volupté

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 8, Issue 2

Winter 2025

Unhappily Ever After: Surface, Queer Bachelorhood, and Occidental Desire in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's 'The Siren's Lament' (1917)

Di Cotofan Wu

ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 21 December 2025

Date of Publication: 31 December 2025

Citation: Di Cotofan Wu, 'Unhappily Ever After: Surface, Queer Bachelorhood, and Occidental Desire in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's '"The Siren's Lament' (1917)"', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 8.2 (2025), pp. 37-56.

volupte.gold.ac.uk

Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Unhappily Ever After: Surface, Queer Bachelorhood, and Occidental Desire in Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's 'The Siren's Lament' (1917)

Di Cotofan Wu

University of Kurdistan Hewlêr

What becomes of the fairy tale when world-weary bachelors and aesthetic exiles enter its enchanted terrain? In the decadent tradition, the happy endings and moral certainties of the genre begin to dissolve. The arc of wish fulfilment gives way to ennui, longing, and the restless pursuit of unattainable beauty. This shift in tone and focus found an enduring embodiment in the figure of the eccentric dandy bachelor, first portrayed by Joris-Karl Huysmans in *À rebours* (1884) and later refined by Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). More than a stock character, he became a vehicle for transnational reworkings of the fairy tale within a decadent mode.

In East Asia, writers adapted this lineage to their own cultural and historical contexts. One of Japan's greatest modern writers, Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1886–1965) initiated a new genre of 'demonism', the Japanese literary equivalent to European decadence.[1] His works are notable for their portrayal of aberrant characters, the pleasures of sadism and masochism, and the unsettling beauty of women amidst cruelty and violence, which is clearly modelled after Wilde's Salomé. Nevertheless, even though Tanizaki has long enjoyed an esteemed reputation in the West, his fairy tales rarely appear in scholarly criticism, and those collected in *The Siren's Lament and Other Essentials* (1917) were only translated into English for the first time in 2023.[2]

My study thus turns to these undiscovered jewels of early twentieth-century Japanese decadent literature. In this article, I focus on 'The Siren's Lament', which is widely read as a reworking of Wilde's fairy tale 'The Fisherman and His Soul'.[3] It stands out for its distinctive treatment of the fetishisation of surface, queer bachelorhood, and self-conscious Occidentalism. By situating this neglected work within the transnational history of decadence, I aim to reveal how

Tanizaki transforms Western motifs into culturally specific meditations on desire, visuality, and aesthetic distance.

In 'The Siren's Lament', the melancholy Chinese Prince Meng Shidao is born into immense wealth and noble lineage. Blessed with striking beauty, refined education, and every imaginable sensual pleasure at his disposal, he grows weary of ordinary delights and finds himself numbed by ennui. Seeking a new source of wonder, he acquires a Mediterranean mermaid from a Dutch merchant and installs her in a glass tank. Her beauty, kept always just out of reach, begins to haunt him from behind the transparent barrier. The prince's longing transforms into a kind of aesthetic worship, focused on this unattainable and exotic being whose allure depends on her perpetual separation from him. As his obsession deepens, the mermaid becomes a symbol of foreign wonder and an Occidental fantasy of Western civilisation. Eventually, moved by her pleas, Prince Shidao releases her on his voyage to England in search of new sensation.

This story turns away from the fairy tale's promise of union and fulfilment. Instead, it dwells on a queer lifestyle that privileges surfaces over substance, bachelorhood over procreation, and the bittersweet pleasure of the unattainable over closure or redemption. By situating this story within the broader, transnational lineage of decadent aesthetics, I show that Tanizaki did not simply imitate Western forms of decadence, but created new, resonant variations on European forms.

Decadence in Japan: Transnational Lineages

Before turning to a close reading of Tanizaki's decadent fairy tale, it is essential to situate his work within the ideological and cultural climate of Taishō-era Japan (1912–1926). This was a period marked by rapid modernisation, urban growth, and the emergence of a mass consumer culture that both fascinated and unsettled intellectuals. The decades following the Meiji Restoration (1868–1889) had already brought extensive contact with the West, and by the turn of the century,

foreign travel, study abroad, and translation had introduced European aestheticism and decadence to Japan.[4]

As Stefano Evangelista observes, the relationship between decadence and Japan emerged from a 'historical convergence' of *japonisme* and art-for-art's-sake aesthetics in the late nineteenth century, when Japanese culture became a mirror for Western artists' own anxieties about modernity.[5] The fascination with Japan as a site of exotic beauty and spiritual refinement largely influenced European decadent writing from Walter Pater to Wilde, yet, as Evangelista notes, this cultural traffic was reciprocal: Japanese artists and writers 'reversed the orientalist gaze',[6] transforming Western decadence into new local idioms of aestheticism.[7] By the early twentieth century, the circulation of decadent forms in Japan was not a mere imitation but an act of translation and transformation – what Evangelista elsewhere describes as a 'transnational network of ideas and authors'.[8]

It was also in this era that Wilde's works entered Japanese translation, were circulated through periodicals, and were adapted into plays performed across the Japanese Empire, including in its colonies of Manchuria, Taiwan, and Korea.[9] Wilde's artistic credo came to define the Taishō zeitgeist. The publication of *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* in Japanese in 1920, accompanied by editor Tatsu Yaguchi's injunction that readers should 'kneel before him', cemented Wilde as an icon of dangerous beauty and moral defiance.[10] For Japanese readers, *Salomé* (1893) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* embodied the allure of forbidden desire and the exaltation of art beyond ethics.

