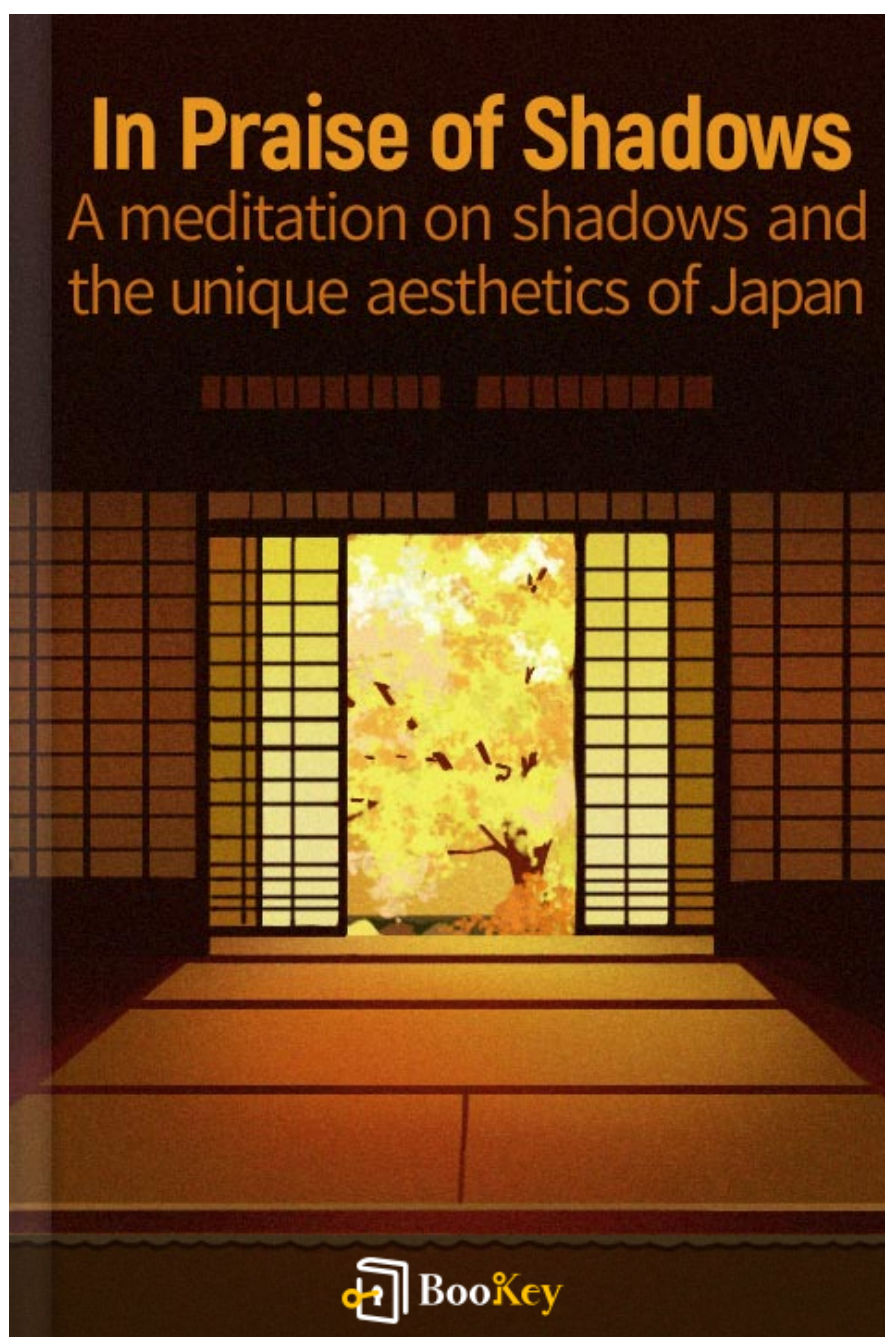


In Praise Of Shadows PDF (Limited Copy)

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki



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In Praise Of Shadows Summary

"Embracing Elegance in the Subtle Dance of Light and Darkness"

Written by Books1

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About the book

In the delicate, whispered world of "In Praise of Shadows," Tanizaki invites readers on a meditative journey through the subtle beauty and enigmatic grace of traditional Japanese aesthetics. Here, Tanizaki masterfully contrasts the quiet, shadow-draped elegance of Japanese art forms with the stark brilliance of modern, Western sensibilities. He challenges us to reconsider the enchanting dance between light and darkness, where beauty is found in the muffled glow of dimly-lit rooms, the soft flicker of candlelight, and the velvety touch of shadows on ink-black lacquered surfaces. With a storyteller's charm and a philosopher's insight, Tanizaki's text becomes a gentle rebellion against the harsh glare of modernity, urging readers to embrace the overlooked allure of simplicity, calm, and the profound depth hidden within the shades of everyday life. As you delve into this contemplative narrative, prepare to find poetry in the mundane and rediscover the soulful nuances of an almost-forgotten world."

