

Social and Political Criticism in Japanese Literature: Hayama Yoshiki's Proletarian Literature and Kenzaburō Ōe's View of the Young Postwar Generation

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Introduction

This paper is dedicated to the analysis of two stories from different Japanese writers: (1) “Letter found in a Cement-Barrel” (*semento-daru no naka no tegami* セメント樽の中の手紙)¹, published in 1926 by Hayama Yoshiki (葉山 嘉樹); and (2) “An Odd Job” (*kimyō na shigoto* 奇妙な仕事)², written by Kenzaburō Ōe (大江 健三郎) and published in 1957. These two stories were written in different historical moments and, therefore, deal with distinct social issues. This study compares the discourse used by these two writers to tackle different social problems.

Contemporary literary criticism emphasizes the difficulty in presenting one single definition capable of encompassing the entire

¹ For the story entitled “Letter found in a Cement-Barrel”, this paper relies on Ivan Morris’ translation published in: Ivan Morris (org.), *Modern Japanese Stories: An Anthology* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 1962), 204-205.

² For the story entitled “An Odd Job”, this paper refers to the original version in Japanese published in: Kenzaburō Ōe, “kimyō na shigoto”, in: Kenzaburō Ōe, *Shinchō Nihon bungaku 64 Ōe Kenzaburō: Memushiri-kouchi ▪ kojintekina keiken ▪ kimyō na shigoto ▪ Shisha no ogori ▪ Miru mae ni tobe ▪ Seitoki ningen ▪ hoka [tankōbon]*. 13th ed. (Tokyo, Shinchosha Publishing Co., Ltd., 1985: 252-261). One reference is made, however, to the translation of a passage available in: John Nathan, *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness – Four Short Novels by Kenzaburo Oe* (New York, Grove Press, 1977), p. xv.

complexity of literature. Wellek and Warren³ assess the problems involved in identifying a single pattern for analyzing, interpreting and evaluating a literary work of art. They argue that a literary work of art “must be conceived as a structure of norms, realized only partially in the actual experience of its many readers” and that every single reading experience “is only an attempt – more or less successful and complete – to grasp this set of norms or standards”⁴.

A literary work can, therefore, be approached from different angles. One may analyze it from a linguistic perspective, considering its style and the use of techniques such as alliteration, metaphor and assonance. It is also possible to explore it from a cultural or historical approach, taking into account the historical context in which it was written. Moreover, the analysis of a literary work may include an investigation on the author’s background, in order to understand the main influences he experienced in life. This present paper approaches the two aforementioned literary works from the historical perspective, taking into account the historical moment in which they were written in order to identify the different ways used by the authors to tackle diverse historical issues.

The remainder of this paper is divided into four sections. The following section is devoted to the discussion of the Proletarian Literature of Hayama Yoshiki, in particular the story called “Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel”. Section three briefly presents the main characteristics of Kenzaburō Ōe’s work, especially his early writings, and examines the story “An Odd Job”. The fourth section compares these two stories in terms of the way they tackle political and social issues of the historical moments in which they were written. The final section concludes the paper.

³ René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1949), p. 139.

⁴ Wellek and Warren, *Theory of Literature*, p. 151.

The Proletarian Literature of Hayama Yoshiki

Hayama Yoshiki was born in 1894 and is one of the main representatives of the Japanese Proletarian School (プロレタリア文学). He endured difficult financial conditions throughout his life and died in great poverty in 1945. Yoshiki actually took several manual jobs, such as “a cement-factory laborer and an operator in a hydroelectric power station”, was an active member of labour movements and put in prison for crimes against public peace and order⁵. These events probably had a great influence over his writings of the Proletarian School, especially on the story discussed in this present study.

The Proletarian School emerged during the Taishō period (大正時代 – 1912-1926) and continued into the Shōwa period (昭和 – 1926-1989), until the first half of the 1930s. Proletarian writers were also active participants of the labour movements and thereby this school is intrinsically connected to labour activism⁶. In Japan, labour activism started before the Taishō period, during the Meiji period (明治時代 – 1868-1912), and peaks in the number of labour disputes and strikes can be observed in 1897 and 1907⁷. The main reason for this was the rapid development of the Japanese capitalist economy from the 1890s onwards. In fact, the massive importation of foreign technology and the industrial development of Japan initiated in the

⁵ Ivan Morris, “Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel by Hayama Yoshiki: translated by Ivan Morris (introductory paragraphs)”, in: Ivan Morris (org.), *Modern Japanese Stories: An Anthology* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 1962, 204-205), p. 204.

⁶ Noriko Mizuta Lippit, *Reality and Fiction in Modern Japanese Literature* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, Inc., 1980), p. 65; Mats Karlsson, “Kurahara Korehito’s Road to Proletarian Realism”, *Japan Review* 20, (2008): 231–273.

⁷ Kazuo Nimura, “Japan”, in: Marcel van der Linden and Jürgen Rojahn (ed.) *The Formation of Labour Movements 1870-1914: An International Perspective, Vol. II.* (The Netherlands, Leiden E.J.Brill: 673-700, 1990).

Meiji period⁸, resulted in a great expansion of the Japanese financial and industrial conglomerates, so-called zaibatsu (財閥), not only in Japan, but also throughout Asia.