By the 1910s, the Japanese literary scene was polarised between naturalism and anti-naturalism. Within the latter camp, *tanbi-shugi* or *tanbism* (lit. 'addicted-to-beauty-ism'), inspired by British aestheticism and inflected by social Darwinism that were popular during this era,[11] championed beauty as a supreme value. The Taishō era's relative liberalism, compared with the stricter Meiji and militarist Shōwa periods, created fertile ground for experiments with form, eroticism, and moral transgression.[12]

Ikuho Amano further argues that Japanese decadence internalised fin-de-siècle European themes (i.e., artificiality, pathology, and erotic neurosis) but transformed them through the lived tensions of Taishō modernity. The Taishō decadents are 'subtle individual (*awai kojin*)',[13] as she notes, who embody a psychic retreat into 'personal artificial paradise' that resists both capitalist productivity and Confucian moral order.[14] This psychology of self-withdrawal, expressed through nervous illness, doppelgängers, and an obsession with the grotesque, marks the Japanese decadent's negotiation with Western ideas of the self and modernity.

Jun'ichirō Tanizaki's early works, such as *Shisei* [The Tattooer]' (1910), *Qilin* (1910), *Shōnen* [The Youth] (1911), *Himitsu* [The Secret] (1911), and *Akuma* [Devil] (1912), bear the imprint of this decadent sensibility. His fiction reimagined the *femme fatale*, like Wilde's Salomé, for a Japanese and Chinese context, presenting women of demonic beauty and erotic power (often they entwine sensuality with sadomasochism). In *The Tattooer*, for example, the artist lures an innocent woman into becoming his model and tattoos a monstrous red spider onto her back, which transforms her from a timid virgin into a cruel seductress who ensnares men as a spider traps prey.[15] Here, art does not exist merely 'for art's sake' but transcends moral frameworks, justifying cruelty and perverted acts in the pursuit of aesthetic excellence. *Qilin* offers an even more extreme vision of beauty's tyranny. Nanzi, the ethereally beautiful concubine of Duke Ling, competes with the moral authority of Confucius for her husband's attention, embracing sensual corruption. She constructs a garden of hell where men who offend her and women who flirt with the Duke are mutilated, caged, and forced to fight for her amusement.[16] The story fuses the sublime and the depraved, revealing a fascination with beauty's capacity to enthral and destroy.

This elevation of art over ethics, often described as 'art supremacism',[17] became a hallmark of Tanizaki's style. It also reflected a broader Taishō-era preoccupation with the erotic, the grotesque, and the absurd, that which Suzuki summarises as 'a season when two or three emotions – of looseness or ennui, of seeking liberation or relief – coalesced and haunted intellectuals'.[18] Another Japanese literary titan of this era, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892–1927), similarly explored

the dark potential of artistic obsession in 'Hell Screen' (1918), depicting an artist who sacrifices his own daughter to achieve a masterpiece.[19] Both writers probe the limits of artistic perfection, presenting a fascination with grotesque beauty, deviant sexual desire, and the transgression of ethical boundaries in the name of art.

As Evangelista observes, such transformations make decadence inherently transnational, its 'power to dissolve national boundaries through shared forms of aesthetic rebellion' allowing Japan to participate fully in the modernist dialogue of moral and artistic defiance.[20] Tanizaki's work thus stands at the crossroads of this global and local nexus. Through his obsession with surface, artifice, and unattainable beauty, he redefines decadence as both an imported form and a distinctly Japanese reflection on desire, estrangement, and the aesthetic labour of art.

The Dandy, Surface Aesthetics, and *Objet Petit a*

Wilde famously declares in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: 'all art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril',[21] adding provocatively, 'it is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible...'.[22] These aphorisms encapsulate the decadent valorisation of surface aesthetics and the scepticism towards hidden moral depths. For Wilde and the decadent tradition, surface is not merely the entry point to meaning but the very locus of aesthetic experience.

What Wilde promotes is not trivial superficiality but a philosophical defence of form. His aesthetic credo, indebted to Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790), treats beauty as a 'purposiveness without purpose',[23] that is, appearance has value independent of function or morality. This defence of surface elevates artifice and visible harmony as legitimate ends in themselves, rejecting Victorian utilitarianism and moral didacticism. For the decadent bachelor, surface and artifice promise an experience beyond the useful or the temporally bound.