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About the author

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1886-1965) stands as one of Japan's celebrated authors, carving a unique niche in modern Japanese literature with his profound explorations into the contrasts and coexistence of traditional Japanese beauty with Western influences. Born in Tokyo during the Meiji era, Tanizaki's works often engaged with themes of desire, aesthetics, and cultural identity, reflecting the rapidly changing society around him. Over his prolific career, he penned numerous novels, essays, and plays, earning him the lasting admiration of literary circles both in Japan and internationally. His narratives frequently delve into the psychological and erotic dimensions of his characters while subtly weaving in his fascination with the art, architecture, and cultural nuances of pre-modern Japan. "In Praise of Shadows," his seminal essay, perfectly encapsulates his deep reverence for the subtleties of Japanese aesthetics, inviting readers to appreciate the subdued, fleeting beauty found in shadows and dimly lit spaces. Tanizaki's literary legacy continues to influence and inspire readers and writers globally, reinforcing the timeless nature of his reflections on beauty and tradition.

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Chapter 1 Summary: 1

The chapter delves into the challenges and philosophical reflections on maintaining traditional Japanese architecture amidst modern advancements. It highlights the plight of traditionalists who strive to harmonize modern conveniences like electric wires and plumbing with the serene austerity of Japanese-style buildings. In Japanese culture, where meticulous attention is given to aesthetics and atmosphere, integrating these elements is a significant concern.

The author begins by discussing the dilemma faced by those who favor traditional architecture, especially in urban settings where the conveniences of modern life, such as heating, lighting, and sanitation, cannot be easily dismissed. The effort to conceal these necessities often results in overly contrived and unsatisfying compromises. Yet, despite these hurdles, there is a certain elegance found in the understated simplicity of traditional Japanese homes.

Anecdotes illustrate the tangible struggles of merging old and new. A restaurateur in a similar predicament reluctantly installs electric fans due to customer demand, while the author recounts personal challenges encountered while building his home. The conundrum of using shoji screens and lighting is resolved with expensive, though aesthetically subpar solutions. Despite technological advancements, such nuances often seem at



odds with traditional aesthetics.

The discussion extends to heating and plumbing. Modern heating implements fail to capture the essence of a traditional setting, where family gatherings revolved around the warmth of a fire, evoking nostalgia for sunken hearths. Japanese bathtubs constructed entirely of wood and Japanese-style toilets offer a spiritual retreat, a place uniquely designed for contemplation and connectedness with nature in a way that Western equivalents do not capture.

The author laments the lack of aesthetic consideration in modern amenities, highlighting the cultural incongruency when these are superimposed into a traditional context. Modern sanitary conveniences often overshadow the tranquility and artistic refinement epitomized by traditional Japanese architecture.

Amidst these reflections, a longing for an alternate reality where Eastern technology developed independently lingers. If Japanese or Chinese civilizations had pioneered technological advancements, the resulting products would likely align more closely with their cultural and aesthetic ideals. Simple tools and utilities—such as pens, papers, and musical devices—would potentially reflect Eastern sensibilities and aesthetics far more robustly than their Western counterparts.

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The discontent spills into other arts, such as cinema and photography, highlighting how nuanced differences in national character manifest even when using identical technology. A complaint is aired that current tech distorts Japanese art forms to fit alien molds. The chapter suggests that a technology closer to traditional sensibilities would better honor the softness and subtleties present in Japanese culture.

The narrative also reflects on materials, like paper and metals, showing deep cultural affinity for textures and finishes that age gracefully—preferences divergent from Western tastes for polished perfection. Treasuring jade and particular crystal qualities, the Japanese and Chinese cultural ethos appreciates muted and murky elegance over bright glamor.

In conclusion, the author contemplates that, although pleasant to dream of what might have been if the East had charted its path in technological evolution, realistically, one must adapt to the ongoing march of modernity. Despite this, there remains a reflective yearning for the integration of tradition and innovation, a world where modern conveniences are not at the expense of age-old cultural erudition and aesthetic values. The chapter speaks volumes about cultural identity and the challenges of sustaining it amid relentless global modernity.