An immediate consequence of this fast process of industrialization over such a short period of time was the deterioration of labour conditions in the factories and the exploitation of workers, as illustrated by the situation of coal miners, who were “bound by their loans and could not freely quit” and sometimes even abducted to work in the mines⁹. The emergence of unions and labour movements were natural results of this scenario. Labor disputes often demanded wage rises and better status within the company, sometimes turning into riots and taking a violent form, in most expanding large-scale industries. Strikes were also called to protest against social discrimination.

In 1900, the Meiji government responded by passing the Public Order and Police Provisions Law (治安警察法), prohibiting strike agitation and preventing union meetings. This Law was successful in neutralizing most of the labour movements at the time and several unions were dissolved. Nonetheless, new trade-unions continued to emerge, forcing the government to pass new legislation in the following years, especially to suppress the expansion of socialism and communism. Overall, however, “the Japanese working-class movement was unable to establish a stable organizational base”, and was therefore short-lived, despite the rapid industrialization process¹⁰. The model of cross-firm, craft-specific and nationwide unionism, adopted in the West, was gradually replaced by the

⁸ Nimura, “Japan”; E. Herbert Norman, *Japan's emergence as a modern state – political and economic problems of the Meiji Period*, 60 ed. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2000).

⁹ Nimura, “Japan”.

¹⁰ Ibid.

enterprise-based unions, which characterize the Japanese postwar labour system¹¹. Similarly, the proletarian school in Japan was also not a long-lasting literary movement. The intervention of the government and police was very successful in neutralizing the proletarian movement in the country, causing its members to cease their political and cultural activities¹².

Proletarian Literature in Japan, as in other countries, tried to denounce the poor working conditions of the labouring class during a period of swift industrial growth. This type of literature had a clear message to convey and, therefore, proletarian writers often opted for realistic narrative modes and their stories were quite objective and straightforward. As a result, some works ended up falling into melodramatic sentimentalism. According to Morris¹³, Yoshiki's stories were successful in avoiding such an effect:

“Given the inherent limitations of the proletarian school of writing, Hayama's work is often remarkably effective. On the whole he avoids sentimentalizing his workmen-martyrs, and by his sparse, compact prose he manages to keep the reader's interest in the story even when the plot is obviously contrived to convey a message”¹⁴.

According to Karlsson¹⁵, the Japanese proletarian writer Kurahara Korehito strongly advocated the need for an unbiased and “objective attitude towards reality”, in order to “portray reality as

¹¹ Ronald Dore, *British Factory – Japanese Factory: the Origins of National Diversity in Industrial Relations* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), p. 197; Koichi Shimokawa, *The Japanese Automobile Industry: a Business History* (London: The Athlone Press, 1994), p. 25.

¹² Donald Keene, “Japanese Literature and Politics in the 1930s”, *Journal of Japanese Studies* 2, No. 2 (1976): 225-248, p. 226-227.

¹³ Morris, “Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel by Hayama Yoshiki: translated by Ivan Morris (introductory paragraphs)”, p. 205.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Karlsson, “Kurahara Korehito's Road to Proletarian Realism”, pp. 237-239.

reality”. Kurahara Korehito identified two different types of Proletarian literature. The first one tends to be devoted to agitation and propaganda and is “constituted by the art of the proletariat’s subjective, or lyric, self-expression”, thus focusing on organizing “the life of the masses in the direction of true proletarian emotion, thought and will”. Although Kurahara considers this type of Proletarian literature increasingly important, he stresses the need to “facilitate an objective and concrete awareness of reality”. He defines, then, a second type of proletarian literature, which is “an objective, epic art designed to facilitate an objective and concrete awareness of reality”.

Yoshiki published “Letter found in a Cement-Barrel” in 1926, while Kurahara’s essays date from 1928. Nonetheless, Yoshiki’s story tends to have elements from both categories identified by Kurahara. It is a fictional tale, and the author expresses his thoughts and emotions through the characters. At the same time, however, he seems to partially draw on his own experiences as a blue-collar worker to describe the working conditions at the cement factory.

Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel: The Hardships of a Working-class Family in Early Industrializing Japan

The short story “Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel” presents, in a very straightforward manner, the tough labour conditions of the Japanese working-class during that period. The first paragraph of the story already denounces the intense work rhythm that the protagonist had to keep up with:

“Matsudo Yoshizō was emptying cement-barrels. He managed to keep the cement off most of his body, but his hair and upper lip were covered by a thick gray coating. He desperately wanted to pick his nose and remove the hardened cement which was making the hairs in his nostrils stand stiff like reinforced concrete;

but the cement mixer was spewing forth ten loads every minute and he could not afford to fall behind in its feeding”¹⁶.

The letter found by the protagonist in the cement-barrel also exposes these harsh labour conditions. The letter narrates the tragic story of a young worker who has fallen into a rock crusher and had his body broken into pieces. The letter was written by the girlfriend of the victim, who deeply laments she could not even give him a proper burial, as the broken pieces of his body have been turned into cement.