Despite the high value placed on outward beauty, its pursuit often results in fatigue and dissatisfaction for prominent characters in literary decadence. Both Des Esseintes in Huysmans's

À rebours and Dorian Gray in Wilde's only novel exemplify this predicament. Des Esseintes, unable to find satisfaction in nature or society, remakes the world as a gallery of artificial, ornamental surfaces. The quintessential decadent act in this infamous French decadent novel was when des Esseintes had a living tortoise encrusted with precious gems, which transforms a creature of nature into a living *objet d'art*, a pure surface severed from natural substance.[24] The tortoise's inevitable death beneath the artificial splendour symbolises the paradox of decadent aesthetics. The attempt to preserve beauty as pure surface ultimately destroys its material basis. Dorian Gray, likewise, loves only the image of Sybil Vane as a series of Shakespearean heroines and 'pretty boys',[25] not as a real woman. When Sybil abandons theatrical illusion for sincere emotion, she ceases to fulfil Dorian's aesthetic desire. Her transition from artifice to authenticity collapses the Imaginary register of the psyche understood in Lacanian theory as the domain of fantasy, projection, and idealized identification, upon which his attraction depends. Her death, as Jack Halberstam observes, becomes a symbolic punishment for breaching the decadent boundary between art and life, surface and substance.[26] For Dorian, and one presumes for Wilde, the surface is all that identity consists of. As Wilde warns us, 'those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril'.[27]

This compulsive fascination with surface, and its self-destructive beauty, provides a critical lens for reading Tanizaki's 'The Siren's Lament'.' At the beginning of the fairy tale, the reader is informed that in the flower of his youth, Prince Meng Shidao, like Dorian, is blessed with 'a countenance of rare beauty and a mind endowed with exceptional qualities' – he often indulged in the pleasures of the flesh and 'had tried every extreme that this world could offer by way of extravagance and debauchery'.[28] By the time we meet him in the narrative, Shidao has already succumbed to a sense of deep ennui. No longer finding interest in the pleasure quarters he once frequented, he ends up cloistering himself in his mansion, passively 'watching dreamily on as the days and months slipped by'.[29] This predicament firmly places Meng Shidao within the lineage of decadent bachelors. Like his Western predecessors, Shidao shares an unassuageable melancholy arising from desires that, without any meaningful purpose, increasingly turn toward the exceptional,

the forbidden, and ultimately, the impossible, that spectral object whose elusive pursuit defines both his pleasure and pain.

It is at this point of world-weariness that the mermaid enters Shidao's life. Hearing of Prince Shidao's relentless quest for novel delights and his readiness to spare no expense, a Dutch merchant brings to his mansion a remarkable treasure, a Mediterranean mermaid captured off the shores of Canton. Shidao finds himself completely enthralled when introduced to the mermaid in a glass tank. Her beauty is so ethereal, so exquisitely transcendent, that it holds him utterly spellbound.

The narrative's language is explicitly visual and almost clinical in its focus on her appearance/surface. Her eyes are vividly described as enormous, 'phosphorescent blue, at times becoming clear indigo, as if crystals or drops of water had solidified within their depths'.[30] Her facial features surpass ordinary beauty, approaching a divine perfection and harmony. Her hair, dark emerald in colour, moves languidly in the water, resembling either drifting seaweed or spreading peacock feathers. Her body possesses graceful curves from her neck down to her shoulders and breasts, exhibiting flawless symmetry and an entrancing harmony of strength, agility, and divine allure. Most striking to the Prince is the remarkable luminosity and purity of her skin, which radiates an intense brilliance surpassing conventional whiteness, seemingly glowing from within. Upon closer inspection, her skin is revealed to be delicately covered in tiny, curling white hairs tipped with minute, pearl-like bubbles, 'resembling a shimmering silk gauze embroidered with countless gems'.[31]

Here, the Prince's gaze is entirely aesthetic, almost sacred in its reverence, and deliberately sexless. His pleasure lies in the sustained act of looking, not in possessing. This pleasure is best understood through Lacan's reworking of Freud's notion of scopophilia. Lacan's model should serve not as a universal grid imposed upon a Japanese text, but as a heuristic tool to explain how Tanizaki reimagines the structure of desire through his own aesthetic of distance and melancholy artifice. While Freud conceived scopophilia as the erotic pleasure derived from looking, Lacan

reformulates it as the 'scopic drive', in which the gaze becomes one of the partial objects functioning as *objet petit a.*[32] The gaze marks a point where the subject faces their own lack, drawn toward something that can be seen yet never reached.[33] Later in this essay, I will examine the specific form of 'lack' Shidao experiences after gazing upon both the Dutch merchant and the mermaid – figures who embody the exquisite European features he believes himself to lack. The mermaid is not simply a beautiful object but the unreachable locus of Shidao's desire. Her perfection is visible yet perpetually withheld, sustaining his enjoyment in the endless act of beholding her.

