Chapter V

The Father of the Japanese Short Story:

Ryunosuke Akutagawa

Ryunosuke Akutagawa was born as Niihara Ryunosuke on March 1, 1892. He was a prolific Japanese writer and poet, noted for his stylistic virtuosity, and is regarded as the "Father of the Japanese Short Story." Akutagawa wrote no full-length novels, focusing instead on the short story as his main medium of expression.

Akutagawa was born in Irifunecho, a district within Tokyo on March 1, 1892, to Fuku Niihara and Binzo Shinhara, a dairy merchant. He was named Niihara Ryunosuke in infancy to honor the family of his mother, the scion of an ancient samurai clan. His father was the enterprising owner of five dairies by the time Akutagawa was born. Shortly after Akutagawa's birth, his mother, who suffered from mental illness, lapsed into a schizophrenic state from which she never recovered. Memories of his mother's insanity and the resulting fear that he may have inherited her mental condition victimized Akutagawa throughout his life. These factors also strongly influenced his writing, often serving as themes in his fiction.

After his mother's death, his mother's elder brother Michiaki Akutagawa and his wife, who gave the boy their family name, Akutagawa, adopted him. His adoptive parents had remained largely untouched by Western culture, and they instilled in him a reverence for Japanese traditions, particularly in literature. Shaken by what he perceived to be parental abandonment, he grew up friendless.
In place of human peer relationships, he absorbed fictional characters from Japanese storybooks. Akutagawa developed a fondness for ancient legends and tales of the grotesque, both of which later figured significantly in his work. However, he was a voracious reader, and by the time he reached middle school he was reading the works of Henrik Ibsen, Rudyard Kipling, and Anatole France, among others.

Akutagawa attended Tokyo Imperial University, where he excelled in his studies of English literature, translated many Western works, and became active in publishing a student-produced literary periodical, as well as regularly participating in a discussion group conducted by the renowned novelist Natsume Soseki. Akutagawa had begun publishing short stories in periodicals by the time he graduated in 1916, and he was widely acclaimed as one of the brightest newcomers on the literary scene.

He accepted a part-time teaching position at the Naval Academy at Yokosuka, meanwhile strengthening his reputation during 1917 by publishing his stories in various magazines and in two collections. In 1918 Akutagawa married the niece of a friend he had known since childhood; in the same year he also entered into a contract with a Japanese newspaper to publish his fiction. This enabled him to resign his post at the Naval Academy and devote himself entirely to his writing. In 1921 Akutagawa was sent to China by his newspaper as an overseas observer, an assignment that proved to be a turning point in his life.

Never having enjoyed sound health, he suffered during his travels from a number of debilitating illnesses that left him weakened, depressed, and helpless to
combat a developing mental illness brought on by fears of deterioration similar to his mother's. His writing, which up to this point was firmly rooted in history and legend, grew introspective and autobiographical.

Akutagawa's fear of madness became obsessive, and he sought temporary respite from both psychological and physical troubles through the use of drugs. Akutagawa filled his works with allusions to classic literature, including early Christian writing and the fiction of China and Russia, both of which he visited in 1921. Among his publications were critical essays and translations of works by William Butler Yeats. A major contributor to Japanese prose, Akutagawa expressed to a wide reading public a vivid imagination, stylistic perfectionism, and psychological probing. For "The Nose" (1916), the story of a holy man obsessed by his ungainly nose, the tale reveals deep personal dissatisfaction and feelings of discontent and alienation that plagued the writer himself.

As described by literary historian Shuichi Kato in Volume 3 of A History of Japanese Literature (1983), Akutagawa developed literary tastes from the shogunate period of late sixteenth-century Japan. Kato Shuichi states:

From this tradition came his taste in clothes, disdain for boorishness, a certain respect for punctilio and, more important, his wide knowledge of Chinese and Japanese literature and delicate sensitivity to language.