The letter greatly stresses the girl’s grief at the loss of her boyfriend and emphasizes his qualities both as a human being and as a worker. She left the letter in a cement-barrel to be picked up and read by anyone who may find it. However, if a fellow worker were the one to find it, she urges him not to use the cement containing the remains of her deceased boyfriend in theaters or in large mansions. This reveals that the girl held a grudge against the rich classes and seemed to blame them for her misfortune:

“I couldn’t bear to see him become the corridor of a theater or the wall of some large mansion. But what on earth can I do to stop it? If you are a workman, please don’t use the cement in such a place...”¹⁷.

Nonetheless, just after making the request, she makes up her mind, saying that it makes no difference where the cement was to be placed. She argues that her boyfriend was a very good worker and, therefore, wherever that cement was placed, it would ensure that he had fulfilled his purpose in life:

“On second thought, though, it doesn’t matter. Use it wherever you want. Wherever he’s buried, he’ll make

¹⁶ Hayama Yoshiki, “Letter found in a Cement-Barrel”, in: Ivan Morris (org.) *Modern Japanese Stories: An Anthology* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 1962: 205-210), p. 205.

¹⁷ Yoshiki, “Letter found in a Cement-Barrel”, p. 209.

a good job of it. He's a good solid fellow and he'll do the right thing wherever he happens to end up"¹⁸.

These two excerpts from the story, as already mentioned, stress a feeling of resentment against the rich and allude to a situation of class struggle, which is one of the main themes of proletarian literature. Moreover, the second passage quoted above, alludes to a sense of powerlessness that pervades the proletariat class, as they acknowledge their limited power to overcome the situation of exploitation, and are forced to accept the *status quo* in order to survive. At the same time, it is clear that the girl is proud of her deceased boyfriend's job, in the sense that, as a blue-collar worker, he is responsible for creating the means to promote a better life to society.

At the end of the story, the protagonist, after reading the letter, once again goes back to his real life. His social reality, however, is by no means different from the one described in the letter. He is a blue-collar worker with a large family of seven small children, living on a very low budget. The life of the protagonist also illustrates the frailty of the working class, who often has no option but to accept adverse working conditions and low wages in order to survive. He is aware of the hardships he has to endure everyday and gets very upset, only to be reminded that he cannot afford to get angry, as he has a wife and children to support:

"I'm going to drink myself silly!" he shouted. "And I'm going to break every damned thing I can lay my hands on."

"I see," said his wife. "So you can afford to get drunk, can you? And what about the children?"

He looked at his wife's bloated stomach and remembered his seventh child.¹⁹

¹⁸ Yoshiki, "Letter found in a Cement-Barrel", p. 209.

¹⁹ Yoshiki, "Letter found in a Cement-Barrel", p. 210.

The message conveyed by “Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel” is closely connected to Karl Marx’s critique of the capitalist society. The deceased worker is turned into cement, which is a clear allegory for the transformation of the working class in a mere commodity. Moreover, the protagonist of the story earns such a low wage that he can barely provide for his family. Nonetheless, he has no option but to keep on working and has not even the privilege of losing his temper or of drinking to forget his problems. As Karl Marx points out:

“The separation of capital, rent, and labor is thus fatal for the worker.

The lowest and the only necessary wage rate is that providing for the subsistence of the worker for the duration of his work and as much more as is necessary for him to support a family and for the race of laborers not to die out. The ordinary wage, according to Smith, is the lowest compatible with common humanity, that is, with cattle-like existence.

The demand for men necessarily governs the production of men, as of every other commodity. Should supply greatly exceed demand, a section of the workers sinks into beggary or starvation. The worker’s existence is thus brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity. The worker has become a commodity, and it is a bit of luck for him if he can find a buyer”²⁰.

²⁰ Karl Marx “Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844”, translated by Martin Milligan, available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Economic-Philosophic-Manuscripts-1844.pdf> (accessed 30 November 2013).

The Postwar Social Criticism of Kenzaburō Ōe

Kenzaburō Ōe was born in 1935 in Uchiko (内子町), Ehime Prefecture (愛媛県), a small town on the island of Shikoku (四国). His work explores a wide array of themes, but it is primarily focused on tackling serious subjects, in particular “the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, the struggles of the people of Okinawa, the challenges of the disabled, the discipline of the scholarly life”²¹. Lindsey Cameron affirms that much of Ōe’s work “reflects his deep anxiety about nuclear warfare and his commitment to peace, environmentalism, and social justice”²².

Kenzaburō’s works of fiction revolve around two main themes. The first one is the challenges of parents with handicapped children and the problems faced by disabled people. Novels in this category include “A Personal Matter” (*kojintekina taiken* 個人的な体験), published in 1964, and “A quiet Life” (*shizukana seikatsu* 静かな生活), published in 1990. Although these novels are not autobiographical, they are connected to Ōe’s own experience of raising a handicapped child. At birth, his son, Hikari, was diagnosed with brain hernia and Ōe knew the child would face several physical and social challenges in life. Nonetheless, Ōe and his wife decided to raise the baby and Hikari is now a famous savant composer²³.

²¹ The Paris Review, “Kenzaburō Ōe, The Art of Fiction No. 195”, interviewed by Sarah Fay, *The Paris Review*, No. 183, winter 2007, available at: <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5816/the-art-of-fiction-no-195-kenzaburo-oe> (accessed 21 november 2013).

