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## Pathetic Beauty: Mono no Aware in Hollywood Cinema –To Family and Friends in These Estranged Times–

Aaron Francis Ward\*

### Abstract

Mono no aware is considered to be one of the central-most Japanese aesthetics and distinctive to Japanese identity (Keene 1995; Miller 2011). This aesthetic standpoint finds wistful beauty in the transient, and is most often translated to ‘beauty in pathos’ or ‘the ah-ness of things’ (Hume 1995), as exemplified in the Heian-era classic, *The Tale of Genji* (Murasaki 1981). To the outside world, mono no aware is most commonly associated with cherry-blossom viewing, where the short-lived existence of the falling cherry blossom is seen as a metonym for contemplation of the beauty in the transience of life itself. Although this mode of aestheticization shares disinterested and contemplative characteristics with the Kantian *pure aesthetic gaze* (Hughes 2010), its focus on pathos would seem to be at odds with commonly understood platonic Western ideals of beauty and art (c.f. Clark 1972; Saito 2007). However, the current paper aims to elucidate how perceptions of beauty of the pathetic have also been an aspect of Western thought and aestheticization practices, since early Christian times, more prominently in the Romantic era and even in Hollywood cinema. This is of particular significance to the current paper as *Hollywood* is often seen as a global metonym for glamour—the apparent antithesis of Japanese traditional aesthetics, such as mono no aware. To this end, an examination will be made of expressions of pathetic beauty in Tom Ford’s (2009) award-winning Hollywood film, *A Single Man*, and how this relates to parallels in the development of aesthetic thought in the occident and Japan.

*Keywords:* Japanese Aesthetics, Mono no Aware, Hollywood Cinema, A Single Man, Pathos

### Introduction

Pathos is a common theme across Japanese aesthetic categorisations and is part of a long-standing tradition that bases standards of beauty on nature and its relationship to time, the mortal realities of the cycles of life, loss and death (Richie 2007). One of the first instituted and more broadly recognized Japanese pathetic<sup>1</sup> categorizations is *mono no aware* (物の哀れ), and is considered to be distinctive to Japanese identity (Keene 1995; Miller 2011). Mono no aware, as with other forms of pathetic Japanese aesthetic, is not a nihilistic bent for death and destruction. Rather, this aesthetic viewpoint finds wistful “natural poignancy in the beauty of temporal things” (Hamill 1999, xiv), and is most often conceptualized

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<sup>1</sup> Although *pathetic* is usually thought to have a pejorative meaning (i.e., feeble, inadequate and/or being described of as a particularly low standard) in its common English usage, for the purposes of the current paper, pathetic will be used in its strictest adjectival sense to denote something which has the root Greek character of *pathos* (suffering) and *pathēikos* (sensitive).

by the occidental aesthete as *beauty in pathos* or the ‘*ah-ness of things*’ (Richie 2007). Mono no aware is recognized foremost through its exemplary expression throughout the Heian-era (AD794 to 1185) classic, *The Tale of Genji*, written by Shikibu Murasaki in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century (Field 1987). The word *aware* (哀れ – compassionate pathos) occur over 1000 times throughout the novel, and mono no aware is most notably prevalent in chapter seven, *The Sacred Tree*, which details the declining relationship between the titular protagonist and his former lover, the Rokuji lady (Murasaki 1981; The School of Life 2021).

In *The Sacred Tree*, the withering relationship between Genji and the Rokuji lady is aestheticized, not only by the substantive details of the narrative, but also obliquely through a combination of poetic descriptions of the wintry context in which the drama unfolds, and the substitution of dialogue and soliloquy with short, poetic verse. For example, as Genji makes his way to the residence of his former love, Murasaki (1981) describes:

“... a reed plain of melancholy beauty [where the] flowers were gone and insects hummed sadly in the wintry tangles” (187). Upon his arrival at her residence, Genji observes “a scene quite unlike any [he] had seen before. The fire lodge glowed sadly. It was all in all a lonely, quiet place” (188) where, “A cold wind was blowing, and a pine cricket seemed to recognize the occasion. It was a serenade to which a happy lover would not have been deaf.” And upon Genji’s departure, the Rokuji lady notes his “shadowy figure in the moonlight and the perfume he left behind...” (191)

The pathetic atmosphere of this scene is reified by reference to contextual, natural elements that are tangential to the interactions of the characters, yet which at the same time metaphorically lend a somber resignation to the inescapable decay of their relationship.