While Shidao's harem of ten most beautiful and accomplished concubines could offer every pleasure and companionship imaginable, the mermaid's appeal is matchless because of her very unattainability. Shidao's desire is structured around lacking. Here, the Lacanian structure of desires could shed some light on this dynamic. Desire, for Lacan, is never satisfied by possession of an object, since what we seek is not the object itself but the absent remainder that sustains longing through its very lack, which Lacan defines as the *objet petit a.*[34] The decadent protagonists' endless pursuit of surface and the unattainable thus reflects a psychic structure in which fulfilment is perpetually deferred. Slavoj Žižek explains the paradoxical dynamic even more vividly, noting that the *objet petit a* embodies a fragile oscillation between the sublime and the abject, the 'sublime Grail' will eventually degrade into 'a piece of shit' when the desired object is obtained.[35]

In this fairy tale, the mermaid is the Prince's 'sublime Grail', forever shimmering on the horizon of fulfilment yet always just beyond his grasp. His pleasure depends on the very postponement of satisfaction. She is a surface that can be seen, admired, and cherished, but never possessed. To claim her entirely collapses illusion into reality, turning aesthetic transcendence into substance, and thus destroying it. Tanizaki continues:

> Separated by a simple wall of glass, he and the mermaid would face each other in silence all day long, she breathing heavily underwater and he tormenting himself outside, one lamenting the fate that forbade her to leave her watery element, while the other cursed his inability to dive right into it. And so, the gloomy and desolate hours passed by.[36]

The glass tank functions as more than a physical barrier, but also a psychic screen that maintains the mermaid as pure surface, the projection site of Shidao's longing. His desire survives only through this separation, ensuring the pleasure is endlessly renewed. Then the mermaid would never turn into 'shit' like his other concubines. Though purchased like a commodity, she can never truly be owned, as she is simultaneously present and absent, a 'remainder of the Real' that both anchors and destabilises desire.[37]

At the climax of the story, Tanizaki dramatically literalises this impossibility. When Shidao attempts to bridge the gap by kissing her, he nearly dies from the mermaid's icy embrace. Her beauty 'like that of Beardsley's Salomé in *The Dancer's Reward*',[38] proves fatal when approached too closely:

> she reached out her arms and wrapped them around the young Prince. He felt a strange, cold sensation about his neck, where his skin came into contact with the mermaid's, as though a block of ice had been applied to it, and, before he knew it, his neck had frozen. The more the mermaid tightened her embrace, the more the icy cold that emanated from her snow-white skin penetrated his bones, piercing him to the marrow.[39]

Her very existence marks the fatal boundary between surface and substance. The attempt to turn aesthetic into physical intimacy results in dissolution.

Wilde's *Dorian Gray* repeatedly enforces the rule that those who seek to penetrate surface to reach substance are destroyed for their transgression. Sybil desires to transition from symbolic artifice into lived reality, namely, to marry Dorian in real life, to cross from Dorian's Imaginary into the Symbolic. Her wish for a future union destroys the pageantry and results in her death. Basil's fate is similarly sealed when he insists on seeing the hidden portrait, seeking substance behind Dorian's glamorous surface. For both, the attempt to transition is the act of drawing the boundary. However, marking a firm dialectic line between illusion and life is fatal. In Tanizaki's fairy tale, the mermaid is less like Sybil than she is like Dorian's portrait. She is a beautiful surface whose mystery and allure are preserved only so long as the boundary remains uncrossed. The punishment for seeking to pierce that surface is fatal, in this case, for the desiring subject himself.

Moreover, the mermaid will never fulfil the roles of a wife or lover (what Sybil and Basil desire to be). She is perfectly preserved as a spectacle that resists incorporation into the heteronormative order. In this way, Tanizaki's tale aligns closely with the Aestheticist credo that art should remain beautiful, not useful. Her 'uselessness' embodies Wilde's dictum that 'all art is quite useless'.[40] Were she to assume domestic or erotic function, she would, in Luce Irigaray's terms, acquire a 'use-value',[41] and then her body would be inscribed with economic or social purpose.[42] Instead, like the 'virginal women' Irigaray describes,[43] the mermaid circulates as pure exchange value, passed between the merchant and prince Shidao, yet she would never enter into the circuit of use. Her inaccessibility preserves her perfection and gestures toward the figure of the queer bachelor, whose devotion to surface and refusal of reproduction sustain the melancholic pleasure of unattainable beauty.

Queer Decadent Bachelorhood

In the dénouement of 'The Siren's Lament', Prince Shidao pities the mermaid and decides to release her on his way to England, where he is heading to pursue his new-found obsession with European civilisation. This moment represents not simply a relinquishment of a love object, but a deliberate refusal of the heteronormative obligations that define Confucian and Chinese masculinity.

In traditional Confucian societies, the imperative of filial piety anchors the entire social and familial order. In both China and Japan, the duty to continue the family line by producing an heir is among the most sacred of obligations. As the Confucian sage Mencius famously states, 'there are three things which are unfilial, and to have no posterity is the greatest of them'.[44] The extinction of a family line is a transgression against parents, ancestors, and the moral order itself. Against this backdrop, Shidao's obsession with the unobtainable mermaid, who is impossible to be integrated into the heteronormative order of wife or mother, is a direct repudiation of Confucian filial piety.

Although he has ten beautiful concubines, Shidao fathers no children. In releasing both the mermaid and his ties to the family line, he ensures the extinction of his noble house. In a world where reproduction is both social imperative and moral virtue, Shidao's bachelorhood is decidedly decadent and a fundamentally modern refusal. As Katherine Snyder observes, the bachelor is always a 'threshold figure' who marks 'the boundaries of normative bourgeois familial and sexual relations, as well as the permeability of those boundaries'.[45] In this tradition, 'bachelorhood is sustained by a range of familial and quasi-familial affiliations, varying in their degree and kinds of reciprocity, dominance, even voluntariness'.[46] For the decadent bachelor, lack itself – lack of family, lack of procreative purpose – becomes the very foundation of pleasure. The extinction of the house is a chosen path.

