

Humanism and Anti-War Thought in Shiga Naoya's Works

Yixi Zhai^{1*}, Shuangjian Dong¹, Yao Yu¹, Yue Zhao¹

¹School of Foreign Studies, Tangshan Normal University, Tangshan 063000, Hebei, China

*Corresponding author: Yixi Zhai, zhayixi @tstc.edu.cn

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Abstract: This paper explores the manifestation of humanitarian spirit in the works of Japanese author Shiga Naoya^[1]. As a writer with a long creative career and an extensive body of work spanning a significant period, Shiga Naoya holds an important position in Japanese literature. Through an analysis of his representative works, including *At Kinosaki*, *Reconciliation*, *A Snowy Day*, *Yajima Ryudo*, and *A Dark Night's Passing*, this study examines his profound reflections on human dignity, the value of life, and the fate of humanity. The research finds that Shiga Naoya's works, characterized by delicate psychological portrayals, a focus on everyday life, and the relationship between nature and humans, reveal a unique humanitarian spirit that yearns for peace. This spirit is reflected not only in the respect for individual life but also in the concern for marginalized groups and the contemplation of universal human struggles. Shiga Naoya's humanitarianism has had a profound influence on modern Japanese literature and offers valuable spiritual insights for contemporary society.

Keywords: Japanese literature; Shiga Naoya; humanitarianism

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1. Introduction

Shiga Naoya (1883-1971) is one of the most influential writers in modern Japanese literature, revered as the "God of Fiction." As a leading figure of the Shirakaba-ha (White Birch School), his works are renowned for their masterful psychological depth and profound insight into human nature. Advocating humanism and individualism, Shiga opposed the pessimistic depictions of naturalism. At the core of the Shirakaba movement, his writings emphasized human dignity and individual freedom, challenging feudal constraints and societal oppression. Many of Shiga's works carry strong autobiographical elements. For instance, the protagonist's experiences in *A Dark Night's Passing* closely mirror Shiga's own familial conflicts, particularly his strained relationship with his father. His narratives are celebrated for their authenticity and meticulous psychological portrayal, excelling in depicting inner turmoil and self-reflection. Rejecting excessive embellishment, Shiga's concise yet powerful prose became known as the "Shiga-style" (Shiga-cho), leaving a distinct mark on the literary world.

2. The Ideological Origins of Shiga Naoya's Humanist Spirit

Shiga Naoya's humanist spirit is deeply rooted in cultural traditions. Firstly, he was profoundly influenced by the aesthetic of "mono no aware" (the pathos of things) in Japanese classical literature. This aesthetic emphasizes melancholy over the transience of life and the impermanence of the world, as well as a sensitive appreciation of subtle details. In Shiga Naoya's works, we can observe his attention to the minutiae of ordinary lives and his profound understanding of life's fragility—a modern expression of the "mono no aware" sensibility^[2].

Secondly, Western humanist thought significantly shaped Shiga Naoya's outlook. From his youth, he was exposed to a wealth of Western literature and philosophy, particularly Tolstoy's humanist ideals and spirit of universal love, which left a lasting impression on him. This influence is evident in his insistence on human dignity and his critique of social injustice.

Additionally, the artistic principles of the Shirakaba (White Birch) school served as another important source of Shiga Naoya's humanism. The Shirakaba movement emphasized respect for individuality and the sanctity of life, opposing the fatalism of naturalism and the nihilism of aestheticism. As a leading figure of this school, Shiga Naoya integrated these humanist ideas into his writing, developing a unique literary style.

Notably, a close reading of Shiga Naoya's middle and later works reveals the indirect influence of classical Chinese culture. However, the traces of Chinese philosophy in his writings are subtle. For instance, in *A Dark Night's Passing*, the prolonged conflict between the protagonist and his father reflects Shiga's critique of Confucian familial hierarchies, yet it also hints at an underlying desire for reconciliation. The Confucian virtues of "filial piety and fraternal duty" often appear in his works as themes of conflict and resolution—such as the eventual easing of tensions with his father, which bears traces of the Confucian doctrine of the "Golden Mean." Moreover, the Confucian emphasis on self-reflection, as seen in *The Analects* ("I examine myself three times daily"), resonates with Shiga's introspective literary style. In *At Kinosaki*, the protagonist's spiritual purification through observing life and death in nature somewhat parallels the Confucian practice of "investigating things to extend knowledge."