Early Heian understandings of aware shared similarities with a Platonic understanding of beauty (de Bary 1995). It was seen as a form of emotional, yet controlled, interjection—a response to the emotional character that can be found in all things (Hamill 1999). This can be seen in the earlier chapters of *The Tale of Genji*, where the characters take delight in the small details of the world around them. Take, for instance, the third chapter, *Lavender*<sup>2</sup>, whereupon noticing the thick lustrous hair of a young girl (who latterly turns out to be Lady Murasaki herself) Genji’s nostalgia for an unrequited love, Fujitsubo, is reignited. As the author poetically notes, “Are these tender grasses to grow without the dew / Which holds itself back from the heavens that / would receive it? [...] / Ere summer comes to these early grasses of spring.” (Murasaki 1981, 72) While connoting a seemingly universal and platonic appreciation of fecund youth (see Clark 1972), the reader is subtly ushered towards the resignation that the both the object of aesthetic appreciation and the aesthete are ill-fated to be lost to posterity (Hamill 1999).

Aware is rooted in Zen Buddhism through its focus on an everyday spiritual enlightenment as freedom from the weight of earthly existence (Suzuki 1959). This is a kind of freedom that is quite removed from established, Western, liberal conceptions of freedom—the scientific and industrial dominion of nature, and the economic and political freedom of the individual (Deneen 2019). Human freedom, from a Zen perspective, is not achieved through liberation in physical space nor the negotiation of sociolinguistic nuance, but rather through immediate and direct access to the mind, from which a liberated understanding of the self naturally exudes. The aim, therefore, of this enlightenment is not to perfectly articulate or control the noumenal world, but rather to understand and accept that it is vague,

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<sup>2</sup> Murasaki is the Japanese name for purple gromwell, a plant used to make purple dye.

undefinable, diffuse and evanescent. This does not render the material world abstract, but rather as an immediacy in which “experience and expression are one [wherein] Zen verbalism [expresses] the most concrete experience.” (Suzuki 1959, 6)

Although *The Tale of Genji* was penned in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, it was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that it came to wider prominence as an exemplar of Japanese aestheticization through the study and retranslation of the text by Motōri Norinaga (Field 1987). Through his modern literary interpretation, Norinaga introduced the concept of *mono no aware* to a much wider audience, and also refined it to an anticipative sensitivity to “the fall of a flower or to an unwept tear.” (de Bary 1995, 44) From Norinaga’s renewed perspective, *aware* refers to both a generalized experience, as well as the capacity to find a certain solace in the resignation to a pathetic aesthetic found in nature—that in time the luster of all living things will fade to oblivion (Field 1987). Norinaga’s view of *aware* was more directly connected to the Zen understanding, that “everything exists exactly as it appears.” (Foult 2016, 171) This view of *aware* aligned with more modern forms of Japanese poetry, and began to dominate the understanding of the term (Field 1987). Gradually, *aware* became closely more associated with a refined poetic expression of “gentle sorrow, adding not so much a meaning, but a color or perfume to a sentence.” (de Bary 1995, 44) This reconceptualization added an air of sophistication to *aware*, much like Kant’s contemplative *disinterested gaze* (c.f. Hughes 2010), that was more concordant with contemporary Japanese aesthetic categorizations like *yūgen* (幽玄 – subtle discernment) and *miyabi* (雅 – elegance). For Norinaga, *mono no aware* was not simply a means to aesthetically commune with the natural world, but also to free the individual from existential isolation through a form of nostalgic, romanticized, empathic and specifically Japanese collectivism (Foult 2016). This unmediated experience of the world is achieved through the philosophical attainment of *mu* (無 – nothingness) and *satori* (悟り – the sensitive appreciation of concrete daily experiences) (Suzuki 1959; Barthes 1983). Thus, *mono no aware* is expressed indirectly, rendering the essential character of this mode of aestheticization ephemeral (c.f. Suzuki 1959). *Aware* had therefore become a direct experience of the present as an intersection between a wistful nostalgic view of the past and the divine, spiritual emancipation this offers from the futility of the mortal world.

