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Suicide in Japanese Writers

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Abstract

It has been claimed that more than 50 Japanese writers in the 20th century died by suicide, more than in other countries. Ten of these writer-suicides are briefly described, and the life of the most well-known (Yukio Mishima) discussed in more detail. It is apparent that the risk factors for suicide (psychiatric disorders, drug and alcohol abuse, and disrupted interpersonal relationship) were present in many of these writers. The role of Japanese culture and the link between creativity and suicide are also discussed.

Keywords: Suicide, Writers, Japan, Mishima

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Introduction

It has been claimed anecdotally that creative people have a high rate of suicide. For example, writers in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and the former Soviet Union died by suicide in large numbers during the 20th century. The Russian suicides were blamed on the oppressive communist regime, those in the UK on poor sales and high taxes, and those in the USA on alcoholism and bipolar affective disorder. However, it is also possible that the suicides resulted from the profession of writing.

Lester (1998) reviewed several sources and estimated that 2.9% of eminent people died from suicide (with a range of estimates of 0.3% to 13.3%). Suicide was more common in writers and artists (especially poets) and less common in public officials. Stack (2001) in a study of current suicides also found a high rate of suicide in writers and artists (as well as doctors and dentists). In the 1990s, the suicide rate for writers and artists in the USA was 33 per 100,000 per year, three times the national average. Preti and Miotto (1999) studied eminent writers and artists from the 20th century and found that poets and writers had a higher suicide rate while painters and architects had a lower suicide rate.

Post (1996) studied 100 American and English writers and found that affective disorders were present in 82 of the men, and 8 died from suicide, a much higher proportion than in the general population of roughly 1%. Forty of the writers had alcohol dependence or abuse and nine more showed abuse or dependence on other drugs. Andreason (2006) also reported that affective disorders (especially bipolar and unipolar depression) were common in creative people. Jamison (1989) compared creative writers at a university workshop with people of similar education and found that mood disorders (especially bipolar disorder) and alcohol abuse were more common in the creative writers. Andreason (1987) also found a higher rate of creativity and affective disorders in the first-degree relatives of writers as compared to controls, suggesting a heredity component to this association.

Since there does appear to be an association between creative writing and affective disorder and alcohol abuse, what is the direction of this link? It may be, for example, that alcohol intoxication increases creativity, perhaps by providing inspiration. It may be, however, that the creative life-style makes alcohol abuse more likely. A life of creative writing may increase the incidence of loneliness which in turn increases the likelihood of alcohol abuse. Or there may be some third set of factors (such as heredity and childhood experiences) that leads to creativity, depression and alcohol abuse.

Another factor may involve the profession of writing itself. Writers typically have to become accustomed to rejection of their work by literary magazines and by publishers. Even when their work is published, the reviews of their work may not always be positive. Sylvia Plath, for example, had to suffer many rejections of her poems, and her book The Bell Jar was acclaimed only after her death by suicide. Furthermore, until they become famous, their work does not bring in enough money for a comfortable existence. Often, writers are forced to take another job in order to support themselves and their families. For example, T. S. Eliot, the Nobel prize-winning poet, worked as a teacher and in banking.

Finally, although it has been claimed that electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and psychiatric medications (such as lithium for bipolar affective disorder) do not impair creativity, both Anne Sexton and Abbie Hoffman disliked the side effects of the medication prescribed for them and its impact on their creativity, and both had stopped taking it when they died by suicide. Ernest Hemingway died by suicide immediately after receiving his second course of ECT.

Japanese Writers and Suicide

In the 20th century, the period when most of the Japanese writers discussed in this essay died by suicide, the suicide rate in Japan was high. For example, in 1980, the suicide rate in Japan was 17.7 per 100,000 per year. The suicide rate in most European countries was less than this (for example, 12.4 in Norway), although some countries had higher rates (for example, 22.8 in Austria).

