

Nature and Human Beings Depicted by Decadents in Fantasy:

A Comparison between In the Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom by Ango Sakaguchi and “Brown Cow and Tokkaebi” by Yi Sang

Nakamura Yuko, Rikkyo University

Ango Sakaguchi was born in 1906. He became well known with “On Decadence”, published in 1946, criticizing Japanese morality and behavior during the war. He wrote In the Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom in 1947.

Yi Sang was born 1910 the year when the treaty annexing the Korean Peninsula to Japan was concluded. After graduating from high school, he started working for the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea but resigned four years later. He came to Japan in 1936 but was arrested as a criminal dissident. A month after his arrest, he died of tuberculosis. Brown Cow and Tokkaebi, published in 1937, was the only fairy tale that Yi wrote.

Both authors lived decadent lifestyles and produced quite innovative works which were very different from pre-existing writing. They each grew up in the era when Western modernization was introduced to both Japan and Korea. This essay will attempt to see how those two authors viewed Western modernization through the ideas about nature appearing in their writing.

1. In the Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom by Ango Sakaguchi

“In times long past, they avoided the space under the blossoms like the plague. . . . The fact is, when not a single soul is to be seen below the blossoms of the Japanese cherry all the more savage is our dread.”(Sakaguchi 6-7) At the beginning of In the Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom which was published immediately after World War II, Sakaguchi uses expression indicating that cherry blossoms are frightening. This obviously transforms the meaning of the flower that modern Japan had used as a symbol of the ordered and graceful characteristics of the Japanese¹. What he depicts is the unhealthy relationship between nature and human beings that developed in modern Japan¹.

A bandit, the main character of the story, is a creature who looks like a human outside but is an animal inside. He kills people and robbed for living. He doesn't feel anything even when he kills somebody. His characteristics are consistent with the Descartes' idea of nature² that, just like a machine, an animal has no feelings. Until he meets the woman, women are “things” to play with. But the woman is different from other women and he becomes tamed by her just like her pet. Here is a scene showing that the man indicates an animal and the woman implies a human.

“You lookin'? Every single mountain that you see, every single tree, every

single valley, not to mention the clouds gushin' up from the valleys · · · it's all mine.”

“Get a move on. I'm not about to stand here below that cliff bulging with big rocks.” (Sakaguchi, 26)

A wide territory represents his great capability as an animal³, but for her, it is meaningless and has no value. It depicts a gap between nature and humans after modernization.

The woman hates to live in the mountains so she persuades the man to move to the city with her. But what is waiting for him in the city existence is her tireless desire to collect and play with severed human heads⁴. This could be interpreted as Sakaguchi's opinion that urbanization due to modernization set humans apart from their natural environment so that they became desensitized to the feeling that all lives of living creatures are connected and thereby precious. Consequently, humans became “killing machines” (=went to the war).

Because cutting off human heads is not interesting or exciting at all, he tells her that he will go back to the mountains⁵. Surprisingly, she insists that she wants to go with him. He is happy and carries her on his back on his way home to the mountains. But when they come under the cherry trees, the woman suddenly turns into an ogre and chokes him. He instinctively strikes back, choking and killing her. When he collects himself, he is struck by the strangest feeling he has ever had.

He broke down and cried. · · · Overhead hung cherry blossoms. · · ·

After some time he felt something, one thing, lukewarm. And he realized that that thing was sadness, coming from his own heart. (Sakaguchi, 139-142)

It may be seen that the forest of cherry trees in full bloom is associated with “the collective symbol”⁶ of Japanese war-time ideology that turned Japanese people into “killing machines”. And the woman who is actually an ogre reminds of the Japanese who followed this manipulative ideology.

2. “Brown Cow and Tokkaebi” by Yi Sang

The main character of “Brown Cow and Tokkaebi” is Torusue who sells firewood for a living. Able to carry firewood on its back, the cow is indispensable to him. The phrase, “For Torusue, the cow is his only asset”(Yi, 101) shows that Yi valued the cow as a “thing”. It sounds as though Yi's view toward animals is anthropocentric⁷.