In his later years, Shiga Naoya frequently engaged with Eastern art and was deeply drawn to Chinese aesthetics. His contemplative and meditative depictions of nature in works like *Yajima Ryudo* align with the Daoist concept of "harmony between heaven and humanity." The Daoist philosophies of "non-action" (wuwei) and "following nature" also influenced his reflections on fate and human nature, as seen in the protagonist's eventual reconciliation with destiny in *A Dark Night's Passing*. Shiga Naoya once mentioned his deep admiration for Japanese Zen culture, which itself incorporates elements of ancient Chinese philosophy. The "sudden enlightenment" moments experienced by his characters also reflect the Zen teaching of "directly pointing to the mind."

Having received a traditional education from childhood, Shiga Naoya was immersed in Japanese classical literature, which itself was heavily influenced by Chinese literary and cultural traditions. His concise and refined prose style was likewise inspired by classical Chinese writing, though he rarely explicitly acknowledged this in his discussions on creativity.

Finally, Shiga Naoya's personal life experiences profoundly shaped his humanist perspective. His prolonged conflict and eventual reconciliation with his father, as well as his reflections on war and modern civilization, deepened his understanding of human complexity. This understanding is reflected in his works through nuanced psychological portrayals and a persistent exploration of the value of life.

3. The Embodiment of Humanism in Shiga Naoya's Representative Works

At Kinosaki (*Kinosaki nite*), one of Shiga Naoya's early masterpieces, showcases the budding of his humanist spirit. Through the protagonist's observations and reflections during his convalescence, the novel reveals the author's profound understanding of the value of life. When the protagonist witnesses the deaths of a bee, a mouse, and a salamander, he not only contemplates the impermanence of life but also recognizes the equality of all living beings in the face of death. This attentiveness to and respect for even the smallest forms of life form the foundation of Shiga's humanism.

Reconciliation (Wakai) reflects the deepening of Shiga's humanist ideals. This semi-autobiographical work depicts the protagonist's journey from conflict to reconciliation with his father. Through this process, Shiga demonstrates the power of understanding and forgiveness^[3]. He suggests that true reconciliation is not mere compromise but arises from a profound comprehension of the other's perspective and humanity. This exploration of human relationships illustrates Shiga's effort to translate humanist principles into everyday life.

A Dark Night's Passing (An'ya koro), Shiga's only full-length novel, represents the culmination of his humanist philosophy. Through the protagonist Kensaku's growth and struggles, the novel grapples with the contradictions of human nature and the complex relationship between the individual and society. After enduring numerous hardships, Kensaku ultimately attains a transcendent understanding of life—one that is not passive resignation but an active affirmation of life's essence. Through this character, Shiga expresses his reflections on universal human suffering and his unwavering belief in the dignity of life^[4].

A Snowy Day (Yuki no hi), subtitled Abiko nikki (Abiko Notes), can be regarded as Shiga's firsthand account of his experiences on February 8, 1920. At noon, amid lightly falling snow, the narrator and a friend go shopping. Their visit to the residence of Yanagi (likely Yanagi Soetsu) includes a lively conversation about Fenollosa with a painter and others. Late at night, as the narrator works by his desk, the snow clears to reveal stars outside the window, and the story concludes with the serene description of snow-laden plum branches in the front garden—a reflection of the characters' day-long immersion in a "cheerful state of mind." "Since 1914, Shiga had been increasingly captivated by Eastern antiquities, and after moving to Abiko in 1917, where Yanagi Soetsu resided, his artistic exchanges and spiritual resonance deepened. Witnessing the sudden death of a robust gardener led Shiga to a profound realization that death is "the work of fate." Faced with the deaths of the gardener and his two sons, Shiga moved beyond sorrow to a state of "accepting fate with equanimity." A Snowy Trek (Yuki no ashita), written in 1929, shifts in tone after the gardener's death scene, creating a stark contrast with the world of Snowy Day. This overcast day serves as a mirror to the brightness of Snowy Day, with the two works forming a symphonic poem of dualities—light and shadow, joy and melancholy. During this period of harmonization, Shiga's works frequently depict themes such as "humans cannot escape fate" and "peaceful acceptance of misfortune," revealing how traditional Eastern thought had taken root in his worldview after his time in Abiko. This underscores the influence of Eastern philosophy on his post-Abiko writings. Thus, in these works, Shiga Naoya's humanism manifests on three levels: respect for individual life, compassion for human relationships, and contemplation of humanity's shared destiny. These interconnected layers form a cohesive humanist philosophy. Unlike many writers who treat humanism as an abstract ideal, Shiga embodies it through concrete life details and psychological depth, making his humanism all the more compelling and persuasive.