Moreover, Shidao's rejection of reproductive destiny is also intimately tied to his fascination with the Dutch merchant. The narrative describes how Shidao, upon meeting the man, is 'deeply impressed by the foreigner's appearance', noting in him 'a nobility and an authority that somehow managed to overwhelm him'.[47] Once celebrated for his own beauty, Shidao now measures himself against the European and finds himself lacking. The text lingers on the merchant's exquisite features:

> The foreigner's green eyes, just like tropical seas of emerald and sapphire, beckoned his soul to fathomless depths. Moreover, with his well-defined eyebrows, his broad forehead, and his snow-white complexion, his face was incomparably more refined and handsome than that of the young Prince, who prided himself on his own beauty, not to mention capable of a richness of expression that showed every nuance of the most complex emotions.[48]

The attention given to these details invites a reading that moves beyond mere admiration. Shidao's contemplation of the merchant's beauty carries an unmistakable erotic charge, intensified by the moment in which he compares the man to the mermaid: 'although the man did not attain the perfection or delicate beauty of the mermaid, still he had the latent possibilities of attaining them some day'.[49] The merchant becomes both a masculine double of the mermaid and an object of longing in his own right.

This dynamic strongly recalls Eve Sedgwick's argument in *Between Men* (1985) that the triangulated relation between two men and a woman often masks male-male erotic investment beneath the guise of rivalry or shared pursuit of a female object.[50] In 'The Siren's Lament', the mermaid mediates the relationship, yet the most charged moments lie in Shidao's interactions with the merchant. The rivalry that arises when Shidao measures himself against the European heightens rather than obscures the erotic current. His plea to join the merchant in Europe – 'please, take the mermaid and me back to your country and introduce us among the superior race that resides there. There is nothing to keep me in China any longer', and his 'grabbing at the hem of his [the Dutchman's] cloak'[51] – read less as casual wanderlust than as pleas for intimate escape, an elopement in all but name. In this light, Shidao's rejection of filial obligation and reproductive duty is also inseparable from his erotic investment in another man. The triangle of prince, merchant, and mermaid encapsulates the logic of decadent bachelorhood, in which the woman remains a luminous yet unpossessable surface, while the most urgent attachments pass between men.

Furthermore, Christopher Reed's *Bachelor Japanists* (2016) highlights the queer potential of bachelorhood and cross-cultural collecting, defining bachelorhood not simply as a euphemism for homosexuality but as an identity 'united less by eroticism between men than by a shared alienation from powerful cultural imperatives during the century historians call "the era of mandatory marriage"'.[52] Figures such as Wilde and Roland Barthes, Reed notes, turned to Japan as a space where authoritative 'truths' from their home cultures could be unlearned, allowing self-invention and offering a form of belonging for men whose homoerotic desires ostracise them.[53] Kristin Mahoney adds that some, like Harold Acton, sought kinship and a sense of asylum in the 'decadent Orient', where same-sex desire was tolerated so long as family lineage remained intact.[54] For these Western queer bachelors, collecting and identification with Eastern cultures served as a form of resistance against bourgeois norms and Christian heterosexuality.

Tanizaki reverses this dynamic. Instead of Western bachelors collecting Eastern artefacts and bodies, Shidao, an Eastern bachelor, collects Western exotica: the mermaid and the Dutch

merchant. Both become objects of longing and symbolic acts of resistance against the Confucian imperatives of filial piety, reproductive duty, and patriarchal lineage. The mermaid's unattainable beauty and the merchant's alluring masculinity are catalysts for Shidao's rejection of the social order to which he is bound.

Reading a fairy tale through the lens of its author's historical and cultural context always risks the charge of over-interpretation. However, the seismic changes that marked the turn of the twentieth century in Eastern societies are difficult to ignore, and the idea of 'decadence' – originally used to describe the decline of the Roman Empire – finds a noticeable echo in the twilight of Chinese Empire. The fairy tale opens its narrative by introducing its background as set after the flourishing era of Emperor Qianlong of the Qing dynasty under the House of Aisin Gioro, situating its narrative at the zenith of imperial grandeur – just before the decline precipitated by China's defeat in the Sino-British Opium War (1840–1842). In this context, the tale reads as both an elegy for a fading aristocratic order and a prophecy anticipating the drastic transformations brought by modernity and foreign invasion.

The melancholia of the bachelor protagonist is thus not merely personal but acquires a civilizational dimension, representing the final flicker of an aristocracy poised to vanish in the tides of republican modernity. As Amano notes, Japanese writers of Tanizaki's generation translated this fin-de-siècle languor into a 'Taishō malaise', transforming the exhaustion of empire and industrial modernity into an aesthetic of idleness and luxurious decline.[55] Shidao's refusal of procreation and his obsessive attachment to the Western mermaid and merchant allegorise this broader historical mood, namely, a withdrawal from productivity that mirrors the decadence of both late imperial China and Taishō Japan.

