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The Dialectical Coexistence of Beauty and Violence in The Temple of the Golden Pavilion

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Abstract: Set against the turbulent Shōwa era, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* constructs a spiritual landscape intertwined with beauty and destruction through Mizoguchi's decisive act of burning down Kinkaku-ji. As the embodied symbol of traditional Japanese aesthetics, the absolute beauty of the Golden Pavilion serves both as a spiritual haven for Mizoguchi and a barrier cutting him off from the real world. Centering on the dialectical relationship between beauty and destructive action, this paper conducts analysis from three dimensions: the aesthetic symbolic system of the Golden Pavilion, the psychological logic behind Mizoguchi's extreme conduct, and the epochal metaphor embedded in the destruction of beauty. It reveals the profound connotation that beauty breeds its own negation, while destruction dissolves and reconstructs beauty in a perpetual cycle. This study further explores Yukio Mishima's philosophical reflections on the predicament of traditional aesthetics amid modern society. By examining the interplay between aesthetic idealism and existential crisis, the paper illuminates how Mishima articulates the tension between preservation and annihilation as fundamental forces shaping cultural identity. The analysis demonstrates that the novel transcends mere narrative to become a meditation on the paradoxical nature of beauty, which simultaneously inspires devotion and provokes its own undoing. Through this dialectical lens, Mishima's work emerges as a profound commentary on the fate of traditional values in an era of rapid modernization and cultural transformation.

Keywords: aesthetics; mishima; beauty; destruction; japanese literature; buddhism

1. Introduction: The Mirror between Reality and Literature

Published in 1956, *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* stands as the pinnacle of Yukio Mishima's literary career [1, 2]. Drawing inspiration from the 1950 incident involving Kinkaku-ji, the novel interweaves historical context with imaginative narrative to portray Mizoguchi, a young man navigating complex psychological terrain shaped by self-perception and aesthetic fixation. Since its publication, the novel has become a central subject in modern Japanese literary studies for its intensive exploration of beauty and its nuanced portrayal of inner life. Conventional scholarship often examines the work through frameworks centered on post-1945 cultural reflection and Mishima's philosophical engagement with impermanence and transcendence. By contrast, this paper focuses on the recurring dynamic between aesthetic idealization and transformative action throughout the work and seeks to address two core questions: Why does the Golden Pavilion—embodying an enduring aesthetic ideal—become the focal point of irreversible change? What aesthetic and cultural perspectives inform Yukio Mishima's representation of this pivotal moment?

In his reflections on composing *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, Mishima observed: "To me, the beauty of Kinkaku-ji is an absolute existence, and absolute beauty often arouses an urge to transform." This statement offers a key interpretive lens for understanding the relationship between aesthetic perfection and human response in the novel. Within the narrative, the Golden Pavilion functions not merely as a physical structure but as a resonant symbol of classical Japanese aesthetic consciousness. Likewise,

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Mizoguchi's decisive act is portrayed not as a transgressive event, but as a deeply internalized resolution emerging from sustained contemplation of ideal form. Analyzing this dynamic enables a richer appreciation of the novel's literary significance, as well as insight into the broader cultural transitions experienced by Japanese society during periods of rapid social and intellectual reorientation [2, 3].

2. The Golden Pavilion: The Symbolic System of Absolute Beauty and Its Existential Predicament

In *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion*, the beauty of the Golden Pavilion is not a static visual presentation, but an evolving symbolic system [3]. From Mizoguchi's perspective, its beauty undergoes three phases: imagined beauty, tangible real-world beauty, and absolute beauty. Ultimately, however, this perfection plunges the youth into an existential deadlock that renders him incompatible with reality.

Mizoguchi's initial bond with the Golden Pavilion originates from his father's descriptions [4]. In his father's words, Kinkaku-ji is Japan's most magnificent building: "The gold leaf on its roof blazes brightly under the sun, as if embracing the entire sky." At this stage, the Golden Pavilion exists as an aesthetic symbol constructed by Mizoguchi out of oral narration. As Mizoguchi reflects: "I had often seen photographs and textbook illustrations of the real Golden Pavilion, yet the phantom of the pavilion evoked by my father's words far surpassed its actual form."