Although, as noted above, writers from many countries appear to have a high rate of suicide, it appears that this is especially true for Japanese writers. A Google search quickly finds headlines saying that more than 50 Japanese writers have died by suicide, and this number seems extremely high. There is a note in one article that54 Japanese writers have died by suicide, but it is difficult to create a complete list. Here are brief notes on some of the suicides.

Takeo Arishima (1878-1923)

After his wife died 1916 from tuberculosis, Arishima had an affair with a married woman. When her husband found out, the couple died by hanging in an isolated location, and their bodies were not discovered for a month.

Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927)

At the time of his suicide, Akutagawa was suffering from physical and mental health problems. He had visual hallucinations, and he feared that he had inherited his mother's psychiatric problems. He wrote that he felt insecure about the future. He attempted suicide several times, once with a friend of his wife in 1927. He died later that year from an overdose of Veronal, a barbiturate.

Osamu Dazai (1909-1948)

Dazai died by suicide, along with his lover, by drowning in a canal, after abandoning his wife and children. He was an alcohol abuser and in declining health, but at the height of his fame.

Hidemitsu Tanaka (1913-1949)

Tanaka also left his wife. He was an alcoholic and drug abuser and had psychiatric problems. Tanaka was shocked by the suicide of Dazai, his mentor, and he died by suicide the following year using wrist-cutting and sleeping pills at the site of Dazai's grave.

Tamiki Hara (1905-1951)

Hara's wife died in 1944 after a long illness, and Hara had said that he would live only one year longer than her. He was in Hiroshima when the atomic bomb destroyed the city. His mental state was made worse by the Korean War and President Truman's consideration of the use of the atomic bomb. He died by suicide by laying on train tracks in front of an oncoming train, a death that he had anticipated in his final story.

Sakae Kubo (1900-1958)

Kubo defied his father's desire for him to become a doctor and became a playwright. He suffered from "nervous breakdowns" throughout his life, mainly anxiety attacks and depressions, and he was hospitalized in 1953. He died by suicide in 1958.

Ashihei Hino (1907-1960)

Hino wrote novels centered on military experience in war, portraying humanitarian behavior, even during the Japanese invasion of China in the 1930s. After the war, his possible complicity in war crimes led to him being banned from public office from 1948-1950. He died in his home office from an overdose of sleeping pills, leaving a suicide note referring to vague anxiety (as did Akutagawa).

Yasunari Kawabata (1899-1972)

Kawabata had a successful life as a writer, but he was very depressed by the suicide of his friend Yukio Mishima and was reported to have nightmares about Mishima's suicide. Kawabata had Parkinson's disease, and there were rumors of an illicit love affair. Kawabata had confided to friends that he had sometimes wished that the plane he was on would crash. Some friends thought that his death by domestic gas was an accident rather than a suicide.

Shoji Yamagishi (1930-1979)

Yamagishi was a photography critic, curator, and magazine editor. He suffered from depressions during his life and found his work stressful.

Izumi Suzuki (1949-1986)

Suzuki was a widow after the death of her husband by accidental overdose in 1978. At the time of her death, her health was deteriorating, and she was receiving public assistance. She died by hanging at her home.

Yukio Mishima (1925-1970)

Perhaps the writer-suicide whose life is best known is Yukio Mishima. There have been biographies of Mishima (e.g., Stokes, 1974) and also a film based on his life. However, Mishima's life and suicide may not be typical of Japanese writer-suicides, primarily because of the mode he chose for his suicide, seppuku after urging Japanese soldiers to overthrow the government. Mishima decided on the romantic image of death as a samurai. He would achieve hero status, and his death would bring together all of the threads in his life. The ideal of the samurai was the pursuit of Literature and the Sword, and Mishima had set out to develop both paths.

There are several themes which were portents of Mishima's suicide. For example, in his literary endeavors, he began a long novel in four parts in 1965 that he would finish just prior to his suicide in 1970. Mishima also became concerned about his physical body. He was a small man, about five foot four, and he had loathed his body when he was young. Starting in 1955 he planned a rigorous program of exercise, body building and sun tanning. He specialized in kendo (fencing with a blunt lance), eventually receiving the rank of fifth dan. He believed that it was best to die when your body was still in good shape, rather than as a decayed old man. He came to view his body as beautiful and even had photographs of his body put in a volume about Japanese body builders. However, in 1970, at the age of forty-five, though still in good shape, his body was declining. He was often too stiff for some of the exercises, and he was not able to keep up with younger men.