As a means of viewing his own country with fresh insight, Akutagawa cultivated a keen interest in European fiction by August Strindberg, Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nicholai Gogol, Charles Baudelaire, Leo Tolstoy,
and Jonathan Swift. In particular, he studied Franz Kafka and American poet Edgar Allan Poe, masters of the grotesque.

He was, by all accounts, a perfectionist in his style and had a great affinity, like the French Symbolists he admired, for descriptions of physical sensations. He was part of a growing literary movement that centered on the magazine *Shin Shicho*, New Current of Thought and was concerned with undermining the influence of the romanticists and aesthetes who were the rage in the early decades of 20th century Japanese fiction. With his contemporaries, *Kikuchi Kan* and *Yamamoto Yuzo*, he shared the mission of replacing emotion with reason. Their philosophy simply stated that the writer should not be overly influenced by either beauty or idealism; rather it was a recognition of the actuality of the human condition.

However, he never visited the West, but his understanding of Western literature was profound. In ”Cogwheel”, he refers to two of his favorite authors:

On one of the shelves upstairs at Maruzen I found Strindberg's Tale and read a few pages while standing there. It describes experiences not unlike my own. And it had a yellow cover. I put it back and pulled out a thick book my hand happened to fall on. In it what should there be but an illustration of cogs with eyes and noses not unlike human beings! It was a collection of pictures by inmates of a lunatic asylum assembled by some German. Even in my depression, my spirit could be felt rising in rebellion and with the desperation of an addicted gambler kept opening book after book.
Oddly enough, almost every book had clearly hidden stings in its sentences and illustrations. Every book, even in Madame Bovary, which I had read many times before, I felt I was only the bourgeois Monsieur Bovary in the end.

In his autobiographical works Akutagawa also shows interest in the debate about socialism and social classes. Japanese sources for his stories include *Konjaku monogatari*, works of Tokigawa, early Meiji anecdotes, and Christian writing as in *Kirishitohoro shonin-den*, about the former Saint Christopher.

Akutagawa's style, poetic interpretation of his observations and nearly aristocratic aestheticism, connected him to the feeling and attitudes of remote generations of writers. However, he was not blind to the struggle of his own generation, and its radicalism, which is conveyed in his essay *What is Proletarian Literature*, written in 1927.

Writing in earnest at the age of 25, Akutagawa produced memorable short fiction in the Japanese "I" novel tradition of *shishosetsu*, which is both confessional and self-revealing. At the height of his creativity, he began examining deeply personal attitudes toward art and life in such symbolic writings as *Niwa* -The Garden, the story of a failed family and the tuberculosis-wrecked son who restores a magnificent garden. As Akutagawa began expressing more of his own neuroses, delicate physical condition and drug addiction, the tone and atmosphere of his fiction darkened with hints of madness and a will to die.
Akutagawa’s work often tended toward the surreal, the grotesque and the fantastic. The beauty of his short stories comes from a kind of dispassionate grace, an authorial restraint in the face of fictional situations we normally associate with intense emotion. As Borges Jorge Luis said of Akutagawa’s writing: Extravagance and horror are in his work but never in his style, which is always crystal clear. One is reminded of the ghost stories of Henry James, *The Phantom Rickshaw* by Kipling, and any number of works by Thomas Ligotti.

“Hell Screen” is a short story originally published in 1918 as a serialization in two newspapers. It was later published in a collection of Akutagawa short stories, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke zenshu*. “Hell Screen” was first translated into English by W.H.H. Norman in 1948, in his collection of *Akutagawa short stories Hell Screen and Other Stories*. Numerous variant translations have followed, including the most recent one translated by Jay Rubin and published by Penguin Group.

In “Hell Screen”, Akutagawa is at his most powerful, mixing the potent mythology of ancient Japan with the stylistic concerns of modern Western writers. It is a complex story in two major movements with a subtly unreliable narrator. The author’s exacting prose comes through even in translation, and there is much to admire beyond the beauty of the writing.