4. The Artistic Expression of Shiga Naoya's Humanist Spirit

Shiga Naoya's humanism is manifested not only in his thematic concerns but also in his distinctive artistic techniques. Firstly, his masterful psychological depiction serves as a crucial vehicle for his humanist expression. Shiga excels at revealing characters' inner worlds through nuanced psychological portrayals, enabling readers to deeply understand each character's thoughts and emotions^[5]. Such understanding forms the basis for empathy and respect—the very core of humanist spirit.

Secondly, Shiga's focus on everyday life also reflects his humanist ideals. Unlike writers who pursue sensational plots or grand themes, Shiga consistently chooses ordinary people's daily lives as his subject matter. He believed that the most authentic humanity and profound meaning of life reside precisely in these seemingly mundane details. This artistic choice demonstrates his respect for and appreciation of common people's existence.

Yajima Ryudo, a novel composed of four originally independent works—White Wisteria, Red Obi, Water Rail, and Shrike—exemplifies this approach. As revealed in Shiga's 1922 diary and his later essay Kusatsu Hot Springs, Ryudo's quiet life by the marsh, suffering from sciatica, his frustration at being unable to work due to the pain, and his subsequent

recuperation at Karuizawa's hot springs (Kusatsu Hot Springs) when the pain slightly eased—all these experiences completely overlap with Shiga's own life in 1922. However, the 48-year-old Ryudo appears to be unmarried, and his sister Atane is also portrayed as single. These deviations from Shiga's personal circumstances suggest he might have projected his own wife onto Atane, who cares for Ryudo. Ryudo is a literary persona embodying Shiga's "essence," with certain life elements drawn from the author's real experiences. Notably absent is the self-loathing characteristic of Shiga's early works, indicating the author's eventual acceptance of his imperfect self.

Shiga wrote *Water Rail* and *Shrike* around the theme of "wild animals should return to nature," yet paradoxically highlighted the water rail's beauty and fragility (making it difficult to keep in captivity) and the shrike's agility and strong parent-child bond. By delineating each animal's distinctive traits, he emphasized the power of nature. Ryudo's initial intention to keep the water rail in a semi-wild state shows he never meant to fully domesticate it. Ultimately, the water rail dies in a "chicken coop" because it "refuses to be tamed." It's worth noting that Ryudo, as a painter, might have originally kept the water rail to create a Southern School-style artistic ambiance—likely hoping to construct "a picturesque garden" through its presence.

The work abounds in contrasts: Ryudo's sympathy for the girl wearing a red obi and his wish for her to live in better circumstances are juxtaposed with the vivid color contrast between the red obi, the woman's powdered white face, and the black ox—a hallmark of Yajima Ryudo. In the inn scene, Ryudo gives the false name "Ushinosuke," with "ushi" (ox) connecting to the zodiac sign and the ox in *White Wisteria*, Ryudo moans like an ox due to sciatica, while in *Red Obi*, the girl fears oxen because red provokes them. These details are infused with humor. Although contrast was common in Shiga's early works, the pervasive humor in Yajima Ryudo was rare in his earlier period, reflecting a shift in the author's mindset. Through this protagonist embodying Shiga's essence, we can discern that by 1925, Shiga had transitioned from a self-loathing youth to a middle-aged man capable of accepting his true self.

Nature descriptions in Shiga's works also carry special humanist significance. His nature is not mere background or symbolism but a living existence intimately connected to humans. Through depicting the relationship between humans and nature, Shiga expresses his recognition of life's wholeness and his respect for all natural beings. This ecological consciousness forms an important part of his broader humanist philosophy.

Furthermore, Shiga's concise and precise prose style serves his humanist expression. He avoids ornate rhetoric and exaggerated emotions, pursuing instead a truthful, unadorned mode of expression. This artistic restraint reflects his respect for authenticity and represents the stylistic embodiment of his humanism. As the Japanese critic Kobayashi Hideo observed: "The greatness of Shiga Naoya lies in his ability to express the profoundest humanity through the simplest language."

5. The Value and Influence of Shiga Naoya's Humanist Spirit

Shiga Naoya's humanism holds significant literary and philosophical value. In literature, he elevated the Japanese "I-novel" to new heights by infusing personal experiences with universal human significance. He demonstrated that literature focusing on individual lives and mundane experiences could equally possess profound intellectual depth and artistic merit. This literary concept profoundly influenced later Japanese writers such as Dazai Osamu and Abe Kobo.