²² The Virginia Quarterly Review, “Starting From Zero at Hiroshima: An Interview with Kenzaburo Oe”, Interviewed by Lindsley Cameron, *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, 13 June 2005, available at: <http://www.vqronline.org/webexclusive/2005/06/24/cameron-starting-from-zero/> (accessed 21 november 2013).

²³ The Paris Review, “Kenzaburō Ōe, The Art of Fiction No. 195”.

The second recurrent theme in Kenzaburō's fiction writings is the confrontation between Japanese traditional values or myths with modern postwar society. "The Silent Cry" (*Man'en Gannen no Futtoboru* 万延元年のフットボール), published in 1967, is an example of such a theme. Works under this category revisit folklore and myths from Ōe's childhood and they "typically feature a narrator who is forced to examine the self-deceptions he has created for the sake of living in a community". Such novels are also deeply rooted in the clash of values faced by Ōe throughout his life. Born in a small village, he was frequently told about the divine status of the Emperor²⁴. Nonetheless, his experience as a student in the postwar generation and his engagement with political issues, particularly the Japanese defeat in the Second World War and the Hiroshima bombing, made him very critical of the Japanese government. He was awarded the 1994 Nobel Prize in Literature, but declined the Order of Culture (文化勲章), which is presented by the Emperor himself and is the country's highest honor. He often severely condemned his country's actions during the war and questioned the notion of Japan as a beautiful nation:

"For Ōe, modern Japanese writers and intellectuals have had to live out, and create, worlds marked by a kind of heteroglossia; they deal with words and ideas and practices of diverse origins, in the context of a historical experience that has been traumatic collectively and individually for those who have gone through it. It has left all kinds of scars, not only on the victims of atomic bombing, but also—as Ōe is sharply aware—on the "body" of Asia as Japan pursued its bloody fantasy of cultural and political hegemony on the continent. For this reason, as his Nobel lecture made clear, Ōe finds it difficult to

²⁴ The Paris Review, "Kenzaburō Ōe, The Art of Fiction No. 195".

justify any talk of Japan the Beautiful, but instead speaks of Japan the Ambiguous”²⁵.

As for non-fiction, Kenzaburō Ōe is internationally well-known for the work categorized as reportage called “Hiroshima Notes” (*Hiroshima nōto* ヒロシマ・ノート), published in 1965. Ōe considers his Hiroshima experience to be strongly connected to the complications after the birth of Hikari. At that time, when he was struggling to keep alive his son born with disability, Ōe attended a conference in Hiroshima, which was centered on political issues concerning nuclear weapons. The writer was disappointed with discussions on “‘clean’ nuclear armaments” or “armaments of justice” and decided to stop attending the Conference. To create an independent and new point of view regarding the issue, he visited a hospital dedicated to treat the victims of the bomb. At the hospital he interviewed several victims of the Hiroshima incident, including a doctor who was also injured during the bombing. The “Hiroshima Notes” was a report that sprung from this experience²⁶.

In style, Ōe’s literature may be considered as opposed to authors such as Yasunari Kawabata (川端 康成 – 1899-1972). Kawabata was a member of the New Sensationalists (新感覚派) and his style was characterized by a strong subjectivity, inviting readers to approach his writings through their senses, i.e., by paying attention to nuances regarding changes of feelings and moods in the characters and overall story development. Ōe, on the other hand, has a more direct and objective style, and readers should be more focused on extracting the political criticism and social implications of his writings.

²⁵ Andrew E. Barshay, “Introduction”, in: Kenzaburō Ōe, *On Politics and Literature: Two Lectures by Kenzaburō Ōe*. Berkeley, University of California, Occasional Papers of the Doreen B. Townsend Center for the Humanities, no. 18 (1999): 1-4, p. 3.

²⁶ The Virginia Quarterly Review, “Starting From Zero at Hiroshima: An Interview with Kenzaburo Oe”.

At the same time, however, the subjects dealt with in Ōe's books, his support for leftist causes, his attitudes towards democracy and criticism of Japanese nationalism and emperor worship tend to place him as an antagonist to Yukio Mishima (三島 由紀夫 – 1925-1970). In an interview, Ōe stated that Mishima hated him²⁷ and, in fact, Mishima's right-wing and nationalist activities and his ritual suicide while attempting to restore the power of the emperor show how conflicting was the view of these two important Japanese writers.

An Odd Job: Stereotypes of a lethargic young post-war generation

“An Odd Job” was Kenzaburō's first published short story and describes a group of young college students who take a part-time job of slaughtering 150 dogs previously used for experiments in a hospital. The story was awarded a prize by the student's newspaper of Tokyo University (東京大学新聞), in which it was published in 1957²⁸.

The college students were hired by the hospital, in a somewhat clandestine way, to dispose of the dogs. There are five unnamed main characters in the story: the first-person protagonist, a professional dog killer (simply known as dog killer 犬殺し), a private college student (私大生), a female student (女子学生) and a character referred to as “the man” (男) who explained the job to the students and to whom the dog corpses would be delivered. The dogs were kept in a warehouse behind the hospital and the job of the first-person protagonist was to bring them one by one to a fenced-in area to be slaughtered by the dog killer, who would also remove the skin

²⁷ The Paris Review, “Kenzaburō Ōe, The Art of Fiction No. 195”.