This sense of decadent finality intensifies when Shidao lavishes great fortunes on the mermaid without any hesitation, offering 'seventy diamonds of Arabia, eighty rubies of Cochinchina, as well as ninety peacocks from Annam and a hundred tusks of elephant ivory from Siam'.[56] The narrative invites readers to savour this extravagant display. Rainbow-coloured

gemstones, vessels of silver and gold, the magical mermaid herself, and the sensuous, ornate language together create an opium-induced dream, a final, luxuriant pageant of wealth and beauty poised on the brink of oblivion.

Racialised Melancholy

Finally, contemporary readers, particularly those from East Asian backgrounds, may find themselves unsettled by the fairy tale's overt Occidentalism and worship of whiteness. This is most striking when the Prince implores the merchant to take him to Europe: 'Rather than remain a prince and end my days in Nanjing, I should prefer to die a lowly pauper in your country!'[57] Such words reveal a strong sense of racial inadequacy, mirroring an inferiority complex that was widespread in Taishō and the Early Shōwa (1926–1945) era.

In fact, the entire fairy tale is haunted with an internalised racism. Shidao contrasts the merchant with the people of his own land, remarking 'compared to the inhabitants of the territories of China, with their sallow skin and flat faces, he [the Dutch merchant] gave the impression of being altogether a creature of a race closer to that of the siren'.[58] This alignment of the merchant's beauty with the mermaid's divine perfection frames whiteness as both aesthetic ideal and unattainable standard.

Shidao's admiration for the merchant's beauty also quickly transforms into a longing to travel to Europe. The prince makes a plea:

> If all the men of your country have as august a face as yours, and if all the women of your country have as white a skin as that of the mermaid, what an unspoilt land, what a fair paradise Europe must be! Please, take the mermaid and me back to your country and introduce us among the superior race that resides there.[59]

In this moment, longing for Europe is inseparable from the melancholic awareness of his perceived racial inferiority, producing a vision of paradise defined by the gaze of the white European upon the East Asians.

Ayu Majima's monograph *The Melancholy of the Skin Colour* (2014) explores the racial experience of modern Japan, and Majima observes that the internalisation of racial hierarchy and self-doubt among Japanese intellectuals and students who studied in the West deeply influenced Japanese cultural and literary identity. For example, the renowned Japanese author Sōseki Natsume (1867–1916), who spent a year studying in England, recorded his time abroad with bitterness and self-pity. He described himself as feeling like 'a country bumpkin who just entered the city'; 'as tiny as a monkey from the mountain'; and while walking on the street of London he felt extremely self-conscious of his different appearance, feeling 'like a ink stain on a British gentleman's white shirt'.[60] Natsume lamented his short stature and sallow skin, even reasoning that it was understandable for Westerners to look down upon him because of his ugliness.[61] These experiences of inferiority persisted even as Japan rose to the status of a modern superpower after its victory over a Caucasian imperial power in the Russo-Japanese war (1904–1905). In his novel *Sanshirō* (1908), Natsume's protagonist muses that if he were to stand among Westerners, 'he would surely feel inferior', lamenting the 'ugly faces' and 'frail bodies' of his compatriots, thus Japan's victory is still 'not good enough'.[62]

Majima further demonstrates how such experiences of humiliation abroad contributed to a new kind of racial hierarchy within East Asia itself, with Japanese intellectuals blaming the racial discrimination against East Asians on Chinese and Koreans.[63] Because Japanese individuals were frequently misidentified as Chinese and subjected to similar forms of discrimination, many Japanese students and expatriates developed deep resentment towards Chinese and other East Asian peoples. For example, Viscount Yatarō Mishima (1867–1919), who later became a successful banker, was among the early Japanese overseas students in the United States. In his diary, he describes the pain of constantly being mistaken for Chinese and enduring racial slurs and attacks. He even found it necessary to walk with American women to attend a circus show, reasoning that 'ladies were treated like goddesses with the utmost respect in American society' and hoping this would shield him from anti-Chinese abuse. Mishima recalls that such experiences made him begin

to hate the very word 'China', expressing, 'I really wish Japan would stop using Kanji, as this writing system is appropriated from China. In the US, China was seen as an inferior and lowly country.' He concludes, 'as Japanese, we should fight against Chinese'.[64]

Mishima's reaction exactly echoes what Frantz Fanon theorises as a symptom of colonial subjectivity: 'people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave – position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture',[65] and thus 'the black man will endeavour to seek admittance to the white sanctuary from within'.[66] When the colonised subject, confronted with the stigma imposed by the dominant race, sometimes turns against neighbouring or kindred groups, seeking proximity to the oppressor by distancing themselves from those deemed inferior. Indeed, Majima observes that such experiences in the West led many Japanese to develop a strong desire to 'leave Asia', distancing themselves from Chinese culture and the Asian race.[67] Fuelled by social Darwinism and eugenic thought prevalent in the early twentieth century, these sentiments later developed into the infamous 'Datsu-A Ron' (lit. Argument for Leaving Asia), advanced by Yukichi Fukuzawa. Fukuzawa urged Japan to Westernise fully and to break off all ties with the 'lowly Mongolian race', so that the nation could join and compete alongside Western powers.[68] This ideology ultimately contributed to the rationalisation of Japanese imperial expansion and racial genocide perpetrated against Chinese and Koreans during the Second World War.