Philosophically, Shiga's humanism provided important intellectual resources for modern Japanese thought. During the increasingly militaristic era, he steadfastly maintained his respect for individual life and belief in human dignity, demonstrating an intellectual's conscience and courage. His works remind us that fundamental human respect and compassion should never be neglected, regardless of social circumstances^[6].

Shiga's humanism remains profoundly relevant to contemporary society. In our materialistic age, his contemplations on life's essence, emphasis on human relationships, and reverence for nature offer crucial perspectives for reevaluating modern lifestyles. His literature teaches us that true progress lies not merely in material abundance, but more importantly in the refinement of humanity and the enhancement of life's quality. The enduring value of Shiga's humanist spirit manifests

in three aspects: First, his insistence on artistic integrity while maintaining popular appeal created a model of serious literature that remains accessible. Second, his ecological consciousness, expressed through nature writing, anticipated modern environmental concerns. Third, his balanced worldview that acknowledges life's suffering while affirming its worth provides psychological resilience against modern alienation.

Shiga Naoya's greatest achievement was transforming Japanese autobiographical fiction from emotional outpourings into a medium for examining universal human conditions. This transformation continues to inspire writers seeking to bridge personal experience with broader human concerns, ensuring Shiga's lasting influence in world literature.

6. Conclusion

Through the analysis of Shiga Naoya's works, we can observe that humanist spirit permeated his entire literary career. This spirit manifests as a reverence for the value of life, an unwavering commitment to human dignity, and profound contemplation of humanity's shared destiny. With masterful artistic expression, Shiga embedded these ideals into vivid character portrayals and meticulous depictions of daily life, endowing them with compelling emotional power and enduring intellectual value.

Shiga Naoya's humanism constitutes a vital legacy in modern Japanese literature and represents an integral part of the global humanist tradition. In our contemporary era of challenges, revisiting and reflecting on Shiga's works not only deepens our understanding of Japanese literary development but also provides invaluable insights for pondering the human condition and the meaning of existence. His humanist spirit reminds us that regardless of technological advancement or social transformation, fundamental respect and compassion for people remain the core values of civilization^[7].

As one of Japan's most celebrated modern writers, Shiga's humanitarianism is rooted in his belief in the sanctity of individual life and emotional authenticity. Unlike many of his contemporaries who engaged in political activism, Shiga's approach was introspective, emphasizing personal morality and psychological realism. His works often depict ordinary individuals grappling with ethical dilemmas, highlighting the importance of empathy and self-awareness^[8].

During Japan's militarization in the 1930s-40s, many writers succumbed to state propaganda, producing nationalist literature. Shiga, however, remained largely silent—a subtle act of defiance. His refusal to glorify war or endorse militarist ideology demonstrated his moral resistance. In *A Dark Night's Passing*, his magnum opus, the protagonist's existential struggles indirectly critique the dehumanizing effects of societal and political pressures, including war^[9].

Shiga's humanism transcended national boundaries. Unlike ultra-nationalist writers who promoted Japanese superiority, Shiga's works emphasize universal human experiences—love, suffering, and redemption. This perspective inherently opposes war, which thrives on dehumanizing the "enemy." His belief in shared humanity made him resistant to wartime jingoism^[10].

After Japan's defeat in 1945, Shiga's writings subtly addressed the consequences of war. Though not as vocal as some post-war pacifist authors, his later essays and interviews reveal a deep regret over Japan's militarist past and a hope for a peaceful future. His quiet but firm stance influenced younger writers who sought to rebuild Japanese literature on humanistic rather than nationalist foundations.

Shiga's anti-war stance differs from more overt critics like Masuji Ibuse (*Black Rain*) or Ōe (Hiroshima Notes). While Ibuse and Ōe directly depicted war atrocities, Shiga's resistance was philosophical, embedded in his broader humanism. His strength lay in his moral integrity—refusing to compromise his artistic vision for state propaganda.

Naoya Shiga's humanitarianism and anti-war thought, though less explicit than some of his peers, were deeply ingrained in his literary and personal ethos. His focus on individual dignity, psychological realism, and moral introspection formed the foundation of his humanistic worldview. Meanwhile, his quiet resistance to militarism and emphasis on universal humanity positioned him as a subtle but significant anti-war voice in Japanese literature. In an era of rampant nationalism, Shiga's commitment to peace and human dignity remains a timeless testament to the power of conscience in art.

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