

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY GENRES AND THE AESTHETIC PRINCIPLE
OF MONO NO AWARE IN THE HEIAN PERIOD**

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Abstract: The Heian period (794–1185) represents a formative era in Japanese literature, marked by the emergence and development of distinct literary genres such as monogatari (narrative tales) and nikki (diaries), which combined prose with poetry. Central to the aesthetics of this period is the concept of mono no aware, often translated as “the poignancy of things,” which expresses a sensitivity to the transience of life and the subtle beauty inherent in impermanence. This study examines the manifestation of mono no aware in Sei Shonagon’s Makura no Soshi (The Pillow Book) and situates it within the broader literary and cultural context of the Heian period. By analyzing narrative techniques, thematic structures, and the interplay between observation, emotion, and poetic expression, the research highlights how mono no aware informs both literary form and aesthetic perception. The work also explores the role of female authors in shaping the diary genre and contributing to the expression of emotional and lyrical sensibilities in Heian literature. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that mono no aware is not only a defining aesthetic of the Heian period but also a central principle that shaped the trajectory of Japanese literary tradition.

Keywords: Heian period, Mono no aware, Sei Shonagon, Makura no Soshi, Monogatari, Japanese diary literature (nikki), Aesthetic perception, Literary genres.

Introduction

The Heian period (794–1185) constitutes a pivotal moment in the history of Japanese literature, characterized by the emergence of highly refined aesthetic sensibilities and innovative literary forms. During this era, the aristocratic court became a center for cultural production, fostering a unique synthesis of poetry, narrative prose, and personal reflection. Poetry remained central to cultural life, yet prose narratives – particularly monogatari – gained prominence by integrating poetic compositions into expansive storytelling. These works, ranging from fantastical tales (denki monogatari) to narratives grounded in courtly life, provided both entertainment and subtle ethical commentary, reflecting the social and emotional experiences of their audiences.

Among the most significant literary developments of the Heian period was the rise of the diary (nikki) genre, particularly as practiced by female writers such as Murasaki Shikibu, and Izumi Shikibu. These diaries not only documented court life and personal experience but also served as a medium for aesthetic reflection, blending narrative, observation, and poetry into a highly individualistic literary form. Central to this literary ethos is the aesthetic principle of mono no aware, which encapsulates a sensitivity to the impermanence of life and the bittersweet beauty inherent in transience.

This thesis examines the development of Heian literary genres through the lens of mono no aware, with a particular focus on Sei Shonagon’s Makura no Soshi (The Pillow Book). By analyzing its structure, stylistic features, and aesthetic principles, the study seeks to elucidate how mono no aware manifests in literary expression and shapes readers’ emotional and perceptual engagement. Furthermore, the research considers the broader cultural significance of this principle, demonstrating its enduring impact on Japanese literary tradition and aesthetic

thought. In doing so, the thesis highlights the interplay between literature, emotion, and social context, providing insight into the distinctive literary culture of the Heian period.

Main Part

During the Heian period (794–1185), Japanese culture experienced a profound evolution in both poetic and narrative literary forms. While poetry retained its central cultural and aesthetic value, narrative literature developed rapidly, often incorporating poetry and poetic citations within prose. The principal narrative form was monogatari, or tales, which frequently included verses and descriptions of poetic composition. Among the earliest and most popular forms were denki monogatari, or “fantastic tales,” which relied on magical or extraordinary plots.

Alongside these, literary prose began to flourish in the ninth century. *Taketori Monogatari* (The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter), written by an anonymous author, is a notable example. The work satirically depicts members of the aristocracy while simultaneously presenting ethical principles that resonate with broader social sentiments. Although the author was likely a courtier, the democratic orientation of the narrative reflects connections to the common cultural strata of Heian society. The aesthetic concept of *mono no aware*, literally “the poignancy of things,” is central to understanding this literature.

Early Japanese prose, such as *Ochikubo Monogatari* (The Tale of Ochikubo, tenth century), attributed to the scholar Minamoto no Shitagou, also drew on folkloric traditions. Similarly, *Utsuho Monogatari* (The Tale of the Hollow Tree, late tenth century) combines fantastical elements with detailed depictions of court life. The opening episodes, for instance, narrate the adventures of Toshikage, a member of the Fujiwara family, who travels to China, survives a shipwreck, and returns with a magical koto (a traditional Japanese stringed instrument). After his early death, his daughter lives in seclusion, playing the koto to soothe her grief. A noble youth discovers her, and their ensuing relationship leads to the birth of a child. Assisted by benevolent monkeys, mother and child survive until the father later finds them during a hunting expedition, brings them to the capital, and constructs a palace for them. These narratives emphasize human emotions, ethical relationships, and a sense of wonder in the interplay between humans and the spiritual world.

The diary (*nikki*) genre, another significant literary form of the Heian period, also reflects the aesthetic principle of *mono no aware*.

Traditionally, diaries were considered a male domain. However, in the *Tosa Nikki* (The Tosa Diary, tenth century), Ki no Tsurayuki, one of the leading poets of the period, assumes a narrative voice as a woman, thereby challenging established literary conventions. Written in a lyrical style and using the vernacular Japanese script rather than Chinese characters, the *Tosa Nikki* represents the first major work of Japanese prose in the indigenous *wabun* style. This shift facilitated the broader adoption of Japanese kana in literary production and signaled a conscious effort to cultivate a distinct national literary identity, independent of Chinese influence. The diary form quickly became popular, particularly among women poets, who explored the nuanced interiority of court life and personal experience.