“The Nose” is a satirical short story based on a thirteenth century Japanese tale from the *Konjaku Monogatari*. *The Nose* was Akutagawa’s second short story, written not long after *Rashomon*. It was first published in January 1916 in the Tokyo Imperial University student magazine *Shinshicho* and later published in
other magazines and various Akutagawa anthologies. The story is mainly a commentary on vanity and religion, in a style and theme typical to Akutagawa’s work.

Akutagawa gained much of his initial fame from his short story “The Nose”. After reading “The Nose” the renowned writer Soseki Natsume sent a letter to Akutagawa, praising his work: I found your piece, The Nose very interesting, sober and serious without trying to be funny. It exudes humor, a sure sign of refined taste. Furthermore, the material is fresh and eye-catching. Your style is well-published, admirably fitting.

The story of “The Nose” tells us about Zenchi Naigu, a Heian period Buddhist priest, is more concerned with diminishing his overly long, dangling nose than he is with studying and teaching the sūtras. He pretends to ignore his nose in fear it will be mentioned, and studies religious texts in a desperate attempt to find a person with a nose like his. When in private, he constantly checks his nose in a mirror, hoping for even the smallest amount of shrinkage.

One autumn, a disciple reveals he has learned a new technique to shrink noses from a friend, a Chinese doctor who has become a high-ranking priest at the Chōrakuji temple in Kyoto. At first, Naigu feigns disinterest, to appeal to the misconception that he is not concerned about his nose, but eventually gives in to the insisting of his disciple. The disciple first boils the nose and then stomps on it, finally removing the beads of fat the treatment extracts from the nose. To Naigu’s satisfaction, the nose, once dangling past his chin, is now the size of a typical hooked nose.
Naigu, excited but nervous, sets about his weekly routines. He is surprised, however, to find the people he encounters laughing at him far more openly than they had before. Naigu becomes bitter and harsh, to the point where one disciple proclaims: Naigu will be punished for treating us so harshly instead of teaching us Buddha’s Law. People continue to laugh at Naigu for his vanity, until one day, Naigu wakes up, and to his relief and rejoicing, his nose has returned to its original length.

Akutagawa explores the themes of vanity and egoism in “The Nose”. Naigu’s vanity leads him to be obsessed only with his nose. This vanity eventually breeds disfigurement and coldness from his peers, recognizing Naigu’s egotism taking precedent over his religious studies and teaching. Instead of his status as a renowned priest, Naigu views his nose as the source of how society will judge him. As is typical with Akutagawa, these inherently modern psychological themes are directly injected into ancient stories and myth.

Akutagawa gained much of his initial fame from “The Nose”, one of his earliest works. After reading “The Nose”, the renowned writer Soseki Natsume sent a letter to Akutagawa, praising his work: I found your piece ‘The Nose’ very interesting. Sober and serious without trying to be funny. It exudes humor, a sure sign of refined taste. Furthermore, the material is fresh and eye-catching. Your style is well-published, admirably fitting.

The story makes numerous references to the Buddhist scriptures, mentioning many characters from them, such as Mokuren, Sharihotsu, Ryūju,
Memyō, and the Bodhisattvas. It also makes reference to a Chinese story where
the Chinese Shu Han emperor Liu Bei is said to have had long ears.

The story makes reference to Chōraku-ji Temple, a Buddhist temple in
Shimoda, Shizuoka where the story’s Chinese doctor formerly became a high-
ranking priest. “The Nose” also makes reference to the Kyoto Imperial Palace,
where Naigu is one of the few honored priests able to minister within the palace walls.

A Fool's Life is a late work, consisting of 51 very short stories,
autobiographical but written in the third person. The stories of Akutagawa's last
years were increasingly autobiographical and his forays into Tokyo's foreign
bookstores continued to feed his imagination as well as his literary ambition. At
this time, he wrote the telling lines: Thirty years old, he had for some time been in
love with a vacant lot.

Akutagawa's style became a unique design of Japanese and Western
elements as it was rich in allusion and because of its compactness. Though he
never visited Europe, Akutagawa was attracted to socialism, engaging in debates
about the class system, this is evident in his essay What is Proletarian Literature?