Mishima was an exhibitionist. He played roles in movies and on the stage. He wrote for all kinds of magazines and newspapers in addition to his serious writings. He delighted in shocking people with his writings and his possessions. He posed for a book of nude photographs in 1963 and in 1966 in the pose of Saint Sebastian.

In 1968, Mishima created his Tatenokai, a group of young men who functioned much like a private army. Using his connections, Mishima obtained permission for his group to train with the Japanese army and to be inspected on ceremonial occasions by military officers. He recruited right-wing students for the group, and the first initiation ceremony is interesting. Mishima and the others cut their fingers and dripped blood into a cup. Each signed their name in blood on a sheet of paper, and then each sipped the blood.

In 1970 he began to plan his seppuku. He recruited four students to help, including the leader of his Tatenokai, Morita, probably his lover and who shared his right-wing views. On November 25th, 1970, the group visited a local military unit, captured General Mashita (the commander of the Eastern Army) and ordered Mashita's officers to gather the troups in order to hear a speech from Mishima. Mishima tried to get them to rise up and take over the government in the name of the Emperor, but they laughed at him. He went back into the general's room, disemboweled himself, whereupon Morita tried twice to behead him. One of the three assistants, Furu-Roga, took the sword and completed the beheading.

Mishima was raised by his grandmother in a pathological manner. She kept him from his parents (who lived in the same building) and refused to let him play with other boys. She dressed Mishima as a girl and allowed girls to visit. She died in 1939 when Mishima was 12. Mishima realized that he was attracted to men in his teenage years. He masturbated to images of men wounded and bleeding, such as Saint Sebastian.

Mishima's relationship with his mother, Shizue, appears to have particularly close. Mishima loved her deeply, while she called him her 'lover.' She supported his writing and tried to get established writers to look at her son's work. (Mishima's father, Azusa, wanted Mishima to go into the Civil Service). Throughout his life, Mishima remained devoted to his mother, taking her to plays, exhibitions, and restaurants and buying her gifts. This attachment is of interest given his homosexuality. It is possible to see his homosexuality as, not simply an attraction to men, but also a flight from his unconscious incestuous desires toward Shizue which may have been stimulated by going to live with her when he was twelve.

In February 1945, Mishima was drafted for the military, but on the way to report for duty he got a fever. This fever, together with his lies about his health, got him rejected for service. (The army doctors believed Mishima to have tuberculosis.) This experience is perhaps critical to understanding Mishima's death. His failure to serve in the army enabled him to romanticize the experience in his imagination. However, although he never admitted it, his cowardice here perhaps led to his overcompensation later.

Mishima's writing career went well with novels, plays and criticism. In 1956 he was the leading writer of his generation in Japan, but in 1960, Mishima began to fall from grace. His most recent novel (Kyoko's House) was judged a failure. His books now sold twenty thousand copies rather than two hundred thousand.

He even felt called upon to visit his publishers and make a formal apology. He took a part in a bad gangster movie, and this alienated people of good taste. In a serialized story that year, he satirized a well-known public man who then sued him. He also fell out with the literary club he belonged to. In 1961, he received death-threats from right-wing extremist groups, and for two months Mishima had a bodyguard.

During the 1960s, the trend continued. Mishima had hoped to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1965 and in 1967 and 1968. In 1968, the Nobel Prize was awarded to Kawabata (the first Japanese author to receive it), and Mishima was bitterly disappointed by this. Suicide had always figured prominently in Mishima's writings and thoughts, and by the mid-1960s he was beginning to seriously consider suicide for himself.