The intimate connection between *mono no aware* and Japanese poetic expression is exemplified in the ascetic works of the monastic poet, Matsuo Bashō, such as the haiku below written shortly before his death:

All along this road	この道や
not a single soul—	行く人なしに
only	秋の暮れ
autumn evening	

- Matsuo Bashō, 1694 (1999, 156)

For Bashō, Buddhist interdependence was central to expression. Rather than looking outside the self to establish meaning, Bashō found it through interpenetrating and interdependent linguistic juxtapositions. This led him to a sincere, direct expressive style that did not employ superfluity or melodrama to create poignancy. This ascetic poetic expression was purely *amari no kokoro* (あまりの心 – remnant of the heart), thus reaching “far beyond the words themselves, leaving an indelible aftertaste.” (Hamill 1999, xiv) French literary theorist, Roland Barthes (1983), considered haiku like Bashō’s, “whose brevity would guarantee their perfection” (69), as a singularly immaculate vehicle for the communication

of emotional meaning. The structural rules and simplicity of the haiku facilitate aesthetic communion that does not require rhetorical labour. The haiku's capacity to encapsulate beauty comes through an elegant simplicity that requires no further articulation, prevarification or predication. Formally, it is a "flat language" that does not require specific insight nor rest upon layers of meaning (Barthes 1983, 74). The haiku's true beauty of expression is extrinsic to the text itself and is conveyed through an, ironically, precise arrangement of words that facilitate a kind of philosophico-aesthetic sleight of hand<sup>3</sup> (see Hamill 1999), an evanescent "essence of appearance" (Barthes 1983, 77).

Bashō's poem above can be read as a concise, elegant description of the simplicity and peacefulness of a solitary, autumnal evening walk. The road, the autumn evening and the absence of others are neither motifs nor allusions, and there is no description nor definition (Barthes 1983). It is this directness of expression that reflects the *presentness* of Zen (Suzuki 1959), and is not intended to be ruminated upon, dramatized, scrutinized or resolved (Barthes 1983). Nonetheless, irrespective of one's knowledge of Bashō's impending death, the purpose of this haiku is—without complication or reification—letting us know that he is aware of the foreboding chill of a journey faced alone. The philosophy articulated in haiku does not aim for spiritual illumination, but rather a realization that noumenal objects are apprehended as metaphysical entities existing in an infinity of events (Barthes 1983). At this intersection "we recognize a repetition without origin, an event without cause, a memory without person, a language without moorings" or purposive finality (Barthes 1983, 79).

Pathetic beauty continues to be a leitmotif in contemporary Japanese culture, although it has come to take on a darker, more wretched tone (de Bary 1995), acquiring a particularly elegant sadness and a bittersweet melancholy of temporality (Richie 2007; Hamill 1999). By the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, aesthetic pathos in nature extended to alienation, and can be seen as a central theme in modern Japanese literature (Varley 1995). In particular, Yasunari Kawabata's (2011) *The Sound of the Mountain* expands on the aware of Bashō's haiku through detailing the experiences of its aging protagonist, whose thoughts, in the light of his foreshadowed death, drift between the past and present of his relationships and the world around him (Varley 1995). Around the same time, more scholarly-focused texts began to articulate pathos in other aesthetic forms. Perhaps the most widely known of these outside Japan is Junichiro Tanizaki's (1977) *In Praise of Shadows*, a descriptive account of wabi-sabi (侘び寂び –patinated and formal simplicity): the beauty in the pathos of traditional Japanese interior design.