One prominent example is the *Kagero Nikki* (The Gossamer Years, late tenth century), attributed to an anonymous female poet, often identified as the “Mother of Michitsuna.” She recorded her reflections on marriage, domestic life, and the fleeting nature of human relationships. Another

seminal work, the Izumi Shikibu Nikki (The Diary of Lady Izumi Shikibu, early eleventh century), recounts events from 1003 April to 1004 January, including the poetess's love for a young aristocrat, his subsequent death, her service at Empress Akiko's court, and episodes from her domestic life. Lady Izumi Shikibu's diary, along with her nearly 150 tanka poems, secured her place among the most illustrious literary figures of the Heian period.

Similarly, Murasaki Shikibu, the celebrated author of Genji Monogatari, contributed to the diary genre with her Murasaki Shikibu Nikki, chronicling her experiences at court from 1008 to 1010. The Sarashina Nikki, authored by a poetess from the distinguished Sugawara lineage, also exemplifies the integration of personal experience, poetic expression, and courtly observation.

The Heian literary landscape thus saw the development of diverse genres. The narrative prose (monogatari) evolved from fantastical tales into detailed depictions of daily life and courtly society. The diary (nikki), infused with lyricism, emerged as a vehicle for exploring interiority, emotions, and the subtleties of personal relationships. Together, these forms laid the groundwork for the later emergence of the Japanese novel.

The concept of mono no aware is central to these literary developments. Literally, mono means "thing," and aware denotes a sense of poignant beauty, transience, or emotional resonance. Broadly, mono no aware captures an awareness of the impermanence of life, objects, and the world, evoking a gentle, reflective melancholy or a tender appreciation for the fleeting nature of existence. It encompasses the bittersweet recognition of ephemerality, highlighting the interplay of life and death, presence and absence. The perception of beauty is heightened precisely because all things are transient, giving rise to a complex emotional response that is simultaneously sorrowful and affirming. Hisamatsu lists four manifestations of aware: the beauty of emotional movement, harmony, sadness, and elegance. According to Hisamatsu, the spirit of mono no aware finds its most vivid expression in monogatari, which aim not to teach moral principles, as in Confucian or Buddhist texts, but to reveal the poetic poignancy inherent in human experience.

The Kojien encyclopedia defines mono no aware as "a sense of the harmony of the world, evoked by the fusion of subjective feeling (aware) with the object (mono). It can signify elegance, refinement, or serenity, as revealed through contemplative observation. Mono no aware reached its fullest expression in Heian literature, especially in Genji Monogatari, but has persisted throughout Japanese literary history." Similarly, T.P. Grigorieva notes that mono no aware, or "the charm of things," reflects an early Japanese conception of beauty linked to the Shinto belief in the presence of kami (divine essence) in all things. Aware is the inner essence of things, and writers were tasked with discerning and expressing it. Though the Heian period represents its apogee, sensitivity to transience and poetic poignancy has remained a consistent feature of Japanese literature [Grigorieva, 1979:165].

Makura no Soshi functions as a literary mosaic, combining anecdotal narrative, poetic interludes, lists, and reflective observations. Shonagon's eye for detail, her subtle humor, and her ability to discern the interplay between human behavior and aesthetic experience exemplify Heian sensibilities. She transforms ordinary phenomena into objects of poetic reflection, emphasizing the subjective perception of beauty and its emotional impact. This approach contrasts with the narrative expansiveness of Genji Monogatari, focusing instead on perception, sensation, and the fleeting quality of experience. Shonagon's work thus inaugurates the Japanese essay genre, *zuihitsu* ("following the brush"), which became a distinct literary form in subsequent centuries.

The aesthetic principle of *mono no aware* in *Makura no Soshi* highlights the confluence of literature, poetry, and personal reflection in the Heian period. It underscores the cultural emphasis on emotional sensitivity, the appreciation of impermanence, and the intricate interplay between perception and expression. Through her essays, Shonagon demonstrates that the beauty of life lies not only in grand events but also in the transient and often overlooked details of daily existence. Her work embodies a literary sensibility that celebrates impermanence, finds delight in subtlety, and cultivates a refined emotional awareness—qualities that define the artistic ethos of the Heian period.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Heian period witnessed the development of narrative prose and diary genres that foregrounded the inner life and emotional experiences of individuals. *Mono no aware* emerges as a central aesthetic principle, informing both the content and style of literary works. Through the works of authors such as Ki no Tsurayuki, Izumi Shikibu, Murasaki Shikibu, and Sei Shonagon, Heian literature explored the ephemeral beauty of the world, the delicate interplay of emotion and observation, and the nuanced perception of impermanence. *Makura no Soshi*, in particular, exemplifies this literary and philosophical ethos, offering a sophisticated meditation on the beauty and melancholy of life, crystallized in the attentive, sensitive consciousness of its author. Its innovative form, blending anecdote, reflection, and poetry, established enduring conventions in Japanese literature and inspired generations of writers who followed, solidifying *mono no aware* as a defining aesthetic of Japanese cultural expression.

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