Many have commented on the reasons for Mishima's suicide. His suicide was the completion of his literary work; it was in defense of the Emperor and Japan; it was a sexual act or a manifestation of his exhibitionist desires; he was insane; he sought esthetic beauty in his death; his talent was exhausted; he and his homosexual lover committed a shinju (double suicide for love); he tried to trigger a coup d'état.

Mishima's childhood was grossly unhealthy. He was kidnapped by a grandmother and forbidden to be with his parents. He was raised as a girl and developed into a sickly child. Much of his later life can be seen as a result of this. He accepted the feminine identification and became homosexual by preference, but he rejected his frail body and sought to become tough.

Mishima wanted fame and was crushed by his failure to win the Nobel Prize. He wanted fame now and not in the future. He was aware, not that his talent was exhausted, but that his reputation was on the decline. He had alienated too many critics, and he feared for his future in the literary world.

Mishima killed himself, not at the end of his career, as did Ernest Hemingway, but rather at the peak (or just past the peak). He was almost a Nobel Prize winner (and might still have won the prize if he had lived to an old age); he was still in pretty good physical shape; his death right now might establish an image in death that would secure his name in literature.

He was often depressed in his life, and sometimes manic. Yet there is no evidence of breakdowns or severe incapacitating depressions. It is easy to suggest that presence of mental illness in people who are dead and unavailable for interview. But Mishima does not seem to have been as mentally ill as some of the Japanese writer-suicides mentioned above.

Mishima may also have been scared of death. When faced with induction into the army, Mishima faked sickness. The fantasy was exciting, but the reality scary. Perhaps his suicide was a reaction against this fear, just as his body building was a reaction against his childhood sickliness.

Thus, the many themes of Mishima's life came together at that point in his life to make his suicide timely.

Discussion

It has often been claimed that the suicide rate in Japan is very high. It is higher than the suicide rate in America (17.7 per 100,000 per year in 1980 versus 11.9), but there were countries in the 20th century with much higher suicides. For example, Hungary's suicide rate in 1980 was 44.9. Hungary's suicide rate was one of the highest throughout the 20th century (Lester & Yang, 1998).

Japanese culture is, however, tolerant toward suicide. Japan has a long tradition of honorable suicide. For example, at the close of the Second World War, some 500 military officers, including the Minister of War, died by suicide at the surrender, thereby accepting responsibility for the defeat and apologizing to the emperor. Officers overseas also took their lives, among them a writer and friend of Mishima. Mishima spent part of the war in a factory making the planes for the kamikaze pilots who sacrificed themselves for their country.

Alter-Gilbert (undated) noted that the Japanese language contains many terms for specific forms of shi, or death. Shinju is the word for suicide which fulfills a pact between lovers. Roshi refers to death from old age, while gokuraku-ojo is the death (of a woman) through prolonged sexual intercourse. Senshi is what death in war is called; while junshi designates the suicide of a warrior who follows his lord to the grave. Japan also has a tradition of writing a jisei, a death poem. Some commentators have also noted the lack of a Christian concept of sin in Japan.

From the point of view of the risk factors for suicide, psychiatric disorders and alcohol or drug use and abuse appear to be common in those writers mentioned above, as well as disrupted interpersonal

relationships. Two of the writer-suicides (Takeo Arishima and Osamu Dazai) were double suicides with a lover, and Hidemitsu Tanaka had left his wife. Seven of the ten writer-suicides had psychiatric disorders. Not enough could be found about their childhoods to determine whether additional risk factors for suicide were present.

However, we are left with the dilemma of whether the life-style of being a creative writer increases the risk of psychiatric problems and, for some writers, suicidal behavior, or do the psychiatric symptoms and alcohol and drug use facilitate the creativity of the writer? Perhaps, both of these are valid hypotheses, thereby accounting for the high suicide rate in writers?

Conclusions

These Japanese writers who died by suicide appear to have similar risk factors for suicide as do suicides in general, including disrupted interpersonal relationships and drug and alcohol use and misuse. However, Japanese culture, with its tolerant attitude toward suicide, and the stress of being a creative writer also appear to play a role in these suicides.

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