Critical Thinking

Key Point: Harmonizing modern conveniences with traditional aesthetics

Critical Interpretation: Imagine walking into a space where the symphony of traditional architecture seamlessly collaborates with contemporary technology. This fusion, although challenging, invites you to rethink how you blend the old with the new in your life. It's about preserving the elegance and tranquility inherent in cultural heritage while embracing advancements that make life more convenient and comfortable. Let this inspire you to integrate innovation thoughtfully, ensuring it complements rather than disrupts the timeless aspects of your personal environment. Balance, in this context, requires an appreciation for the past that informs a more considered and elegant future—a quest that encourages you to echo the beauty of what came before while stepping confidently into modernity.



Chapter 2 Summary: 2

In this text, the author explores the nuanced relationship between light, darkness, and beauty in Japanese aesthetics and architecture, contrasting it with Western ideals. The discussion begins with the appreciation of objects that have acquired a "glow," signifying both an elegance and an acceptance of natural grime and wear. This appreciation extends to the broader cultural differences in cleanliness and presentation, where Westerners typically seek to eliminate every trace of grime, while in Japan, such traces are cherished for their history and warmth.

The narrative then shifts to the environment of hospitals, suggesting that a softer, more traditional Japanese setting could be more comforting for patients than the sterile, glittering, white-dominated spaces influenced by Western design. The author reflects on personal experiences, such as a preference for an old-fashioned dentist's office that blends with Japanese architectural sensibilities over a modern, intimidating clinic.

A vivid description of the Waranjiya, a restaurant in Kyoto that once used candlelight instead of electric lighting, illustrates how traditional Japanese aesthetics, like the dim lighting, enhance the beauty of lacquerware. The interplay of light and material reveals a depth and richness in lacquer objects that electric light would obscure, highlighting how traditional settings affect the perception and appreciation of beauty.



The author reminisces about conversations with an Indian friend, sharing insights into how both cultures value lacquerware over ceramics, underscoring a shared appreciation for the shadows and warmth that lacquerware conveys. Lacquerware, with its black, brown, or red finishes, requires the subtle illumination of candles to unveil its beauty, a stark contrast to ceramics that thrive under brighter conditions but lack the same depth.

This exploration of traditional Japanese cuisine further exemplifies the importance of shadow and darkness. Many Japanese food presentations find their charms heightened in dim surroundings, from the meditation evoked by the color of y M k a n—a traditional confection—to the beauty of miso soup served in black lacquer bowls under faint light.

The text then delves into architectural philosophies, contrasting Japanese structures with Western ones. Japanese buildings prioritize heavy roofs and deep eaves to cast generous shadows, creating intimate and contemplative spaces. Western architecture, conversely, strives for openness and exposure to light, with designs that minimize shadows. These choices reflect differing cultural values and environmental adaptations, with Japanese aesthetics embracing darkness as a source of beauty and tranquility.

Through this contemplation of light and shadow in various aspects of



Japanese culture and living spaces, the author celebrates the unique way Japan cultivates a profound beauty that stems from an intimate connection with the natural ebb and flow of light and darkness in daily life.

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Critical Thinking

Key Point: The beauty found in imperfections and natural wear

Critical Interpretation: In a world that often pursues the flawless and the pristine as the ultimate ideals, embracing the beauty of imperfections and the history marked by natural wear can offer a liberating perspective. Consider how Tanizaki highlights the 'glow' of aged objects, where the acquired grime and wear aren't seen as blemishes but as testaments to their journey and essence. Applying this principle to your life urges you to shift your focus from the relentless pursuit of perfection to finding grace and beauty in the authentic history of objects—and of yourself. Cherish the stories and experiences that have left their mark on your soul as symbols of personal growth, resilience, and beauty, much like how the gentle glow of lacquerware in candlelight unveils its exquisite depths.

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Chapter 3 Summary: 3

In the exploration of Japanese aesthetics, particularly the design of traditional Japanese rooms, the interplay of shadow and light emerges as a central theme. Unlike Western design, which often highlights ornamentation and bright illumination, Japanese rooms are defined by their subtle use of shadows. This unique approach can be initially puzzling to Western observers, who may perceive such spaces as simply bare or unadorned, failing to grasp the nuances of shadow mastery that define their true charm.