### Hollywood Glamour

Japanese aestheticians, such as Yuriko Saito (2007) and Takashina Shuji (2019) claim that traditional pathetic Japanese aesthetics are quite distinct from Western canons in both philosophy and form. Western popular media in particular is often still viewed through the lens of salon fine-arts and platonic ideals of Greek classical form (Clark 1972; Saito 2007; Berger 2009). The differences between traditional Japanese aesthetic values and modern Western ones are perhaps most distinct in the context of Hollywood culture. In contrast to aesthetic appeals to nature, simplicity, imperfection and transience (Barthes 1983; Foulk 2016; Suzuki 1959; Saito 2007), *Hollywood* is seen as a metonym for modern, global, consumer-culture decadence (Metamia 2021): glamour, status signaling, superficiality, hedonism and meretricious commodification (Han, Nunes, and Drèze 2010), where the cinematic medium itself has become the

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<sup>3</sup> In committing his stroll to writing, Bashō has affixed it.

message (Sturken and Cartwright 2001). Critique of the modern Hollywood aesthetic is best exemplified in the post-structuralist writings of Jean Baudrillard (1998), who argued that, under Hollywood's aegis, consumer culture has become radically alienating such that "everything is *spectacularized*." This process of self-commodification is characterized "by the *end of transcendence* [... where there is] no longer any sense of soul." (191) In late-capitalist society, central notions of the self have become increasingly anomic through monopolized consumption and popularized idolatry (Ritzer 1998). Through liberal meritocracy and a media-saturated culture, modern society has bought into the idea of identity-through-consumption, fueled by social anxiety (de Botton 2004; Berger 2009).

For Baudrillard (2005), communication via mass media has ceased to be either symbolic or didactic, thus lacking in emotional connection and moral significance. The post-modern society is no longer organized around classical liberal ideals of social and absolute need (Deneen 2019), and has shifted towards increasingly insatiable and relative wants that are necessarily spectacularized and kitsch (Baudrillard 1998). For Baudrillard (2005), post-modern society is articulated by the social logic of the Disney Corporation, in which people have become deluded into participating in an anesthetic, apolitical, simulated, nihilistic and infantilizing dystopia that lacks beauty, originality or meaningful significance (Ritzer 1998; Baudrillard 2005). The effect of this totalizing process of commercialized simulation is the creation of an alienating *hyperreality*—a 'reality' that bears some vague reference to actual reality, but has the rhetorical effect of appearing *more real than real* (Baudrillard 2005). Since Baudrillard's death in 2007, this process of self-commodification has accelerated exponentially through the development of social media (Hund and McGuigan 2019), in which "the users [have become] the real product." (Kepes 2013) Concerns in these regards were most recently reflected in a critical essay by celebrated movie director, Martin Scorsese, in 2021. In his essay, Scorsese (2021) decried that Hollywood cinema and its associated culture had become reduced to its "lowest common denominator, 'content.'" Consequently, the art of cinema, as epitomized in Disney's Marvel cinematic universe franchise, is no longer discernable from television, advertising or social media memes, and, worse still, is dispassionately and meaninglessly propagated by computerized algorithms. However, some still see cinema as a potential site for philosophical contemplation. Although cinema is largely a fictional endeavour, it is grounded in familial contexts through which philosophical concerns can be addressed to a wider audience (Falzon 2014).