Akutagawa “The Spider Thread” is a simple, elegant short story, which is
a combination of traditional Buddhist proverb and anecdote from The Brothers
Karamazov, and it is not the tale alone that makes the story so intriguing. Instead,
it is Akutagawa’s flair for description that draws the readers to it.

“The Spider Thread” is a simple story. A criminal sits in hell, either
surrounded by the Pond of Blood or atop the Mountain of Needles. Above him, in
Paradise, is Buddha, the compassionate being who leads others out of suffering. Because, just once in his life, the criminal himself was compassionate, The Buddha sends down a thin spider thread to save him. The criminal must again be compassionate if he is to leave hell and join the Buddha in paradise.

When we look at the Buddha’s dropping of the web, about which Akutagawa writes: By happy chance, He turned to see a heavenly spider spinning a beautiful silver thread atop a lotus leaf the color of shimmering jade.

This is no ordinary spider web, it’s sent by the enlightened one. And the beautifully written story can teach us a little bit about Buddhism and a little bit about what makes good literature.

The works of Akutagawa are listed as follows:

1914 - *Old Age, Rashōmon.*


1917 - *Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum, Absorbed in writing popular novels.*

1918 - *The Spider's Thread, Hell Screen, A commentary on the desolate field for Bashou, Jashūmon, The Martyr.*


1920 - *A ball, Autumn, Christ in Nanking, Tu Tze-chun, God of Aguni.*

1921 - *A snipe, Autumn Mountain, A report on the journey of Shanghai.*

1922 - *In a Grove, also In a Bamboo Grove, The general, A Lorry.*

1923 - *From Yasukichi's notebook.*
1924 - *A clod of earth.*

1925 - *Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years, Aphorisms by a pygmy.*

1926 - *Death Register.*

1927 - *Genkaku's room, Kappa, Literary, All-Too-Literary, Spinning Gears, Fool's Life, A Note to a Certain Old Friend, The Man of the West.*

Akutagawa wrote almost all his central works in the ten years before his suicide. His early short pieces were carefully plotted historical tales, but toward the end of his short life, he focused more on his own emotional state and contemporary settings. He would mix western storytelling styles with old tales of ghosts and monsters, of the human and inhuman varieties, often setting the stories in an unspecified time in the past or a distant land. His reasons are simple and not dissimilar to those of current fantasy authors: It will be extremely difficult to treat an extraordinary incident—simply because it is extraordinary—as happening in contemporary Japan; and if, against my inclination, I do so, then the reader will, in most cases, find it unnatural and, as a result, the theme itself will be destroyed.

Akutagawa’s short story “In a Grove”, which is often compared with Ambrose Bierce’s *The Moonlit Road,* exemplifies the concept of an unreliable narrator. It tells the story of a murder from four contradictory perspectives, including the account of the victim via a psychic medium. The shifting nature of subjectivity among principle characters is a topic Akutagawa revisits in a number of stories. Akutagawa was right to question the reality of perspective as he was
living in the middle of major cultural shifts, with aristocrats, farmers, artists and lunatics as role models,

The manical interest of Akutagawa’s mother in *kitsune* is mirrored in Akutagawa’s later fixation with *kappa*. Kappa, a river-child, in Japanese is a legendary creature living in ponds or rivers, and often appears in folklore. Kappa have a body of green and appear a half human and half frog with a flat top with a very short bob style hair hanging down in a slapdash fashion. These small child-size creatures are often described as strong, mischievous, witty, and loyal but at times can possess evil tendencies.

It is also said to be created as god of river in the *Shinto* belief, *Shinto* is an indigenous Japanese religion.

Akutagawa’s last major work was the novella *Kappa*, in which a mental patient relates his time as a captive and observer of Kappanese life in Kappaland. The overt narrative is a Swiftian social satire with occasional hints that the narrator has, in reality, only ever been in a mental institution. Akutagawa mocks human society in the eyes of Kappa. The intriguing story became one of his last works before he took his own life.