Japanese architecture is meticulously crafted to manipulate light. By extending eaves and utilizing veranda structures, direct sunlight is intentionally reduced. Instead, light filters dimly through paper-paneled doors, allowing the charm of the room to emerge from this indirect, muted illumination. The walls, often finished in neutral tones using clay and fine sand, absorb light to create a serene atmosphere. In these spaces, the fascination lies not with ornamental details but with the gentle play of fading light upon a dusky surface, which provides a delicate glow surpassing any decorative accessory.

An essential element within the Japanese room is the tokonoma, or alcove, serving as a focal point for subtle art displays, such as a hanging scroll and floral arrangements. These elements are not mere decorations but enhance the shadow depth in harmony with the room's aesthetic. The mounting of



the scroll is as significant as its artistic content; it must blend seamlessly with its alcove surroundings. Often, the paper and fabric carry an antique appearance, creating a perfect balance with the room's shadows, thus elevating even ordinary works into extraordinary visual spectacles.

When visiting the grand temples of Kyoto or Nara, observers typically encounter such scrolls displayed in deeply recessed alcoves. Here, the limited light softens the masterpieces into shadowy outlines that beg additional interpretation. The minimal clarity, rather than detracting, completes the harmony, as the antique scrolls transform into another layer of delicate surface for shadow play.

This reverence for shadows in Japanese architecture can be likened to an ink wash painting. The shoji screens act as the lightest areas, with shadows deepening towards the alcove's darkness. This enveloping shadow fosters an atmosphere of tranquility, perpetuated by silence and an inherent mystique. Therein lies the "mysterious Orient" perception by newcomers—an interaction of light, shadow, and space evoking calmness and timelessness.

The beauty within these spaces results from careful construction decisions, such as window placements and the dimensions of architectural elements. Particularly notable is the shoji's soft glow in a study bay, a window originally designed for reading. Over time, this area became valued primarily as a conduit for filtered light, enhancing the alcove's shadows with



a cold, desolate hue.

In terms of material usage, gold plays an intrinsic part in this aesthetic philosophy. In the dim rooms of ancient Japanese structures, gold leaf or dust applied on sliding doors or screens can capture and magnify even the slightest light, creating an ethereal glow. Unlike silver, gold maintains its reflectiveness and brilliance indefinitely, becoming both a source of illumination and a component of beauty and status.

Gold threads were similarly employed in textiles, like priestly garments, primarily to accentuate their visual impact in minimal light. The resulting interplay of glimmering gold and deep shadow increases the solemnity and dignity of both religious and non-religious occasions alike.

In essence, Japanese architecture and decorative arts reveal a profound understanding and appreciation of darkness and shadows, crafting a serene, timeless beauty that fundamentally redefines voids and emptiness into spaces of quiet majesty.

Theme	Description
Interplay of Shadow and Light	Japanese aesthetics focus on subtle shadow use, contrasting with Western emphasis on bright illumination and ornamentation.
Architectural Design	Structures like extended eaves and paper-paneled doors reduce direct sunlight, enhancing a room's charm through soft light.

Theme	Description
Materials and Atmosphere	Neutral tones in materials absorb light, fostering a tranquil atmosphere where decorative details give way to shadow play.
Role of Tokonoma	The alcove displays art pieces to enrich the room's aesthetic depth, harmonizing with the surrounding shadows.
Art Display	In temples, scrolls are positioned to interact with shadows, inviting further interpretation and appreciation.
Influence of Shadows	Like an ink wash painting, shadows and light work in unison to instill tranquility and mystique within spaces.
Construction Decisions	Strategic architectural choices, such as window placements, mold spaces into conduits of filtered light and shadow.
Use of Gold	Gold elements in architecture and textiles capture and reflect light, creating an ethereal ambiance and symbolizing beauty and status.
Textile Embellishments	Gold threads in garments enhance visual impact in dim light, increasing the dignity of various occasions.
Appreciation of Darkness	Japanese design harnesses darkness to create serene spaces of timeless beauty and calmness.

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Chapter 4: 4

The passage celebrates the unique beauty of the NM contrasting it with Kabuki and Bunraku theater forms, and ponders the historical fascination with the interplay of light and shadow in Japanese aesthetics.

The NM theater, known for its minimalist presentation of the beauty of Japanese actors' complexions. Unlike Kabuki performers who use heavy makeup, NM actors appear without any, allowing their characteristic brownish hue with a red flush—to stand out. This natural beauty is accentuated by the elaborate yet historically-influenced costumes that NM actors wear, showcasing how these traditional elements enhance the charm and allure of the performers, often reflecting an idealized form of beauty that enchanted feudal lords of old.