#### Pathetic Beauty in Hollywood: A Single Man

In spite of the criticisms levelled at Hollywood by Baudrillard and Scorsese, modern cinema can still have an aesthetic that speaks to the human condition. The current paper will address a well-known Hollywood movie, *A Single Man* (Ford 2009), to examine how its narrative and use of cinematic technique create an aesthetic that lends the film a human and meaningful sense of beauty in pathos. *A Single Man* is an adapted screenplay by Tom Ford of a 1964 novel by Christopher Isherwood (2010). The movie boasts a rollcall of Hollywood glamour, including one of Hollywood's most celebrated fashion designers, Tom Ford, in his debut directorial role, Academy Award winners, Colin Firth<sup>4</sup> and Julianne Moore, in starring roles, as well as other high-profile, award winners and nominees and luxury brand ambassadors. Further, *A Single Man* was nominated for 58 and won a total of 39 industry awards upon its release for acting and direction, as well as technical achievements, including screenplay adaptation and

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<sup>4</sup> Firth was also nominated for an Academy Award for *A Single Man*.

musical score, and art, production and costume design (Internet Movie Database 2021). To the aesthete or cinephile, financing a movie by a fashion designer may seem an opening for an indecorous Hollywood vanity project. Despite this, *A Single Man* has been discussed in scholarly publication, particularly on the subjects of sexual identity and discrimination (e.g. Elçin 2017; Gonzalez 2013). This notwithstanding, director Tom Ford, who is himself gay, publicly stated that he felt that the protagonist's sexual orientation is only incidental to Isherwood's original story, which is intended only to be a matter-of-fact love story concerning isolation and social connection. As Ford (2010) states, the main message of the film is to "really to live in the present" and recognize that "sometimes the most amazing things in life are the small, little things."

Much like *The Tale of Genji*, *A Single Man* has an elegantly and thoughtfully executed narrative. The story similarly revolves around isolation and loss, whilst being neither melodramatic or gloomy. *A Single Man* follows college professor, George Falconer (Colin Firth), on the final day of his life, having meticulously planned out his suicide, triggered by the death in a car accident eight months earlier of the love of his life, Jim (Matthew Goode).<sup>5</sup> George intends to spend his last day tidying up his financial affairs, giving a final lecture to his students is on Aldous Huxley's (1939) *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*—also the story of an aging protagonist contemplating mortality—and meeting his best friend, Charlotte (Julianne Moore) for one last time. In spite of his suicidal intent, George's day is punctuated by a number of Murasaki-esque aware encounters, such as the bright yellow hue of a plastic pencil sharpener given to him by a student and the 'battered toast' smell of a smooth fox terrier (Algieri 2018; Ford 2009). These reminders to George of the transient, beautiful nature of life, rather than being made through metaphorical reference to nature (c.f. Murasaki 1981), are conveyed to the audience through momentary, liminal increases in colour saturation and reduced depth of field.

The movie also uses a range of other cinematic techniques to evoke a pathetic sense of beauty. Jazz music can be frequently heard in the background, and classical incidental music by Abel Korzeniowski and Shigeru Umebayashi is used to subtly heighten the nostalgic pathos. Production designer, Dan Bishop and art director, Ian Phillips, also make heavy use of Japanese-influenced design elements via Californian mid-century modernism throughout the movie.<sup>6</sup> Most prominent in this regards is George and Jim's tree-shaded, timber and glass home, the *Schaffer Residence* (1949), which was designed by John Lautner, an apprentice of Frank Lloyd Wright, an early proponent of formal Japanese design elements in American architecture (Wright 2003; Čapkova 2017; Maasberg 2019). The scenes set in George's home following Jim's death also make heavy use of muted, chiaroscuro lighting, thus lending an air of Tanizaki-like wabi-sabi. Understated decreases in colour temperature and the use of warm hues, subtly reminiscent of Bashō's autumn evening, are used during flashback scenes to George's time with Jim. Such scenes contrast with high colour temperatures and harsh, desaturated colour grading that emphasize more explicit pathos, such as when George dreams of finding Jim's, curiously serene, lifeless body in the snow aside one of their two dogs; or in George's recurring visions of drowning.