²⁸ Asayo Ono, “Ōe Kenzaburō's Early Works and the Postwar Democracy in Japan”, *Master's Thesis*, Massachusetts, Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst, September 2012, p. 86.

of the animals. The private college student would hand the animal corpses to “the man” and the female student would dispose of the dogs’ skin²⁹.

From the very first day at his job, the first-person protagonist noticed the passivity of the dogs. He wondered that, maybe because they were kept for a long time in that warehouse, each tied to a stake, they have got accustomed to that situation and lost all their hostility. “Even if I enter the fence”, he said, “they won’t bark”³⁰. This already reveals, although in a subtle way, one of the allegories used by Ōe in the story: he alludes to the apathy of Japanese college students during the post-war period, by describing the passivity and lack of hostility of the dogs. As Sterngold³¹ points out, while “looking at the huddled animals” the main character of the story “compares them to Japan’s university students”. The following passage of the story seems to illustrate this comparison in a more direct manner:

“There was almost every breed of dog, yet somehow they looked alike. I wondered what it was. All mongrels, and all skin and bones? Or was it the way they stood there leashed to stakes, their hostility quite lost? That must have been it. And who could say the same thing wouldn’t happen to us? Helplessly leashed together, looking alike, hostility lost and individuality with it – us ambiguous Japanese students. But I

²⁹ Kenzaburō Ōe, “kimyō na shigoto”, in: Kenzaburō Ōe, *Shinchō Nihon bungaku 64 Ōe Kenzaburō: Memushiri-kouchi ▪ kojintekina keiken ▪ kimyō na shigoto ▪ Shisha no ogori ▪ Miru mae ni tobe ▪ Seiteki ningen ▪ boka [tankōbon]*. 13th ed. (Tokyo, Shinchosha Publishing Co., Ltd., 1985: 252-261), p. 253 [in Japanese].

³⁰ Ōe, “kimyō na shigoto”, p. 253.

³¹ James Sterngold, “Nobel in Literature Goes to Kenzaburo Oe of Japan”, *The New York Times*, 14 October 1994, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/14/books/94nobel.html> (accessed 21 November 2013).

wasn't much interested in politics. I wasn't much interested in anything. I was too young and too old to be involved in anything. I was twenty; it was an odd age, and I was tired. I quickly lost interest in that pack of dogs, too³².

Another passage of "An Odd Job" also alludes to the lethargy of the Japanese college students. The main character emphasizes his inability to sustain his rage for a long time and concludes that this was probably one of the reasons why he didn't have interest in politics nor strength to join the students' movements³³.

Ono³⁴ argues that Ōe, in his early works (1950s and 1960s), "weaves in some aspects of his own life into the sufferings of his main protagonists who are unable to develop into adults". Nonetheless, it is imprecise to consider these early stories as autobiographical, because Ōe cannot be identified with the central characters, who are often immature. In fact, most of his young protagonists are "tortured by their inability to develop into mature people in postwar Japanese society" and, therefore, it is reasonable to say that Ōe seems to project the distinctive characteristics of the postwar generation onto his main protagonists. In this manner, Ōe uses the stories of these protagonists "as ironic allegories to explain postwar Japanese society".

As "An Odd job", Ōe's second published short story entitled "Lavish Are the Dead" (*Shisba no ogori* 死者の奢り – 1957) is also narrated in the first person, which reveals an attempt to portray the sense of helplessness of his own generation, characterized by the loss

³² John Nathan, *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness – Four Short Novels by Kenzaburo Oe* (New York, Grove Press, 1977), p. xv.

³³ Ōe, "kimyō na shigoto", p. 254.

³⁴ Ono, "Ōe Kenzaburō's Early Works and the Postwar Democracy in Japan", p. 85-86.

of independence and lack of concrete goals in life. Although in “An Odd Job”, Ōe only indirectly alludes to such Japanese postwar adolescent crises, in “Lavish Are the Dead”, he “expressly illustrates his generation’s problem of growing up”³⁵ and themes such as the lack of hope for the future are explicitly discussed in some dialogues throughout the story³⁶. Moreover, while in “An Odd Job” the protagonist disposes of animal carcasses, in “Lavish Are the Dead” the central character has to deal with the dead bodies of human beings, including that of a war soldier, making the allusion more explicit. Ono³⁷ argues that, in “Lavish Are the Dead”, “the dead humans in the tank of water are superior to him in terms of their physical maturity and a sense of realism about life and death”. In both stories, nonetheless, Ōe presents characters that lack objectives and a clear purpose to live, and have limited initiative or strength to overcome their passivity. As Nathan points out:

“Ōe’s early heroes have been expelled from the certainty of childhood, into a world that bears no relation to their past. The values of that regulated life when they were growing up have been blown to smithereens along with Hiroshima and Nagasaki; what confronts them now, the postwar world, is a gaping emptiness, enervation, a terrifying silence like the eternity that follows death”³⁸.

A recurrent topic throughout “An Odd Job” is the reaction of the characters regarding the way used by the dog killer to slaughter the

³⁵ Ono, “Ōe Kenzaburō’s Early Works and the Postwar Democracy in Japan”, p. 87.

³⁶ Ōe Kenzaburō. “Lavish are the Dead”, translated by John Nathan, *Japan Quarterly* 12, n.2 (1965): 193-211, pp. 199-200, 2006.