One day on his way home, he meets Tokkaebi which is unable to use his magic and thereby has become weak and exhausted. Torusue feels sorry for Tokkaebi and wonders whether he should commit himself to fulfilling its wish: to live in the cow's stomach for about two months until Spring comes. Tokkaebi seeks this with the offer that “I will make the cow 10 times stronger than it actually is while I am inside it” (Yi, 105). Torusue asked the cow what to do. Because he believes the cow has said yes to him, he allows the little creature to enter into the cow. What the story really tells us is that humans can decide what animals do. And the idea that

the cow comes to run so fast that Torusue can't follow and thereby buys a car also reflects Yi's attitude toward nature which is the same as the Descartes' idea of nature.

Two months later, when Torusue wakes up, the cow "looks so tired, sweating and shaking its head." (Yi, 108) He hears Tokkaebi's voice saying that it can't get out of the cow's stomach because it has gained weight. "The cow seems to know what's going on and what Torusue thinks. It even sorrowfully looks at him while shaking its body." (Yi, 111) Torusue does everything he can help it, but nothing works. When the cow gets tired and yawns, Tokkaebi jumps out safely. Tokkaebi casts magic on the cow again to make it 100 times more powerful this time, and leaves.

3. Differences and commonalities in the two stories

Both of the main characters live in the mountains. It seems a romanticism⁸-like point of view of the two authors that their lifestyles are portrayed easy-going and they are quite satisfied with their lives. Moreover, the way they are depicted as innocent as children is also in common⁹. From these points, it is fair to say that both authors share the same pastoralism-like attitude toward nature. It seems that there is a basic understanding in the two works: mountains = nature = innocence = people in the countryside.

The way they portray the situation and the main characters in their stories is consistent with romanticism. But meta messages that can be read from them are quite different.

Basically it's fair to say that Yi has the Judeo-Christian tradition toward nature. At the end of the story, Yi teaches a lesson that "if you feel sorry, you should help anyone, even Tokkaebi" (Yi 112). However, the lesson doesn't tell anything about help done by the cow. It is obvious that Yi didn't realize the importance of the cow being sacrificed. Furthermore, Yi included scenes where Torusue was very happy to see the cow become tremendously powerful due to Tokkaebi's magic. This shows Yi's modernism to glorify Western modernization.

On the other hand, Sakaguchi's work looks to show his anti-modernism and romanticism in admiring nature. The woman, a symbol of humans, is depicted as a devil who forces the man to kill other people needlessly. The depiction shows the author's criticism that people after the modernization are disconnected from nature, have become materialistic and have become more and more greedy.

As explained above, in the two stories the authors unintentionally reveal their own ideas and attitudes toward nature. But at the same time, those ideas and attitudes reflect how they think about modernization. For Yi, modernization was a correct thing, but for Sakaguchi, it was wrong. Yi might admire Western countries through Japan; thus he worked for the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea and eventually came to Japan. Sakaguchi, however, wrote his work after WWII; therefore it was natural to have a sense of loss regarding modernization. It appears that the two different viewpoints toward modernization reflect the different perspectives of these two modernists regarding nature.

1. In his book Sakura to Nihonjin, Ogawa (122) insists that many critics share the same opinion about Sakaguchi's literal attitude toward war. They believe what Sakaguchi actually shows in In the Forest, Under Cherries in Full Bloom is a strong denial of cherry blossoms as a military flower, which is also seen in Decadence.
2. This is based on the definition of "the Cartesian ideas of nature" in Environmental Information & Communication Network.
3. Referring to "The evolution of territorial behaviour" by Hediger, Heini
4. The woman likes to play with human heads more than anything. She wants many types of human heads.
5. The woman can't live without playing with human heads. She needs the man as the provider of heads. Therefore, she agrees with him to go back to the mountain.
6. The definition that Canetti(1971) applied is used here.
7. The definition that Takada(2005) applied is used here.
8. The definition of Romanticism" used in this essay is from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary as follows:
 "A literary, artistic, and philosophical movement originating in the 18th century, characterized chiefly by a reaction against neoclassicism and an emphasis on the imagination and emotions, and marked especially in English literature by sensibility and the use of autobiographical material, an exaltation of the primitive and the common man, an appreciation of external nature, an interest in the remote, a predilection for melancholy, and the use in poetry of older verse forms."
9. In Torusue's case, he is portrayed as being childish with the phrase that he "usually does nothing but play until nothing is left to eat". In Sakaguchi's case, there is a scene that while the woman brushes her hair, "the man tries to touch her hair and pulls his hand back being bashful like a boy".

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