Akutagawa’s writings maintained and analyzed unfathomable aspects behind the world of superficiality in human society. Considering his deeply introspective writing style, the story includes the following passage spoken by an
elder kappa who attempts to sermonize a younger one: There are three things in life that determine your destiny – your religious belief, circumstance, and mere luck.

When Akutagawa was being tormented by his uncontrollable personal and external circumstances, he tried to convey his lack of beliefs both as a disappointment and blessing. He put across his thoughts saying that no matter how much effort one makes, it is impossible to control one's circumstances and how much luck one would have in their lifetime.

Throughout the story, various kappa characters are depicted as doctors, philosophers, business owners, artists, poets, journalists, etc., all of which represent different roles played in human society. Some commit suicide, steal, and debate about the death sentence, politics, art, music, relationships between opposite sexes, and labor issues.

Akutagawa never fails to call attention to human condition that is too smart for its own good in the story. In the society where laws and culture are created by kappa, a wealthy factory owner is legally permitted to fire any workers and eat them for super. Accused of bizarre behavior by a human acquaintance, a young kappa responds by pointing the finger at underage prostitution in human society, and says: You are being too pessimistic, kansho shyugi.

The most outrageous routine in the kappa society is the process of birth. In front of a doctor and midwives, father is supposed to ask an unborn baby prior to birth if he or she wants to be born: Do you really want to be born? Think carefully and answer me! Father places his ear right next to mother’s vagina and waits for
an answer. If the baby decides not to be born due to his father’s disease or other reasons, the baby has a right to have a lethal injection to die inside mother’s womb.

An intriguing story with cynically insightful satire of human condition, Akutagawa’s Kappa is beyond a doubt an intellectually stimulating work and it is vital to read between the lines to understand his introspective thoughts. Akutagawa has chosen kappa as his main characters, not dogs or cats to mock human society. July is a month of pouring rainy season in Japan; Akutagawa left the world with the sound of rain and perhaps hearing the voices of kappa calling him to their world: … Everything seemed so terribly gloomy that I thought I’d have a go at looking at the world the other way up. But it turns out to be just the same, after all - Kappa.

Kappa begins with a short preface by Akutagawa describing the visit of the apparent author to a mental asylum. There he meets Patient No.23, a man who claims to have stayed several months in the land of the Kappas. In the course of the following seventeen relatively short chapters, the narrator tells us of his many adventures there and his numerous encounters with Kappa individuals. The personages and events that shape his account obviously reflect many stereotypical personalities and an array of social issues that can be traced back to contemporary Japanese society. Nevertheless, critics so far have tended to downplay these elements, focusing rather on the story’s numerous autobiographical aspects. Yoshida Sei’ichi, Akutagawa’s biographer, even went so far as to say that: the world of Kappa relates nothing but his own anguished mind. (1942: 319)
Perhaps Akutagawa’s famous statement, made in a letter, that: Kappa was born out of my disgust with respect to everything, especially myself. (Keene 1984: 580) may have formed the root of this rather biased approach. Akutagawa writes:

They often tell me ‘to write more about your life and make a bolder confession’. I too make confessions; my stories are confessions of my own experiences to a degree. What they want is for me to make myself the hero of a novel, write of actual events concerning me without reservation, and furthermore attach to the book an identification chart of the names of the characters and the real persons. Let it be clear that I have no intention of writing such a work. Firstly, it disagrees with me no end that I exhibit my private life to those curiosity-seekers. Secondly, it gives me no pleasure to turn such a confession into profit and fame. Let us suppose that I wrote my sexual experiences like Kobayashi Issa and published it in the New Year issue of, say, Chūō kōron. My readers would be thrilled; my critics would shower me with praise: Akutagawa’s great leap forward etc., and my friend would be happy, saying ‘Akutagawa is now naked and truthful,’ etc. Just thinking of it gives me bone-chilling shivers.