³⁷ Ono, “Ōe Kenzaburō’s Early Works and the Postwar Democracy in Japan”, p. 88.

³⁸ Nathan, *Teach Us to Outgrow Our Madness – Four Short Novels by Kenzaburo Oe*, p. xv.

animals. He killed the dogs by delivering a strong blow with a stick and then cutting their throat to let the blood stream into a bucket³⁹. The protagonist considered this method quite mean (卑劣), but he felt he should not criticize such an approach, as he concluded that one should develop such meanness in order to deal with tough jobs. On top of that, as aforementioned, the protagonist also did not have the ability to sustain his rage for a long time and therefore could not bear a grudge against the dog killer⁴⁰.

In fact, the dog killer tells the protagonist that someone has advised him to use poison to dispose of the dogs. The dog killer, however, says he wouldn't do such a thing, firstly because he doesn't like the idea of giving poison to the dogs and sitting comfortably drinking tea while waiting for them to die. He believes the right way to slaughter a dog is to stand in front of the animal and use a stick to deliver a fatal blow. He adds that he has been using the same stick to kill dogs since he was a kid. A second reason is that, according to the dog killer, poison makes the dog's corpse stink. Finally, the dog killer affirms that he simply likes dogs too much to use poison to kill them⁴¹. This seems to show not only that the dog killer follows a strict professional ethical code, but that he does like the animals, although his job is to slaughter them.

The dog killer's affection for the animals is also clear when he quarrels with a hospital staff over who was going to feed the dogs on the two remaining days before they were killed. He feels very irritated to learn that there was no one in charge of feeding the dogs and finds the idea of not providing for the dogs quite cruel. "Are you going to leave them to starve to death", he asks⁴². The dog killer then asks for

³⁹ Ōe, "kimyō na shigoto", p. 254.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 254-255.

⁴² Ibid., p. 256.

the staff to give him leftovers of the hospital, so that he can prepare food for the dogs himself.

The female student considered the dog killer's behavior as the expression of his awareness of a tradition or culture particular to his type of job. She asserts that, in the case of jobs such as artisans, their culture is expressed through the techniques used in the objects they produce and are closely connected to their own way of life. This is an example of a culture which is accepted, praised and considered beautiful by society. Nonetheless, she affirms that other jobs not well accepted by society also have a culture awareness of their own, including that of the dog killer, which is a kind of dirty culture, comparable to the work of prostitutes. By accepting such a job, she adds, the students themselves also became completely immersed in such a culture⁴³.

For the private college student, on the other hand, the way the dog killer slaughtered the animals was too mean. Throughout the story, he has several disagreements with the dog killer, including in the aforementioned passage regarding the lack of food provisions for the dogs. The private college student quarrels with the dog killer saying that it was mean to give food for dogs that were about to be slaughtered. According to him, it was like the dog killer was trying to tame the dogs he was about to kill. The dog killer, however, did not think that his own way of dealing with the dogs was mean. Rather, he believes it would be cruel (残酷) to leave the dogs starving in these two days before they were killed. He adds that he likes dogs too much to do that⁴⁴.

Throughout the story, the private college student constantly shows his disapproval regarding the way the dog killer dealt with the animals and often complained about the harsh living condition of the

⁴³ Ibid., 255.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 256.

animals. “We can stare beyond these walls”, said the private college student referring to the warehouse walls, “but the dogs cannot; they are only waiting to be killed by this guy”⁴⁵. Due to remarks such as this one, the female student called him, in a somewhat derogatory tone, a “humanist”⁴⁶.

These reactions to and opinions about the dog killer’s way of slaughtering the dogs tends to reveal the predominant psychological feature of each one of the characters.

The dog killer seems to be quite confident and certain that he is good in his work and is performing his duties in the proper way. He follows a strict professional ethic and has a strong sense of responsibility and integrity. Moreover, despite the despicable nature of his line of work, he clearly performs his task in a very effective way. It is paradoxical that although he is the one responsible for slaughtering the dogs, he is actually the only character who really seems to care for the animals. It may strike the reader that, in a story about dog killings, the character responsible for the slaughters is not a vile person.

The protagonist, conversely, tends to be quite a lethargic person, who is not by all means indifferent to the problems of other individuals, but who has limited energy to actively engage in social movements or defend his ideals. It is actually questionable whether he has any ideals to defend or stand up for. He seems to be dominated by a strong apathy towards life. This psychological trait of the protagonist can be inferred by his opinion about the way the dog killer slaughters the animals. As already mentioned, initially the protagonist considers his killing method to be mean, but he didn’t criticize it because he actually lacked the capacity to nurture and sustain his anger. As he puts it, “as soon as I try to nurture my anger,

⁴⁵ Ibid., 257.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 258.

it quickly fades away”⁴⁷. It is interesting to note, however, that, by the end of the story, the protagonist does act promptly to finish off one dog, a task which the private college started but was unable to bring to completion. This shows that the protagonist was not completely emotionally numb and that he did have energy, to some extent, to overcome his apathy towards life. Maybe he simply lacked the will or motivation to use it.

