Kizumonogatari: A Foreign Gothic

The gothic genre can be described as dreary and bonkers. Not so much as a comedy but so much in the form of something maniacal. Something is intrinsically gothic when it stems from a plot that is so exaggeratingly horrific that the outcome is ridiculous or spectacular. So, then what becomes of the gothic when it meets foreign soil, or rather foreign soul? It evolves. The same way a species does to survive in a new environment, the gothic genre takes on aspects of its surroundings to survive and prosper, becoming altogether something new whilst retaining the core of what makes it identifiable. Nisio Isin's Kizumonogatari is one such bastard child; a typical East meets West affair.

To start, not only is Nisio Isin's Kizumonogatari the perfect example of the gothic genre created from a foreign perspective, but it is also an example how to keep an old concept, the vampire, feeling fresh. Nisio Isin has woven a tale that is original and entertaining, with its charming characters and their differentiating interactions that further expand on their personalities but embodies the important parts that make it gothic. From the start, the introduction—or more fitting, the warning—of Kizumonogatari is a dance of words. A dance that twirls and spins to tell us that the story about to be read has no happy ending, but instead an ending in which nobody is happy; a tragedy. This is the beginning of Kizumonogatari's prophecy. The fortune telling that accompanies the gothic in one form or another; such as Dracula's warnings from the lady to Jonathan Harker or Frankenstein's foreshadowing of misfortune.

One other common trope of gothic literature are characters that won't change the way they are and so are deeply despised for their flawed characteristics In Kizumonogatari, we have characters that are forced to change, only to revert back to what they were. Which is why when bad things constantly happen to them we are angered and ecstatic for the former, but saddened and interested in the latter. When Nisio Isin writes his characters, he only ever thinks about the ones in front of him, giving each one the same treatment, making sure they all live up to the status of protagonist. Each one only ever changing when they interact with a different person. In doing this, he essentially digs his characters into a rut. This means that his characters are never truly changing despite the many interactions they can have with a limited amount of people.

One such character is the protagonist of Kizumonogatari, an altruistic, horny teenager, who believes that making friends will lower his intensity as a human. And yet, no longer than twenty pages later is he saving the life of a vampire, a monster, all because she cried and begged him to do so. Koyomi Araragi, is character is that built by his desires, but driven by his moral code. He weighs the value of both his life, someone who has no friends and who the only people that would care if he went missing are his two little sister, to that of a legendary vampire. And the vampire won. The vampire, who he is later allowed to call Kiss-shot, was of a greater existence than that of a lowly human like him, so he saved her. She was weak, and that was why he gave up his life for her. While this may seem like a good intention, she later calls him out on this action. Once Kiss-shot is no longer weak, once she is back to being the deadly man-eating vampire that she always was, Koyomi then sees her as something that should no longer live. She calls him out as a hypocrite. That he would have saved anyone if they were weaker than him.

As Nisio Isin writes about a creature that's been mined dry, we begin to see just how the vampire has changed due to foregin influence—more specifically, Japanese influence. In and American literature, vampires may be supernatural, but they are given limits that ground them in reality as much as possible. But in Japanese literature, the vampire, as with most things, is given power beyond comprehension, and is in all ways, a physical embodiment of a being that is beyond human reach. Kizumonogatari's vampire represents overwhelming power, and unlike the typical female that is oppressed in classic gothic literature, she is enchanting and is therefore, a monster. It is in this that we see the different interpretations of the gothic between the west and the east.

The Japanese gothic is a beautiful manifestation of a culture built on a foundation of entirely dependent on both its folklore and its depiction of the female. In Western Gothic, the horrors featured are a product of their time, and can be entirely made up or influenced by an urban legend. Likewise, the woman depicted are representative of the mindset of the time in that they are weak and fragile; pushovers when compared to the men of the story. On the other hand, Japanese Gothic is the inversion of these aspects. For the Japanese, they have come to an understanding that "Woman are lovely, and they are frightening. Because of this dual nature they are to be treated with care." In Japanese Gothic, women are scary because of just how beautiful and elegant they are or can be. The contrast and gap between a refined surface and terrifying underbelly, like that of a calm lake holding unknown dangers, is something that only serves to heighten this aspect. This idea of the scary, beautiful woman is not something that appears only once, but many times throughout Japanese folklore.

This trope of the femme fetale continues in Kizumonogatari as our protagonist, Koyomi, comes across the legenedary vampire, Kiss-shot Acerola-orion Heart-under-blade, limbless and bleeding profusely under a streetlamp. She was nothing more than "a monster, in a tattered dress, limbs cruelly shorn, shadowless even under a street lamp—but I thought her, with her blond hair hair, beautiful. As pretty. I was drawn to her. From the bottom of my heart." Everything about her was beautiful, from her face to her chic dress to her bountiful bosom that bounced and bounced and bounced and bounced. But that was only her surface. As Koyomi decides to actually learn more about her he stops seeing her as just another woman, but is forced to remember that she is a vampire. And that vampires, an existence greater than human and the very thing he saved, ate humans.

The Japanese have rooted themselves in their urban tales and folklore, which gives life to all things, transforming them into living beings. Otherwise known as animism, it is the center of a lot of Japanese storytelling, serving in the same way fairy tales do for the west, but with a more horrific aspect (e.g. the kuchisake onna, the yatagarasu, the gaki, or even hasshaku-sama). These creatures are also known by the name of yokai. But then what do you call it when these "yokai" that are not restricted to Japanese creatures but encompass any urban myth's creature?

For Kizumonogatari's creatures that exist based on the belief in them, these "aberrations" encompass the views of those who see or believe in these urban legends. Even the vampire, a western monster, "holds meaning for the observer… whose meaning changes depending on the observer… whose meaning cannot be agreed upon by her observers." To expand upon this, Nisio Isin has blatantly created a way to write about these monsters in a way that is based upon the culture of the moment, letting him, in a sense, never truly be incorrect in his descriptions so long as he doesn't stray to far from what the masses have come to learn of these them. What

does this do for the vampire? Were it limited to only Western knowledge, then the vampire would solely become an edgy teenager who exudes sexual tension. But when mixed with Japanese culture, it becomes a god.

Throughout Japanese culture, there is this idea of power levels, with the most famous mention in the Dragon Ball series. And with power levels came the desire for characters to constantly surpass them, which then snowballed into a power fantasy, creating characters that surpass realities limits. So then, if Kizumonogatari's aberration known as the vampire is meant to encompass all aspects that public views it to have, then there was no choice for the ubiquitous creature to become anything other than a near god. For someone like Kiss-shot who can blow things up by looking at them sharply, shape shift, travel faster than the speed of light, jump miles in one leap and regenerate severed limbs instantly, being offered godhood is nothing unnatural.

In conclusion, or rather the punchline, as Nisio Isin would put it, the gothic genre has its telltale aspects, but when it is introduced to foreign land, it evolves into something more. And Nisio Isin's Kizumonogatari is the perfect example of what the modern gothic has become in Japan, a country where folklore and culture is deeply rooted in all aspects of life. Kizumonogatari is a tale in which both its protagonist and antagonist are broken, and instead of either one reaching any semblance of a happy ending, they are both met with misfortune, forced to accept an ending where no one is happy.