(Tsuruta 1970: 23-24)

In a letter he wrote on October 29, 1926, a little bit over three months before Kappa, he wrote: My head feels so weird. … even the most futile matter …
causes me to sink, inevitably, into a state of melancholy. When I ask myself how many New Years I will be able to welcome hereafter, I feel wretched beyond description. (*Ishizaki* 1990: 339-40)

Despite his mental agonies, within half a year from his suicide on July 24, 1927, he surprisingly still found the time and the energy to produce a work that is so concerned with the various problems that existed in Japanese society. Considering his anguish, which caused him to subsist on opium extracts, strychnine, laxatives, and Veronal, one cannot but marvel that he managed to write a ravishing work so full of scintillating satire as *Kappa*.

Writing *Kappa*, however, appears to have been quite engaging to him. He said he wrote it with: a speed he had not known lately (*Yoshida* 1955: 124), and revealed that after he had: finished the 106-page-manuscript of *Kappa*, he felt a little relieved. (*Yoshida* 1955: 124) This story was written in the same year he decided to leave the reality, the reality that he perceived it to be – a reality made of circumstances and luck.

Prior to his death, he noted that he had “an ambiguous anxiety about his future.” His words overlap with ambivalence in the kappa society, seemingly organized and intelligent, while chaotic and barbaric, in which many events and actions have embellishing effects of human society.

In his last two years, Akutagawa suffered visual hallucinations, alienation, and increasing self-absorption as he searched himself for signs of his mother's insanity. As macabre thoughts and exaggerated self-doubts marred his perspective, he pondered the future of his art in a prophetic essay, *What is*
Proletarian Literature (1927). Insanely introspective and burdened by his uncle's debts, he considered himself a failure and his writings negligible. Two of his most effective fictions, “Cogwheels” and A Fool's Life, recount his terror of madness as it gradually consumed his mind and art.

Following months of brooding and a detailed study of the mechanics of dying, Akutagawa carefully chose death at home by a drug overdose of Veronal as the least disturbing to his family. He left a letter, entitled “A Note to a Certain Old Friend,” describing his detachment from life, the product of diseased nerves, lucid as ice. In death, he anticipated peace and contentment.

Much of Akutagawa's most intriguing writing – “Hell Screen”, “The Garden”, “In the Grove”, Kappa, A Fool's Life, and the nightmarish “Cogwheels” - reached the reading public over a half century after his death. Largely through increased interest in Asian literature in translation and through cinema versions, these titles reinforced the value of Japanese short fiction. During his short life, he wrote over 150 short stories.

Akutagawa is considered one of the foremost writers of Japan's modern era, a period that began in 1868 under the rule of the Emperor Meiji. His works, particularly his short stories, contributed greatly to his generation's thoughtful consideration of such issues as the function and merits of different literary genres and the artist's role in contemporary Japanese society. They also proved instrumental in extricating Japanese literature from what critics consider the quagmire of gossip and tedious didacticism into which it had fallen before the Meiji Restoration.
Akutagawa was known for taking trivial objects or events and enlarging on their significance to create a moral lesson or a comment on humanity. The Akutagawa Prize, established in 1935 by Kikuchi Kan in memory of Akutagawa, is Japan’s most prestigious literary award presented semi-annually. The *Nihon Bungaku Shinkokai*, Society for the Promotion of Japanese Literature selects the best short story from a beginning author to receive the prize as well as publication in the literary magazine *Bungei Shunju*.

![Fig. 14. A set photograph of 1919. The second from the left is Ryunosuke Akutagawa. At the far left is Kan Kikuchi. Picture from en.wikipedia.org.](image)

This prize is awarded in January and July to the best serious literary story published in a newspaper or magazine by a new or rising author. The winner
receives a pocket watch and a cash award of 1 million yen. Short stories and novellas win the prize more frequently than do full-length novels. Because of its prestige and the considerable attention the winner receives from the media, it is Japan's most sought after literary prize.

While Akutagawa did not confine himself to any particular genre during his career, his greatest work was done in the short story form. He consistently attempted to examine predictable and universal patterns of human behavior, and to depict those natural aspirations and illusions that transcend barriers of space and time. Conflicts between the natural inclinations of human beings and the demands imposed by ordered societies, echo throughout Akutagawa's works.