The female student, on the other hand, seems to have a very negative view of the world and is a person that, according to the protagonist, does not smile frequently. This trait of character is confirmed by the female student herself: “People with my type of personality don’t smile often. I’ve been like this since childhood”⁴⁸. It could be argued that the female student represents the voice of reason in the story. As already stated, she is the one that elaborates on cultural or traditional awareness as a way of explaining the meanness behind the dog killer’s slaughtering method. She also quickly labels the private college student as a “humanist”. She thus understands the logic behind the behavior of each of the other characters and presents objective explanations for their ways of thinking and personalities. The fact that she is a sad and pessimistic person may be a way envisaged by Ōe to raise another social concern, i.e., to show that those who are able to fully understand the way society works and objectively analyze the social and political environment in which they live cannot avoid but to be melancholic and gloomy. In this manner, even those with such abilities to clearly understand the social problems end up feeling apathy and not doing anything to change society.

Finally, the fourth character, the private college student, frequently quarrels with the dog killer regarding his way of dealing with the animals, which he considers to be extremely mean. He is

⁴⁷ Ibid., 254.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 255-256.

always irritated with the job and voices his disapproval of the condition in which the dogs are kept and dealt with. He may be considered a “humanist”, as pointed out by the female student, but sometimes it is not clear if he is truly worried about the animals or simply annoyed with the job he has to do: “The blood of the dogs got stuck so deep under my nails that I can’t remove it. Besides, no matter how hard I rub, the dog’s stench won’t come off”⁴⁹. Nonetheless, a humanist tone is often present whenever he speaks:

“It was a mistake for you to accept this job’, the female student said.

‘That is not the case’, said the private college student getting even more irritated. ‘Even if I did not accept this job, the person who would have taken this job in my place would have the dogs’ blood stuck in his nail and their stench clung to his body. I cannot bear this thought’⁵⁰.

An incident by the end of the story illustrates the psychological traits of the protagonist, the dog killer and the college student. In this passage, the dog killer is about to slaughter a huge dog and, to make it docile, acts in a way which is viewed by the college student as too mean. The college student and the dog killer start to quarrel and the latter says that the college student complains too much but has not killed a single dog. Enraged, the college student grabs the stick and delivers a blow to the dog’s head. Although the animal is badly hurt, the blow was not enough to completely kill it. The college student, however, starts to tremble and cannot finish off the animal. At this moment, the dog killer urges the college student to end what he has started: “Hey, finish the dog off”, shouted the dog killer with a voice filled with rage, ‘the dog is in great pain’⁵¹. It is, however, the

⁴⁹ Ibid., 258.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 257-258.

⁵¹ Ibid., 259.

protagonist who takes the stick from the hands of the college student and finishes the animal off. After that, nonetheless, the private college student again starts to complain about the attitude of the protagonist, who in his view has attacked a harmless animal:

“‘You did a terrible thing’, said the private college student.

‘What?’

‘You are such a coward. The dog was not offering any resistance anymore, he was completely enfeebled’.

I was about to burst in anger. However, I turned around and removed the cord from the dog’s neck. I actually had no interest at all in the private college student’⁵².

Ōe, therefore, seems to use the private college student to further criticize the attitudes of the postwar Japanese students. It is true that this character has, to some extent, a sense of humanitarianism and seems to be looking for an ideal to follow. Nonetheless, he is extremely naïve and his ideals do not seem to fit the real world. In other words, he has good intentions, but does not know how to act to change his reality and does not understand that his way of thinking is too idealistic for his real living conditions. Sometimes, his discourse against the meanness of the dog killer resembles the prejudice held by society against the marginalized caste called eta (穢多) in medieval Japan. Although eta communities were doing an important job for the society – after all, someone had to do the dirty work of extracting the skin of animals to produce leather and dispose of their carcasses –, people would treat them as a marginalized group⁵³. The private college student had a similar behavior, as he accepted the job offer

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Waldemiro Francisco Sorte Junior, “Does the Japanese inclination towards nonlitigation hinder access to justice for minority groups?” *International Journal of Public Law and Policy* 4, no.3 (2014): 221-244.

and was expecting to receive the payment, but kept criticizing the way the dog killer slaughtered the animals, without proposing any alternative solution.

A Brief Comparison between the Social and Political Criticism of Hayama Yoshiki and Kenzaburō Ōe

As discussed in previous sections, the works of Kenzaburō Ōe and Hayama Yoshiki belong to very different political moments of the Japanese history. They thus deal with different social issues and, therefore, they provide a fruitful ground for comparison. Of course the different approaches to social and political issues of these two literary works are also explained by the distinctive style of these two authors. Nonetheless, such a comparison is useful in identifying the strategies used by different authors to tackle specific political and social moments.

The main purpose of Yoshiki's story is to denounce the exploitation of workers during the Japanese rapid industrialization in the late 19th and early 20th century. Accordingly, Yoshiki's narrative style is quite objective and straightforward. He depicts, in quite a direct manner, the adverse conditions of Matsudo Yoshizō, the protagonist, as well as of the characters described in the letter found in the cement-barrel. Although Morris⁵⁴ tends to be correct in emphasizing that Hayama Yoshiki succeeds in avoiding melodramatic excesses, it is highly difficult to develop a work under the Proletarian literature paradigm that does not tend to rely, to some extent, on sentimentalism.

