

Toko Go

Saitama University

TWO POETS WHO REPRESENT UKRAINE AND JAPAN: TARAS SHEVCHENKO AND KENJI MIYAZAWA

Poetry has a certain impact on people, and countries around the world have produced great poets whose influences have continued to exert their ideas and vision throughout history.

In consideration of how distinct poets from different cultural backgrounds compare, one question that arises is what kind of similarities, and perhaps differences, do Ukrainian and Japanese poets have? This paper explores the similarities between them through a comparison of the Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko and Japanese poet Kenji Miyazawa. It could be considered that these poets share something common in their works, thoughts, and backgrounds. By comparing these elements, the paper demonstrates that both poets shared a love for the nature of their lands, compassion for the poor, and a passion for enriching their respective languages.

This paper comprises three parts: an introduction to the two poets, an analysis of the themes and features found in their works, and a concluding discussion on their similarities and the impact of their works. The first section will briefly introduce Taras Shevchenko and Kenji Miyazawa, highlighting their backgrounds and significance as artists. The second section will delve deeper into their respective works, identifying common themes and distinctive features. The final part will synthesize the findings from the previous sections, highlighting the similarities between the two poets and exploring the lasting influence of their works on contemporary society.

These points will contribute to the understanding of why their works remain vivid impacts on the present day.

Who Were Taras Shevchenko and Kenji Miyazawa?

Taras Shevchenko is known as one of most important Ukrainian poets, writers and artists. He was born as a serf in 1814. After gaining support from those who were impressed by his paintings, he achieved freedom in 1838. Two years later, he published his first poetry collection “Kobzar.” In “Kobzar” he depicted Ukrainian traditions, encouraging Ukrainian culture and national identity by writing poems in Ukrainian. This poetry was criticized for two reasons: using Ukrainian and not focusing on his primary profession as a painter, which led him to lose his scholarship. In 1843, he was invited by one of his patrons to travel around his homeland, Ukraine. Seeing the poverty and harsh conditions there deeply affected him.

In 1845, he wrote “Three Years,” a collection containing messages critical of the Russian emperor, the empire, and its government. Due to its critical content, Taras was arrested and sentenced to more than ten years of prison.

TRADITIONS AND CHANGES

As evidenced above, Taras Shevchenko dedicated his life to fighting against the serfdom system and advocating for the restoration of Ukraine as an independent country.

Kenji Miyazawa, like Taras Shevchenko, is considered one of the most important poets, writers, and agricultural educators in Japan. Born in 1896 in Iwate Prefecture, north-eastern Japan, he grew up in a family that was both financially secure and spiritually rich. This background allowed him to excel in his studies, particularly in agricultural science. It also instilled in him a deep connection to Buddhism.

At the age of 25, he was deeply affected by the loss of his sister, an event that plunged him into deep sorrow. In 1924, at the age of 29, he published his first poetry collection, “Spring and Ashura.” This collection revealed his unique composition style, which he himself called “mind-sketching,” where he observed and depicted the interplay between reality and his own inner world. While actively creating literary works, he also dedicated himself to education, teaching agricultural technology and introducing art to his students. This demanding workload eventually sowed the seeds of health issues, leading to a severe cough.

Although his life was cut short at the age of 38, he spent his years working without rest and inspiring others through his work.

An Analysis of the Themes and Features Found in Their Works

In “Kobzar” and “Three Years” Taras Shevchenko beautifully depicted the Ukrainian landscape, featuring elements like the Dnieper River, while expressing his personal sorrow and lamenting his life experiences. It can be inferred that the hardships he endured as a serf instilled in him a sense of compassion. While some of his works appear negative on the surface, they are not solely focused on negativity. Poems like “My Thoughts” and “My Testament” expressed his bravery, determination, and patriotism towards Ukraine.

Fujii (1988, p. 44), a Japanese translator who interpreted Shevchenko’s works, noted the poet’s deep affection for Ukraine and how his personality, shaped by hardship, significantly influenced works like “My Thoughts.” Furthermore, in poems like “A Dream” Shevchenko directly criticized the Russian Empire and its emperor. Through these diverse works, he expressed sympathy for the plight of the underprivileged and lamented the harsh conditions they faced in Ukraine.

Kenji Miyazawa expressed concern and offered encouragement to workers and farmers, as seen in works like “No. 1023.” Through his unique “mind-sketching” technique, he captured the beauty of his native Iwate Prefecture. One of his most famous poems, “Won’t Give in to the Rain,” depicts his resolve to live a diligent life, despite challenges. Affected by Buddhism, Miyazawa emphasized that true happiness could only be achieved when the whole world achieved it. This philosophy permeates his writing.

Miyazawa’s works are characterized by their rich metaphors, lyrical language, and spiritual thoughts. Literary critic Inoue (in “Miyazawa Kenji,” Shogakukan, pp. 210–212) praised him for his flawless use of Japanese, including personal pronoun, blending singular and plural forms.

Concluding Discussion on Their Similarities and Impact

This paper has analyzed the lives, thoughts, and works of two poets, Taras Shevchenko and Japanese Kenji Miyazawa; revealing three key similarities in their approach to their compositions: depicting nature's beauty and the way of living, outstanding linguistic usage, and patriotism and empathy.

Firstly, both poets portrayed the beauty of their respective homelands, Ukraine and Japan, while addressing the hardships faced by their people. Secondly, they showed deep love for their countries and compassion for the underprivileged. These shared characteristics highlight their common ground. Thirdly, they pushed the boundaries of their native languages, maximizing their expressive potential. While embracing different religions, both related their life experiences into words that still resonate today with readers worldwide, offering encouragement and inspiration.

References:

Fujii, E. (1988). T. Shevchenko before and after the Publication of his Collection of Poems Kobzar. *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies*, 13(3), 39–59. DOI:<https://doi.org/10.15057/6037>

Shinpei, K.(ed.) (1967). *The Complete Works of Miyazawa Kenji*. Tokyo: Shincho-sha.

Shevchenko, T. (2018). *Kobzar*. Translated by Fujii, E. Tokyo: Gunzoshu.

Shevchenko, T. (2022). *A Selection of Poems*. Translated by by Fujii, E. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten.

Michitaka, H & Yoshinari, H.(eds.) (2018). *65 Chapters to Know Ukraine*. Tokyo: Akashi Shoten. pp.188–193.

Miki, T.(1990). “*Miyazawa Kenji*.” Shogakukan.