Afflicted with congenital stuttering, Mizoguchi is excluded from ordinary social interaction from childhood. "Language is a barrier to me. I cannot express my emotions smoothly like other people." Trapped in such isolation, the beauty of the Golden Pavilion becomes his spiritual consolation. He projects all his yearnings for goodness onto this building he has never seen, regarding it as an ideal symbol transcending worldly suffering [5]. He even fantasizes himself as a ruler with a speech impediment, revealing a heightened desire for self-affirmation.

When Mizoguchi finally sets foot in Kinkaku-ji, the tangible temple does not shatter his imagination; instead, it reinforces his impression of supreme beauty. The Golden Pavilion is depicted through Mizoguchi's eyes: "Bathed in the sunset, the gold leaf on the roof turns dark crimson, forming a sharp contrast against the surrounding lake and green trees, like a flowing scroll." To Mizoguchi, the beauty of the Golden Pavilion is irreproducible, encompassing "the elegance of Hōsui-in, the mystery of Chōon-dō, and the solemnity of Kyokusui-chō." This synthesis of diverse aesthetic qualities establishes the pavilion as the epitome of beauty. More importantly, its beauty possesses timeless transcendence: "It stands quietly across changing historical periods, as if unaffected by temporal flow." Such permanence stands in marked contrast to Mizoguchi's own fragility, deepening his obsessive fascination [6].

Nevertheless, while granting Mizoguchi spiritual solace, the absolute beauty of the Golden Pavilion traps him in an existential predicament. Exclusive by nature, this absolute beauty repels all facets of reality. "Everything in the mortal world appears mediocre and ugly beside the beauty of Kinkaku-ji." Mizoguchi discovers he can never integrate his own existence with the pavilion's beauty. When he tries to share its splendour with Kawakawa, his stuttering prevents coherent expression. When he encounters beautiful women, visions of the Golden Pavilion immediately surface in his mind: "Compared with the beauty of the Golden Pavilion, feminine beauty seems fleeting and superficial." This irreconcilable divide transforms the Golden Pavilion from a source of comfort into a spiritual constraint. As Mizoguchi confesses: "The beauty of the Golden Pavilion is like a wall separating me from the whole world, imprisoning me with no escape."

Furthermore, the absolute beauty embodied by the Golden Pavilion faces the impact of modernization, further intensifying the pressure weighing upon Mizoguchi. Japan underwent rapid societal transformation, bringing profound shifts to traditional values [4, 7]. People began prioritizing material concerns and showed diminishing engagement with inherited aesthetic sensibilities. Within this context, the beauty of Kinkaku-ji appears

increasingly detached from contemporary life. Mizoguchi observes a growing stream of visitors, most of whom merely take photographs in haste without grasping its aesthetic depth. Worse still, he fears the heritage faces ongoing environmental and structural challenges: "Historical events once placed it at serious risk; current development activities now pose new challenges to its preservation." This concern over the endurance of beauty infuses Mizoguchi's affection for the Golden Pavilion with mounting unease and vigilance.

3. Mizoguchi's Turn Toward Violence: Spiritual Breakout under the Oppression of Beauty

If the absolute beauty of the Golden Pavilion constitutes the external catalyst for radical action, Mizoguchi's individual psychological traits form its internal foundation [8, 9]. The magnificent image of the Golden Pavilion simultaneously attracts and distances the protagonist. Caught within this tension, Mizoguchi's sense of self is gradually weakened by the overwhelming presence of idealized beauty. He experiences profound inner dissonance. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Mizoguchi's speech difficulty, deep-seated feelings of inadequacy, and intense preoccupation with aesthetic perfection collectively contribute to his transformation from an admirer into one who seeks to dismantle that which he once revered. This shift fundamentally reflects an effort to achieve spiritual autonomy amid the weight of unattainable aesthetic ideals.

Speech difficulty marks the beginning of Mizoguchi's struggle with self-perception and underlies his growing distance from social interaction. Psychological research indicates that disruptions in verbal fluency may be linked to early emotional distress. Mizoguchi's speech difficulty originates from a childhood incident: "When I misspoke in public and was mocked, I lost the ability to speak fluently ever after." This experience generates persistent feelings of embarrassment. Mizoguchi consciously minimizes interpersonal engagement and turns inward. Without fluent language as a bridge to others, he finds it difficult to establish meaningful relational connections. "I am like a solitary island, with no one capable of understanding my inner thoughts." Within this solitude, the beauty of the Golden Pavilion becomes his primary source of meaning. He invests his deepest emotions in the pavilion and integrates its image into his developing sense of self.