In the last act of the movie, George returns to the bar where he first met Jim. For the third time

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<sup>5</sup> In Isherwood's (2010) original novel, George only briefly contemplates suicide, but abandons the idea. Instead, Isherwood foreshadows George's fate via a mild heart attack early in the day, a plot device that is retained in Ford's (2009) adapted screenplay.

<sup>6</sup> Although these formal elements are synchronous with the setting of Isherwood's (2010) original novel, the novel itself is relatively short and does not go into great descriptive depth.

that day, George runs into one of his students, Kenny Potter (Nicholas Hoult), who is evidently aware of George's internal torment and encourages him into an evening reminiscent of youthful exuberance. Kenny then falls asleep on George's sofa and it is in this final scene that the protagonist finally articulates a mono no aware moment of enlightenment. Whilst watching the sleeping youth, George, having been reawakened to the beauty of life, abandons his suicidal plan. He then, in resigned, contemplative and measured tone, gives the following soliloquy:

“A few times in my life I've had moments of absolute clarity, when for a few brief seconds the silence drowns out the noise and I can feel rather than think. And things seem so sharp, and the world seems so fresh. It's as though it has all just come into existence. I can never make these moments last. I cling to them, but like everything, they fade. I have lived my life on these moments. They pull me back to the present, and I realize that *everything is exactly the way it was meant to be.*” (Ford 2009 emphasis added)<sup>7</sup>

George suddenly suffers a massive a heart attack, and as he lies dying on the floor, is reunited with Jim, who kisses him on the cheek as the film fades to black.

George's soliloquy, while not fitting the formal prescriptions of the haiku, nonetheless perfectly conveys a direct sense of enlightened, yet nostalgic and pathetic beauty. It also highlights his resignation to the wistful nature of fate in a way that needs no qualification. Most importantly, this moment of clarity affords George a measure of spiritual emancipation from the sense of loss and futility he has endured since Jim's death. For George, as Suzuki (1959) observes, “The door of enlightenment-experience opens by itself as one finally faces the deadlock of intellectualization.” (15)

## Discussion

Although the focus of the current paper has been on pathetic beauty in one movie, *A Single Man* is not unique in this respect. The protagonists of other Hollywood movies have also expressed such sentiment. For example, in Andrew Niccol's (1997) similarly aestheticized and elegant *Gattaca*, the main protagonists express a sense of beauty in the pathos that they share as they part for the last time, knowing full-well that one of them is about to die. Similar themes are also present in the coda of other movies, including *American Beauty* (Mendes 1999) and *Arrival* (Villeneuve 2016). However, perhaps the best-known example of poetic pathos in a Hollywood production can be found in Ridley Scott's (1982) ‘C-beams monologue’ from the cult science-fiction movie *Blade Runner*. Again, at the end of the film antagonist, Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer), but moments from his own inescapable demise, spares the life of his would-be assassin, Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford), and poetically reflects on the sublime things he has seen, knowing that, “All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain.” (Hauer and Scott 1982)

While mono no aware is thought to not translate well into English (Richie 2007), there are numerous other examples of pathetic beauty in Western culture. Norinaga's modern reinterpretation of aware as essentially pathetic lent it a greater sense of *lachrymose* (Latin –weeping, tearful) (Field 1987)—a concept that is familiar to Christian-based societies. Lachrymose is a particularly common theme in depictions of the Virgin Mary weeping over the martyred Christ (Williamson 2004). In fact, aesthete Roger Scruton (2009) argues that Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's (1736) musical interpretation of this scene, *Stabat Mater*, exemplifies pathetic beauty in the Western canon.

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<sup>7</sup> This soliloquy was not in Isherwood's (2010) original novel.



