attain... The group must be open to death—which meant, of course, that it must be a community of warriors.*

PLAIN ENGLISH:

I realised you can't reach the highest experiences alone. You need a group that suffers together. And that group has to be willing to die together: a brotherhood of warriors.

✂ How does this connect to what you learned about fascism from Eco? Which features do you see here?

FROM CONFESSIONS OF A MASK (1949)

Mishima's breakthrough novel, substantially autobiographical, explores a young man's hidden desires and his sense of being fundamentally false.

“ *From the early outset, I had a presentiment of the nature of my existence... that I would never be blessed with those close natural friendships between man and man... that I was fated to live in solitude.*

“ *Of late I had come to understand that my very existence itself was a mask I had been wearing from the outset... I had been a mere actor, performing the role of a human being.*

PLAIN ENGLISH:

I always sensed I was different, that I would never have normal friendships. Eventually I realised that my whole self was a performance: I was just acting the part of a regular person.



THE ST. SEBASTIAN PASSAGE

The novel's most famous scene: the 12-year-old narrator describes his reaction to seeing Guido Reni's painting of St. Sebastian, a beautiful young man pierced by arrows. This scene establishes the pattern that would define Mishima's life: the fusion of beauty, the male body, suffering, and death.

“ *A remarkably handsome youth was bound naked to the trunk of the tree. His crossed hands were raised high, and the thongs binding his wrists were tied to the tree... His white and matchless nudity gleams against a background of dusk.*

“ *It is not pain that hovers about his straining chest, his tense abdomen, his slightly contorted hips, but some flicker of melancholy pleasure like music.*

PLAIN ENGLISH:

The beautiful young man in the painting isn't just suffering. There's something almost pleasurable about his pain, something beautiful about his torment.

“ *The arrows have eaten into the tense, fragrant, youthful flesh and are about to consume his body from within with flames of supreme agony and ecstasy.*

“ *That day, the instant I looked upon the picture, my entire being trembled with some pagan joy. My blood soared up... This was the beginning of my 'bad habit.'*

PLAIN ENGLISH:

When I saw this painting, I was overwhelmed with intense feeling. My whole body responded. This was the start of my lifelong fusion of beauty with suffering and destruction.

✂ **In the St. Sebastian passage, beauty and suffering merge completely. What does this tell us about fascist aesthetics?**

FROM PATRIOTISM (1961)

A short story about Lieutenant Shinji Takeyama, who commits seppuku after his friends stage a failed coup. Mishima made this into a film in 1966, playing the officer himself. In 1970, he would enact this story in reality.

“ *Was it death he was now waiting for? Or a wild ecstasy of the senses? The two seemed to overlap, almost as if the one were a gateway to the other.*

PLAIN ENGLISH:

Death and intense pleasure seemed to be the same thing, or at least connected: one leading to the other.

“ *The lieutenant always looked well in uniform, but now, as he contemplated death with severe brows and firmly closed lips, he revealed what was perhaps masculine beauty at its most superb.*

“ *Looking at the slender white figure of his wife the lieutenant experienced a bizarre excitement... To have every moment of death observed by those beautiful eyes—it was like being borne to death on a gentle, fragrant breeze.*

PLAIN ENGLISH:

Being watched while dying was exciting to him. Having his wife witness his death made it feel beautiful, almost romantic.

“ *In the radiant, bride-like figure of his white-robed wife the lieutenant seemed to see a vision of all those things he had loved and for which he was to lay down his life—The Imperial Household, The Nation, The Army Flag.*

PLAIN ENGLISH:

His wife became a symbol of everything he was dying for: the Emperor, Japan, the military. She represented all the abstractions that made his death meaningful.

✂ **In Patriotism, death and ecstasy merge. His wife represents 'The Nation.' What does this tell us about how fascism connects the personal to the political?**

OVERARCHING QUESTIONS

1. What relationship does Mishima describe between words and the body? Between beauty and death? What does he seem to be seeking through this fusion?

2. Mishima describes wanting to be 'untouched by human warmth' and says the individual can only reach 'the height of existence' through a group 'open to death.' What needs is he trying to meet? What is he trying to escape?