It is worth mentioning that the protagonist in Yoshiki's story does have a name. This seems to be an artifice to create a sense of familiarity and empathy between the reader and the protagonist. The characters in the letter, however, do not have names, probably

⁵⁴ Morris, "Letter Found in a Cement-Barrel by Hayama Yoshiki: translated by Ivan Morris", p. 205.

because their story stands as an allegory for the poor conditions faced by the working class as a whole. Moreover, the events depicted in the letter describe a work accident. Even if one argues that work accidents were more common in those years than nowadays, these accidents were certainly not so recurrent as to become part of the daily lives of the working class. The day of Matsudo Yoshizō's life narrated in the story, however, seem to be closer to the everyday lives of the working class in the period. His story, therefore, tends to have a more personal tone and tries to connect to the writer in a more intimate way, while the events narrated in the letter have an appeal to the working class as a whole. In fact, the only allusion to class struggle in this story is in the letter, which further shows that the letter approaches the readers from an anonymous and universal perspective.

On top of that, as proletarian literature has a rather clear objective, Yoshiki narrates the story from only one perspective, i.e., that of the working class. The message he wants to convey is very straightforward and, although Yoshiki was a skillful writer, the story becomes quite limited in terms of presenting different worldviews or exploring the psychological features of the characters.

Kenzaburō Ōe also uses his story as an allegory for social and political issues of his own generation. "An Odd Story" was published in 1957, when the writer was 22 years old and was enrolled as a student of French literature at Tokyo University. The story's central theme revolves around the analysis of the Japanese postwar generation and, therefore, Ōe had a broader scope to explore alternative views and different social issues. As a result, Ōe's story, unlike Yoshiki's narrative, leaves open the possibilities for different interpretations.

In fact, the Japanese postwar generation was forced to face a number of conflicting ideals, especially regarding fundamental assumptions which the Japanese Meiji society was built upon. Japan was defeated in the Second World War, the authority of the Emperor

was greatly reduced and the American Occupation imposed a number of political changes in the country. As aforementioned, Ōe himself was raised to believe in the supremacy of the Emperor only to see all these ideals crumble after Japan's defeat in the war. The Japanese postwar young generation, therefore, had to live in a country which suddenly rejected old values and was in need of finding new ones.

Most of the characters in Ōe's story tend to reflect this impact of a changing social and political environment in the Japanese people, although in different ways. The main character was apathetic and lacking any real interest in anything. He illustrates the Japanese students he talks about in the beginning of the story, who greatly resemble the 150 dogs in their lack of hostility. The female student was very rational and capable of grasping the motivations and reasoning of the other characters, but displayed a very sad and gloomy character. She therefore functions as an allegory for those in society who have a clearer understanding of the political and social situation, but have developed a pessimistic view regarding the possibilities of change. The private college student, on the other hand, represents those who have or are in search of ideals, but who do not have the courage to put such ideals in practice or who are too naïve in thinking that reality can mold into their own philosophy. It is plausible to argue that the private college students also illustrate hypocrisy in society, as he usually says what may be deemed socially acceptable, but his rhetoric greatly diverges from his actions.

The dog killer is somewhat different from the other characters as he is not a student, and was not hired as a part-timer, but as a professional to do the job. He is older than the aforementioned characters and has been doing that job for a long time. As a result, he has developed a strict professional ethic code and, as the female student puts it, "a cultural awareness" of how his job should be done. The dog killer, therefore, stands for the people in society who have to work in order to survive and, accordingly, do not endeavor in deep philosophical speculations about their activities.

It is clear in the story that the hospital really needed someone to slaughter the 150 dogs and, therefore, there is no questioning regarding the importance of the dog killer's job. Nonetheless, most of the characters in the story saw his job as vile, dirty or mean. This also tends to be a criticism of hypocrisy in society, which resembles the case of the prejudice against the eta cast in medieval Japan as mentioned in previous sections.

It is also interesting to note that all the characters in Ōe's story are nameless. This may be an artifice to show that they represent, as a whole, the Japanese postwar young generation. In this manner, they are quite similar to the dogs: each having their own physical features, but greatly resembling one another in their lethargy and lack of will to live. On top of that, the use of unnamed characters may also be an allegory to the lack of personality, ideals, past achievements or future aspirations of this generation.

Conclusion

This paper examined two stories from different historical moments in Japan, in order to discuss the strategy used by the authors to tackle specific political and social issues. Hayama Yoshiki's 'Letter found in a Cement-Barrel' is a well-known work representative of Japanese Proletarian Literature. The main motivation of the Proletarian school was to depict the workers' condition in early industrializing Japan and to denounce exploitation. As discussed in this article, despite the literary prowess of the author, the very specific purpose of this type of literature greatly limited the possibility of presenting different worldviews and exploring social and political issues from multiple angles.

Kenzaburō Ōe's 'An Odd Job', on the other hand, analyzes the young generation in postwar Japan, emphasizing the lethargy of the students and their absence of ideals and future aspirations, due to the social and political events that followed the Japanese defeat in the Second World War. Ōe was not limited by a very specific purpose

and dealt with social and political issues that were not as clearly defined as in the case of the Proletarian Literature. Therefore, Ōe had more freedom to approach these issues from different perspectives and to explore diverse physiological traits contrasting characters.⁵⁵

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