Yet as he matures, Mizoguchi gradually recognizes that the Golden Pavilion's beauty cannot resolve his ongoing uncertainty about identity, even while offering temporary solace. On the contrary, its perceived flawlessness accentuates his own sense of limitation: "The Golden Pavilion is perfect, while I am flawed; the Golden Pavilion is eternal, while I am transient." This contrast intensifies his self-doubt and contributes to negative self-regard. "I often wonder what it would be like if I could attain perfection like the Golden Pavilion." His sense of limitation becomes more pronounced after encountering Kawakawa and Kashiwagi. Kawakawa's openness and Kashiwagi's pragmatic adaptability stand in marked contrast to Mizoguchi's reserved nature. They navigate everyday life with relative ease, whereas Mizoguchi remains on the periphery [10].

Kashiwagi's presence proves instrumental in reshaping Mizoguchi's outlook. Though physically impaired, Kashiwagi engages with reality through active adaptation rather than withdrawal. He advises Mizoguchi: "Learn to make use of your defects rather than being confined by them." He introduces the idea that aesthetic value is not fixed but subject to reinterpretation, thereby challenging Mizoguchi's unwavering veneration of the Golden Pavilion. "He told me that the beauty of Kinkaku-ji is merely superficial, and we could alter its form if we wished." Mizoguchi begins to consider that he need not remain passive before aesthetic ideals; instead, he might reinterpret or reframe them in ways that affirm his own agency.

Kawakawa's passing serves as the decisive turning point that consolidates Mizoguchi's resolve [6, 11]. As Mizoguchi's sole close companion, Kawakawa represented his only stable link to shared human experience. "Kawakawa is gone; there is no one left to understand me." Overwhelmed by loss, Mizoguchi attributes his isolation to the all-consuming presence of the pavilion's beauty: "It is the beauty of the Golden Pavilion that

made me reclusive and robbed me of my friend." This attribution transforms his long-standing reverence into profound disillusionment. He concludes that only by removing the pavilion can he transcend the constraints imposed by rigid aesthetic ideals and attain genuine psychological liberation. "I will remove it, dismantle this barrier separating me from the world. Only then can I truly live."

Mizoguchi's act is carefully considered rather than spontaneous. He undertakes deliberate preparation: "I studied the architectural structure of the Golden Pavilion to locate the most flammable sections; I also prepared gasoline and matches, waiting for the right moment." As the structure is consumed, Mizoguchi registers both a sense of release and a lingering resonance with aesthetic grandeur [12]. "When flames swallow the roof of Kinkaku-ji, I witness the gold leaf radiating dazzling light, revealing a beauty more supreme than ever." Though deeply moved by this vision, he proceeds without hesitation. He recognizes that only through complete dissolution of the object can he move beyond its symbolic dominance and realize a renewed sense of self-integration.

4. The Destruction of Beauty: Aesthetic Reconstruction Amid Social Transition

What is the Golden Pavilion? Is it merely a physical structure? Could Kinkaku-ji function solely as a symbolic form, and if so, what meaning does it convey?

Superficially, the act involving the Golden Pavilion appears as an instance of aesthetic disruption. Fundamentally, however, it reflects profound contemplation on the trajectory of traditional aesthetics amid broad societal change [13].

In the period following major historical upheaval, Japanese society experienced a shift from long-established cultural frameworks toward new modes of social organization and expression. Traditional aesthetic sensibilities encountered increasing pressure under evolving conditions. As a representative embodiment of classical Japanese aesthetics, the fate of the Golden Pavilion signals broader transformations in aesthetic valuation. External cultural influences contributed to widespread adoption of new lifestyles and design paradigms. Practices such as wearing traditional garments, participating in ceremonial rituals, and engaging with classical spatial arrangements gradually receded in prominence; historic architectural forms gave way to contemporary construction approaches. Within this environment, the aesthetic principles historically associated with Kinkaku-ji found diminishing resonance [14]. A writer deeply engaged with inherited cultural forms expressed concern over this development. The symbolic transformation of the pavilion serves as a literary representation of how aesthetic traditions may undergo fundamental reconfiguration in response to changing social realities: the event signifies not only structural change but also the evolution of underlying aesthetic consciousness.