The appearance of pathetic beauty in Christian culture is perhaps not surprising. Although Christianity began to appear well before broader occidental-Japanese cultural exchange following the Meiji Restoration in 1889 (Marra 2001), cultural exchanges with Buddhist India were not uncommon millennia earlier and likely influenced the development of Christian doctrine (MacCulloch 2010; Bentley 1993). Common to both Buddhist and Christian thought, but significantly less so in Judaism or Islam, is penury, another form of doctrinal pathos, typically manifested in various forms of ascetism and monasticism (MacCulloch 2010). Buddhist and Christian thought also share similarities in the themes explored in early Ecclesiastical texts that address the human search for significance and purpose in a finite, mortal life when placed in the broader context of eternity in the afterlife (Keefer 2019). The existential irony perceived at the intersection of the finite and infinite in Old Testament thought (1000 – 100 BCE) can be seen in Ecclesiastical observations “of the most compelling and unexpected expressions [...] of resignation at the futility of human existence” (MacCulloch 2010, 64). The divine nature of imperfection is perhaps most eloquently surmised in Ecclesiastes 7:13, “Consider God’s handiwork: Who can straighten what He hath made crooked?”<sup>8</sup> Like *mono no aware*, this passage succinctly expresses an existential concern about imperfection in the natural, mortal world set against the sublime and infallible divine. Perhaps not coincidentally, this passage also appears as the intertitle of *Gattaca*, a movie also concerned with social isolation and connection in the context of discrimination.

Pathos, as a metaphor for human resignation connected to the transient beauty of the natural world became more prominent during the Western post-18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment and Romantic Eras (Forster 2011; Soderquist 2013). Pathos, particularly in poetry, was philosophically examined by German Romantic philosophers, such as Friedrich Schlegel. Like traditional Japanese aesthetes, the Romantics embraced the past and the de-scientism of nature. There was also a particular emphasis on sentimental, poetic emotion (Forster 2011), which aimed to address the existential contradictions of mortality in Christian thought (Soderquist 2013). Under the development of Schlegel, Romanticism evolved a sense of transcendent truth through acceptance of and resignation to mortality (Soderquist 2013). Schlegel characterized “romantic poetry as “poetry of poetry,” a set of endlessly reflecting mirrors...” (Forster 2011, 24). This influence brought a sense of implicit pathos that sometimes expressed “meanings and thoughts, not explicitly in any of their parts, but instead implicitly through their parts and the way in which these are put together to form a whole.” (Forster 2011, 17) This pathos is felt in the moment of reading, much like the Zen presentedness of Bashō’s haiku (see Hamill 1999; c.f. Suzuki 1959).

Examples of Romantic concerns, the resignation to fading beauty and the transience of nature, as conveyed in *A Single Man*, can be seen in the following poetic extract by Alfred Tennyson (1859):

“The woods decay, the woods decay and fall, /The vapours weep their burthen to the ground,  
/Man comes and tills the field and lies beneath, /*And after many a summer dies the swan.*” -  
*Tithonus*, (stanza 1, lines 1 - 4, emphasis added)

As a specific aesthetic categorization located between the mortal world and infinite divine, the Western construct that perhaps most closely fits *mono no aware* is T.S. Eliot’s (1937) *still point* from the poem *Burnt Norton*:

“At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; at  
the still point, there the dance is,” (quartet II, stanza 2, lines 1 - 2)

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<sup>8</sup> The exact phrasing of this passage varies across different translations of the Bible. This particular version was taken from Niccol (1997).

The development of poetic pathos in the romantic era did not occur in isolation. As early Christian thought was likely influenced by Buddhism (MacCulloch 2010; Bentley 1993), so too were these modern philosophies and poetry. Although a devout Christian, Schlegel had studied Chinese and Indian language and culture (Forster 2011). There was also a good deal of interest in Eastern thought in Victorian England (Franklin 2005), around the time of the poetry of Tennyson and Eliot – the latter of whose poetry was directly influenced by Buddhism (McLeod 1992).