For example, “Rashomon”, which has come to be synonymous with its author's name in part because of the 1950 film version by director Kurosawa Akira, depicts the moral collapse of a man driven to assault and thievery by the horror he witnesses in a society that itself has collapsed and lives by the savage morality of pragmatism. This in turn was adapted for the American film, The Outrage (1964), directed by Martin Ritt, starring Paul Newman, Claire Bloom, Edward G. Robinson and William, the Kirk, Shatner. Akira Kurosawa directed the film Rashomon in 1950 based on Akutagawa's stories; the majority of the action in the film was actually an adaptation of “In a Grove.”

While Akutagawa's subjects constitute faithful representations of both the grim and the foolish aspects of human behavior, they are not always devoid of humor. Hana, “The Nose”, one of Akutagawa's best-known stories, addresses egoism by relating the predicament of a Buddhist monk who has succeeded in
shortening his enormous nose, the bane of his existence and, as he sees it, the impediment to his social acceptance, but his vanity is penalized by disfigurement of his face and coldness from his peers.

In the end periods Akutagawa suffered from delusions, seeing hallucinations such as maggots in his food. He alluded to the paranoia that gripped him in “A Note to a Certain Old Friend”, when he wrote: The world I am now in is one of diseased nerves, lucid as ice. At the age of 35 before he took an overdose of Veronal, Akutagawa wrote a story imagining how it might feel after taking an overdose in destruction. Elsewhere he had written presciently: Such voluntary death must give us peace, if not happiness.

With a few exceptions, Akutagawa’s last pieces in which he examined his own work and place in the world as an artist did not gain such success as his older tales. Paranoid and delusional, Akutagawa had suffered from visual hallucinations, believing, among other things, that maggots were in his food. Six months before his death, Akutagawa's brother-in-law had killed himself to escape his debts; Akutagawa was expected to look after the family, a burden, for which he did not have the strength.

In his suicide note, entitled “A Note to a Certain Old Friend”, the author wrote: The world I am now in is one of diseased nerves, lucid as ice. Such voluntary death must give us peace, if not happiness. Now that I am ready, I find nature more beautiful than ever, paradoxical as this may sound. I have seen, loved, and understood more than others.

Akutagawa's autobiographical works include *The Early Life of Daidoji*
Shinsuke (1925), which was left unfinished, A Fool’s Life (1927), and Cogwheels (1927). Akutagawa wrote his last important work, Kappa (1927) in less than two weeks, in a creative outburst before his death.

Seiji Lippit eloquently summarizes how Akutagawa’s literary work and his untimely death were perceived by the advocates of proletarian literature and the Japanese literary world in general:

A number of writers and critics … interpreted his death as marking the defeat of an intellectual (or aestheticized) literary practice disengaged from historical and social reality. This point was particularly emphasized by several prominent Marxist critics, who read his personal crisis as “one aspect of a collapsing bourgeoisie.” Miyamoto Kenji crystallized this sentiment in his landmark 1929 essay, Haiboku no bungaku (The Literature of Defeat), in which he wrote that Akutagawa’s late writings and death constituted a warning to bourgeois intellectuals of the inevitable and disastrous results of their aestheticism and hermeticism. (Lippit 1999: 27)

Akutagawa was in fact not at all indifferent to the socio-political events that took place around him, and neither was he a diehard aesthete totally against the idea of engaged literature. On the contrary, with the writings in some of his essays and especially with Kappa, he demonstrated that he himself was capable of producing literature that, albeit humorous and aesthetically pleasing, was also of a political nature.
Even his early suicide in 1927, at thirty-five only heightens the portrait of a modern Japanese intellectual, the double victim of an unsympathetic society and a split culture. But it is a vague composite portrait. For Akutagawa himself, aloof, elusive, individual, remains withdrawn behind the polished facade of his collected works. All that one needs to be know about Akutagawa may be found within his poems, essays, miscellaneous writings, and more than a hundred beautifully finished stories.