Although Japan was never colonised militarily, its rapid modernisation following the Meiji Restoration entailed what Amano argues as a 'pseudo-colonial situation', namely, a form of voluntary Occidentalism in which Japan 'drastically Westernised' itself to achieve parity with Europe.[69] From this perspective, Japan internalised the West as a virtual coloniser, adopting Western modernity as the standard of civilization and replicating the cultural mimicry that Frantz Fanon identifies as central to the colonised psyche.

This context illuminates why Shidao's obsession with the unattainable mermaid may also be read as a metaphor for racial segregation. The mermaid of Mediterranean origin and with the

almost translucent fair skin remains forever unattainable for Shidao, mirroring the persistent exclusion of East Asians from the fantasy of full acceptance by the West. The narrative recalls Fanon's analysis of the colonised subject's desire to imitate the coloniser, hoping for acceptance but always meeting disappointment. No matter how intense the longing, or how closely one imitates Western ideals, the racial boundary remains insurmountable.

Shidao's journey to Europe, which concludes the story, acquires a deeply melancholic resonance for modern readers familiar with the experiences of Japanese travellers and intellectuals described in Majima's study. The 'beautiful and noble' European paradise he seeks is likely to greet him with alienation and discrimination, echoing the bitter disappointments recorded by Natsume, Mishima and their contemporaries out of the fictional world. In this sense, 'The Siren's Lament' does not merely reflect personal longing or aesthetic fascination, it also could read as the psychic wounds and impossible desires produced by racialised modernity and cross-cultural encounter.

Conclusion

In 'The Siren's Lament', Tanizaki transforms the fairy tale into a melancholy meditation on the decline of lineage, the lure of the unattainable, and the psychic fractures of modernity. Prince Meng Shidao's journey from decadent opulence to Occidentalist longing is neither a straightforward escape nor a simple tragedy, but a richly layered parable of refusal and desire. His aesthetic worship of the mermaid, his fascination with the Dutch merchant, and his ultimate severance from filial duty enact a modern bachelorhood poised at the threshold between eras – a last flicker of aristocratic splendour shadowed by the oncoming tides of republicanism, Westernisation, and racial self-doubt.

This tale's ending, with the prince setting sail for a Europe that will likely remain forever out of reach, dramatizes the central paradox of decadent longing: that desire is most powerful when it is never fulfilled, and that beauty exists most intensely at the moment it slips beyond our grasp. Shidao's refusal to procreate, his squandering of inherited wealth, and his melancholic

admiration for Western ideals are not just symptoms of personal malaise; they function as a synecdoche for the broader dislocations of a world in transition. The story's surfaces – be they the mermaid's luminous skin, the merchant's Caucasian features, or the glass that separates longing from fulfilment – become the true locus of meaning and loss.

In bringing together the motifs of unattainable beauty, bachelor melancholia, and racialised yearning, Tanizaki's fairy tale compels us to reconsider the geography and genealogy of decadence itself. 'The Siren's Lament' is not simply a tale of unhappy endings, but a contemplation of surfaces, distances, and the bittersweet allure of what can never be attained. In its exquisite refusal of closure, it offers an enduring vision of modernity's discontents and the queer, spectral afterlives of the fairy tale.

---

[1] Di Cotofan Wu, 'Oscar Wilde in East Asia', in *The Oxford Handbook of Oscar Wilde*, ed. by Kate Hext and Alex Murray (Oxford University Press, 2025), pp. 518-32 (p. 525).
[2] Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament: Essential Stories*, trans. by Bryan Karetnk (Pushkin Press, 2023).
[3] Maho Hidaka, 'Portraits on the Human Body: Japanese Adaptations of Oscar Wilde by Junichiro Tanizaki', *The Wildean*, 46 (2015), pp. 72-87 (p. 72).
[4] Wu, 'Oscar Wilde in East Asia', p. 523.
[5] Stefano Evangelista, 'Japan: Decadence and Japonisme', in *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir (Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 264-82 (pp. 264-65).
[6] Ibid., p. 264.
[7] Ibid., pp. 279-80.
[8] Stefano Evangelista, 'Transnational Decadence', in *Decadence and Literature*, ed. by Jane Desmarais and David Weir, Cambridge Critical Concepts (Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 316-31 (pp. 316-19).
[9] Yoko Hirata, 'Oscar Wilde and Honma Hisao, the First Translator of "De Profundis" into Japanese', *Japan Review*, no. 21 (2009), pp. 241-66; Qi Chen, 'The Circulation of Oscar Wilde's Prose and Poems in Japan (1868–1926)', *Literature Compass*, 10.3 (2013), pp. 288-99; Kimie Imura Lawlor, 'Iconographic Changes of Images of Salome in East and West', 4 (2001), pp. 55-67.
[10] *The Complete Works of Wilde, Vol. 4* [ワイルド全集 第 4 巻], ed. by Tatsu Yaguchi, Vol. 4 (Tenyousha Publishing House, 1920), p. 3.
[11] Sunyoung Park, 'The Colonial Origin of Korean Realism and Its Contemporary Manifestation', *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, 14.1 (2006), pp. 165-92 (p. 176).
[12] Sadami Suzuki, 'Eroticism, Grotesquerie, and Nonsense in Taishō Japan: Tanizaki's Response to Modern and Contemporary Culture', in *A Tanizaki Feast: The International Symposium in Venice*, ed. by Anthony Chambers and Adriana Boscaro (University of Michigan Press, 2020), pp. 41-53 (p. 43).
[13] Ikuho Amano, *Decadent Literature in Twentieth-Century Japan* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 104.
[14] Ibid., pp. 18 & 104.
[15] Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *The Tattooer* [刺青], trans. by Qinghua Lin, Digital Lab E-book (Shanghai Translation Publishing House | Digital Lab, 2022).
[16] Jun'ichirō Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament: Essential Stories* (Pushkin Press, 2023), pp. 13-39.
[17] *The Complete Works of Wilde, Vol. 4*, p. 3.
[18] Suzuki, 'Eroticism, Grotesquerie, and Nonsense in Taishō Japan', pp. 43-45.
[19] Ryūnosuke Akutagawa, *Hell Screen*, trans. by Jay Rubin, Penguin Classics 2011 (Penguin, 2011).
[20] Evangelista, 'Transnational Decadence', p. 317.