While Kabuki is known for its vivid, colorful costumes and makeup, these attributes often appear excessive and verge on vulgarity under modern bright Western floodlights. In contrast, NM relies on a soft lighting that maintains the mystery and natural allure of the actors. The subdued lighting and natural presentation create an intimacy that enhances the theater's emotional and aesthetic impact.

This interplay of light and shadow has deep roots in Japanese culture,



reflecting a broader aesthetic appreciation that finds beauty in the vague, the shadowed, and the partially revealed. The darkened spaces echo the shadow-filled domestic spaces of historical Japan, where aristocrats and warriors adorned themselves in resplendent attire that today is reflected in theatrical costume. This aesthetic preference is not limited to theater but extends to architectural and personal spaces, where the play of light and darkness creates a distinct beauty.

The Bunraku puppet theater is also discussed, noted for its realistic portrayal under gentle, traditional lighting that bestowed an uncanny beauty to the puppets, much like the veiled femininity of traditional Japanese social practices, where women lived much of their lives in the secluded shadows of domestic spaces. This cultural preference for shadows is seen as a way to accentuate the brilliance and mystery of whiteness—a revered trait in traditional Japanese beauty, emblematic of purity and elegance.

The author reflects on his personal experience of these aesthetics, recalling the dim, ash-like darkness in old Kyoto teahouses, which augmented the ethereal beauty of women with blackened teeth and shaven eyebrows, practices that served to emphasize the captivating white of the face. The modern era's penchant for bright lights and clear views is highlighted as a departure from the subtle beauty that thrives in softness and obscurity. The author laments this loss, noting how current usage of electric lights has eradicated the meaningful shadows once prevalent in Japanese life, favoring



the constant quest for illumination that characterizes Western progressiveness.

Overall, the narrative places traditional Japanese theater and aesthetics within a context of cultural heritage, emphasizing an enduring appreciation for subtlety, mystery, and the layered beauty found within darkness and shadows.

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Chapter 5 Summary: 5

The narrative presented primarily centers around Yamamoto Sanehiko, the president of the KaizM publishing house, and his involvement with the physicist Dr. Albert Einstein during a trip to Kyoto. As the train journey approaches Ishiyama, Einstein, observing an unnecessary use of an electric lamp during daylight, remarks on its wastage, prompting Sanehiko to interpret this as a reflection of Einstein's frugality as a Jew. However, Sanehiko himself acknowledges that Japan's use of electric light is wasteful, second only to America among Western countries.

This anecdote leads Sanehiko to reminisce about modern society's insensitivity to the excessive use of illumination and how it disrupts traditional experiences, such as moon-viewing. He recounts an experience marred by artificial lights overwhelming the natural moonlight, illustrating societal shifts towards over-illumination that overshadow traditional aesthetics and experiences in Japan.

Sanehiko's narrative further explores the theme of modernity overshadowing tradition through various examples. He criticizes Western-style hotels in Japan, like the Miyako Hotel in Kyoto, which despite their scenic locations, suffer from oppressive heat due to excessive lighting, alienating both Japanese and Western guests from the natural beauty and coolness of the surroundings. The Imperial Hotel, though better with its indirect lighting, is



also critiqued for similar reasons.

The narrative expands to societal observations, highlighting generational differences. Citing complaints from elderly English women, Sanehiko reflects that disdain for younger generations' disregard for tradition and elders is a universal sentiment, exacerbated by rapid modernization.

Food, too, symbolizes this cultural shift. While living in a modern city, Sanehiko finds traditional foods more palatable and pays homage to persimmon-leaf sushi from Yoshino, a delicacy crafted by the rural poor but superior in taste to city offerings.

In addressing changes across generations, Sanehiko alludes to the Restoration of 1867, marking Japan's modernization efforts parallel to the Western world. However, this progress, he muses, creates challenges for the elderly, who find urban living increasingly inhospitable and long for the simplicity of rural life. Yet, even rural areas are succumbing to modernization's pervasive reach.

Despite recognizing westernization's inexorable path, Sanehiko professes a desire to preserve the essence of traditional Japanese aesthetics, especially in literature and the arts, proposing a figurative mansion where shadow and subtlety, hallmarks of Japanese tradition, can thrive undisturbed by the harsh glare of modernity.