Zen philosophy does not provide a clear articulation of objective truth, but rather seeks understanding through experience, and the possibility of uncertainty, indefiniteness and wonderment (Suzuki 1959)—much like Eliot’s (1937) momentary and elusive dance. Such themes also began to arise in Western existentialist philosophy, notably the writings of, similarly devout Christian, Søren Kierkegaard. Under the influence of Schlegel, Kierkegaard, much like the Zen Buddhists, took an interest in poetry, not as an immanent truth to be solved, but rather as an indirect means to understanding the irony of being existentially at odds with the world we live in. This form of irony is neither superficial nor rhetorical, but a philosophical irony of contradiction and beauty, which allows for the dismissal of convention and an enlightenment to the finite world (Soderquist 2013). From Kierkegaard’s perspective, becoming conscious of romantic irony allows an escape from the kind of egoism he associated with Enlightenment and early Romantic thought. Irony allows for an acceptance of the “inherent tension between the infinite [that one] could never fully express and the finite, that could never fully contain the rich, undifferentiated mystery of the infinite.” (Soderquist 2013, 135 - 136).

In Western contexts, passion is usually thought of as exuberant emotion, yet stems from the *passion* (etym. Latin *patior* - to suffer) of the flagellated and crucified Christ –himself a symbolic intersection between the mortal and divine (see MacCulloch 2010, 91). As much as Christ’s violent end would seem unsuitable fodder for beautiful poetry, it would be equally difficult to imagine Genji being caught up in the ‘ah-ness’ of a carelessly discarded Styrofoam cup, or Bashō being compelled to verse over a fetid carcass. Irony proper is not something which seems to appear in discussions of Zen, nor is it addressed by Suzuki (1959). However, we can see that pathetic beauty in Western poetics, as also in traditional Japanese aesthetics relates specifically to a form of unstable irony, a “reconciliation with finitude” (Soderquist 2013, 134). The *mono no aware* of Japanese communal festivities of pathetic beauty, such as *ohanami* (お花見 – cherry blossom viewing) or *momijigari* (紅葉狩り – autumn leaf viewing) hinges on the transient intersection of the at once vibrant beauty of the leaves and the ironic foreknowledge of their imminent decay. Nostalgia for Genji’s past romances and unrequited loves stem from those relationships having failed. Similarly, the lonely beauty of Bashō’s empty autumn road is contingent on past warmer and convivial times. In *The Tale of Genji*, the Lady Murasaki is in the prime of her beauty, and a fleeting reminder to Genji of Fujitsubo as she was once, too. Like the falling cherry blossom, fleeting reminders of Jim are all the more poignant to George because they remind him of the irony of beauty being whimsically struck down.

## Conclusion

While there are differences in the execution of pathetic beauty in *A Single Man* and exemplar texts of *mono no aware*, such as *The Tale of Genji* or the haiku of Bashō, the central themes of nostalgia and resignation to the transience of nature are preserved. Although directorial and cinematic decisions made by Ford (2009) and his colleagues convey a subtle sense of beauty in George’s isolation and loss, these

were built on foundational narratives that echo Kawabata and Murasaki before. Isherwood's narrative decision to foreground George's character development through pathetic allusion, such as reference to Huxley's 1939 novel and Tennyson's 1859 poem add to this effect by weaving a nostalgic sense of history into the story. Further, the cross-cultural intersection between Eastern and Western philosophical spirituality, in spite of long periods of historical Japanese isolationism, suggests that a degree of aesthetic convergence should not be unexpected. As Tom Ford suggests, *A Single Man* is ultimately about isolation and the human need to establish social connection in the face of loss. It is also about cherishing the simple beauty in everyday life (Ford 2010). Whether in traditional Japanese texts or thoughtful Hollywood cinema, understanding this kind of aesthetic does not require any particular artistic bent or skill. It is a reflection of existential concerns common to all people and their expression in culture is ultimately relatable. All that is required is the presence of mind to cherish the people and things around us, and to live in the moment, knowing that such moments do not last. The Rokuji lady, like autumn evenings, swans, C-beams and of course Jim, are most poignantly beautiful once we realize and accept that one day they will be gone, and outside of fleeting memory, we will never see them again.

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