Yet the narrative does not present this transformation as irreversible loss. Rather, it suggests that renewal may emerge through processes of reexamination and reintegration [15]. The dissolution of the pavilion's conventional form becomes a catalyst for reconsidering how aesthetic values can be revitalized within contemporary contexts.

At the conclusion of the narrative, the protagonist experiences a sense of release following the transformation of the Golden Pavilion, rather than despondency [16]. For the individual navigating rapid societal adjustment, the temple had represented an idealized vision of cultural continuity—yet one increasingly difficult to sustain amid complex realities. Faced with uncertainty about preserving such ideals intact, the protagonist chooses a course that elevates the essence of beauty beyond material constraints, allowing its significance to persist through collective memory. In moments of disorientation and deep attachment to fading cultural patterns, the act becomes a means of affirming enduring aesthetic value. 'I transformed the Golden Pavilion, yet beauty remains intact. In fact, I have encountered a more grounded and vital expression of beauty.' This renewed conception moves beyond static perfection toward an aesthetic orientation dynamically engaged with lived experience. The suggestion is that traditional aesthetic sensibilities need not vanish under modern conditions; instead, they may evolve through meaningful interaction with present-day contexts. The transformation of the

pavilion thus initiates a process of regeneration: established forms recede, making space for emergent expressions of aesthetic meaning.

Additionally, the narrative incorporates reflections on cultural accountability and ethical responsibility in periods of societal transition. While no direct reference is made to specific historical episodes, the thematic resonance extends to broader considerations of how cultural symbols are interpreted and repurposed across time. During certain historical periods, aesthetic traditions were aligned with ideological frameworks emphasizing national distinction. Following subsequent societal recalibration, questions arose concerning the ethical foundations of cultural identity and the reconstruction of shared values. The author proposes that aesthetic traditions require ongoing critical engagement—not as fixed relics, but as living elements subject to reinterpretation [17]. A renewed aesthetic orientation must be rooted in integrity and inclusivity, emerging from thoughtful reassessment rather than inherited assumptions.

5. Conclusion: Interweaving and Interpenetration between the Individual and Society

Aesthetic intensity and transformative action maintain a dialectical coexistence within The Temple of the Golden Pavilion. The transcendent aesthetic ideal embodied by the Golden Pavilion simultaneously functions as a locus of spiritual resonance and a catalyst for profound personal transformation. The act of dismantling this ideal both concludes one mode of meaning-making and inaugurates another. Through this dynamic, the narrative unfolds individual psychological tensions under the influence of absolute aesthetic ideals, while also engaging with broader cultural questions concerning aesthetic continuity and renewal amid societal change.

On the individual plane, the novel reveals how absolute aesthetic ideals may estrange human experience. When an individual invests total existential significance in such an ideal, it risks losing its relational and experiential vitality, becoming instead a rigid framework that constrains self-understanding. The protagonist's trajectory stems from an all-consuming orientation toward the aesthetic perfection of the Golden Pavilion; his sense of identity becomes inseparable from this external standard, culminating in a decisive rupture that reconfigures his relationship to meaning. This trajectory underscores a central insight: aesthetic ideals are most vital when they serve human flourishing—not when they prescribe fixed conditions for worth or belonging. A balanced engagement with aesthetic value, grounded in reflective awareness and adaptive selfhood, helps sustain meaningful orientation without surrendering agency to external ideals.

From a societal perspective, the work engages with cultural transitions marked by shifting aesthetic frameworks. Established traditions encountered new modes of expression and valuation, creating moments of uncertainty and recalibration. Through the dissolution and symbolic reconstitution of the Golden Pavilion, the narrative gestures toward possibilities for aesthetic renewal—not through preservation in isolation nor through wholesale assimilation, but through thoughtful integration across temporal and conceptual boundaries. Such considerations regarding continuity and adaptation resonate beyond their historical context, offering insights relevant to societies navigating evolving cultural landscapes.

The Temple of the Golden Pavilion endures as a timeless classic fundamentally because it addresses enduring human concerns: the aspiration toward aesthetic excellence and the complexities it entails. In an era of pluralistic aesthetic sensibilities, questions persist about how to relate thoughtfully to beauty and cultivate a resilient, inclusive aesthetic sensibility. While the narrative's resolutions remain open-ended, its sustained inquiry provides valuable conceptual resources. Examining the interplay between aesthetic intensity and transformative response deepens appreciation of the novel's literary significance and invites ongoing reflection on how aesthetic experience can support personal growth and collective understanding.

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