[21] Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. by Joseph Bristow, New edition (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 3.
[22] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 22.
[23] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. by Nicholas Walker and James Creed Meredith (Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 227.
[24] Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature: À Rebours*, ed. by Nicholas White, trans. by Margaret Mauldon (Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 96-108.
[25] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 45.
[26] Jack [Judith] Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 63-64.
[27] Wilde, p. 3.
[28] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, p. 91.
[29] Ibid., p. 91.
[30] Ibid., p. 106.
[31] Ibid., pp. 106-08.
[32] Jacques Lacan, Jacques-alain Miller, and Alan Sheridan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis - Book XI of the Seminar of Jacques Lacan: 11* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), p. 194.
[33] Ibid., pp. 84-85.
[34] Lacan, Miller, and Sheridan, p. 180; Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (Routledge, 2012), p. 310.
[35] Slavoj Žižek, *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (Verso Books, 2001), p. 49.
[36] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, pp. 140-41.
[37] Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!*, p. 310.
[38] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, p. 142.
[39] Ibid., p. 144.
[40] Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 4.
[41] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 174.
[42] Ibid., pp. 185-86.
[43] Ibid., p. 186.
[44] Ke Meng 孟軻 [Mencius 孟子], 'The Chinese Classics/Volume 2/The Works of Mencius/Chapter 07: Li Lou [離婁] Part 1', trans. by James Legge, n.d., p. 26 <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Chinese_Classics/Volume_2/The_Works_of_Mencius/chapter07> [accessed 8 August 2025].
[45] Katherine Snyder, 'The Necessary Melancholy of Bachelors: Melancholy, Manhood, and Modernist Narrative', in *Bachelors, Manhood, and the Novel, 1850–1925* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 172-210 (p. 172).
[46] Snyder, 'The Necessary Melancholy of Bachelors', p. 173.
[47] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, p. 102.
[48] Ibid., p. 102.
[49] Ibid., p. 109.
[50] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia University Press, 2016), pp. 21 & 25.
[51] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, p. 110.
[52] Christopher Reed, *Bachelor Japanists: Japanese Aesthetics and Western Masculinities (Modernist Latitudes)* (Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 5.
[53] Reed, *Bachelor Japanists*, p. 4.
[54] Kristin Mahoney, *Queer Kinship after Wilde: Transnational Decadence and the Family* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 126-56.
[55] Amano, *Decadent Literature in Twentieth-Century Japan*, pp. 103-07.
[56] Tanizaki, *The Siren's Lament*, p. 103.
[57] Ibid., p. 110.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Sōseki Natsume, *Complete Literary Works of Meiji Era Vol. 55: Sōseki Natsume* [明治文学全集 55: 夏目漱石集] (Tsukuba-shobo, 1971), p. 355.
[61] Ayu Majima, *The Melancholy of the Skin Colour: The Racial Experience of Modern Japan* ["肤色"的忧郁:近代日本的人种体验], trans. by Xiaoyu Song, Qiwei Shuxi, Chinese edition (Social Sciences Academic Press, 2021), p. 78.
[62] Sōseki Natsume, *Sanshirō* [三四郎], Soseki literary works collection (Iwanami Shoten, 1990), p. 22.
[63] Majima, *The Melancholy of the Skin Colour*, pp. 30-53.
[64] Yatarō Mishima, *The Letters of Mishima Yatarō: A Pioneer Meiji-Era Student Abroad in America* [三島弥太郎の手紙: アメリカへ渡った明治初期の留学生], ed. by Yoshiatsu Mishima (Rakuseisha, 1994), pp. 67-68, 75-76, 93, and 127-29.

[65] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Richard Philcox (Grove Press/ Atlantic Monthly Press, 2008), p. 17.
[66] Ibid., p. 39.
[67] Majima, pp. 40-41.
[68] Ibid., pp. 51-53.
[69] Amano, pp. 2-3.