AKUTAGAWA
RYŪNOSUKE'S
HELL SCREEN:
A Case For The
"Novel Without Plot"

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In a famous 1927 debate between Japanese authors Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, Tanizaki argued for the necessity of an "interesting plot" while Akutagawa emphasized the "depth of poetic spirit" as the primary element of importance in a work of literature (Suzuki 252). In the discussion, dubbed the "novel without plot debate," the two authors vied to determine what would be held up as the most important aspect of literature and therefore influence their peers. In Akutagawa's prized work "Hell Screen," we find insight into what this "depth of poetic spirit" actually is and demystify its components. To do this, it is important to identify the qualities of "Hell Screen" that have allowed it to maintain a lasting quality and help earn Akutagawa the title of "the father of the Japanese short story." The answer to this question lies in the author's ability to manipulate our senses, deny us a firm platform on which to stand, and to keep searching for a "truth" that is always shifting with each new reading of the tale. In "Hell Screen," Akutagawa interferes with our theory of mind capabilities by largely employing the concept of social minds to cast doubt on everything we read. By denying us a sense of solid ground, Akutagawa creates a search for a truth that supersedes the plot.

Alan Palmer claims we have a capacity for "collective thought," and that a large amount of literary work is based upon the "formation, development, and breakdown of these intermental systems," all part of a function he calls social minds (Palmer 28). "Hell Screen" is one such work to utilize this formation-and-breakdown structure. In literature, the narrator is the primary source of knowledge for the reader. If the narrator is naive, such as the narrator of "Hell Screen," our ability to read characters and situations (our theory of mind capacity) is constantly being juggled between what we can observe via
concrete details and what we are being told through the narrator's lens. These "concrete
details" consist of discourse, but also physical descriptors -- descriptions of physical
activity that are indicative of emotional states (Higgins). These physical descriptors
allow for the development of alternate narratives different from the one the narrator
offers. The multiple possible "truths" this tactic offers is our largest clue to what
Akutagawa means when he talks about a "poetic spirit."

"Hell Screen" immediately puts us to the task of utilizing our theory of mind
capacity. In the opening pages, the narrator lauds over his master, claiming that "he was
always a man of great magnanimity, who ... kept in mind even the lowliest of his
subjects" before mentioning the time that a bridge's construction was not going according
to plan. The narrator describes the Lord's response, stating that the construction must
have been against a deity's wishes, and therefore "His Lordship offered up a favorite boy
attendant as a human sacrifice to be buried at the foot of a pillar" (Akutagawa 42-43).
Judging by the narrator's seeming complete adoration for the Lord and ability to overlook
his barbarism and color a human sacrifice as a noble deed, we question his reliability. At
this moment, we are exercising our own theory of mind to doubt the narrator's ability to
read situations and assign appropriate interpretations of them. Readers are forced to
juggle their intermental relationship with the narrator (reading him reading others and
attributing a value judgment to the veracity of his words) and the details evident through
discourse and descriptors.

The structure of "Hell Screen" is composed of a number of layers that create a
barrier between the reader and any objective truth. The narrator is constantly re-telling
stories that have come to him second or third-hand. If the narrator is telling these stories without alteration, the question becomes how can these other parties be trusted? Palmer's theory of social minds gives us reason to doubt that we can. At the beginning of chapter two, the narrator couples an unflattering description of Yoshihide's appearance with a statement that "...even now there are ladies and gentlemen who would recognize the name 'Yoshihide.' He was famous back then as the greatest painter in the land ... cruder tongues used to say that he looked and moved like a monkey," and later that "his appearance was not the only thing that people hated about Yoshihide. In fact, he had many evil traits that repelled them even more" (Akutagawa 43-44, 47). The narrator is indicating a form of intermental thought process taking place among those that know of Yoshihide. Whether based on his appearance, personality, gossip, or any combination thereof -- there is already a perception of Yoshihide that many have agreed upon and will bleed into the collective's tales about him. If our source of information is through a narrator who lacks good theory of mind capabilities to decipher the truth (or lacks a willingness to portray them accurately) and a "group mind" that already has prejudice against Yoshihide, discovering a truth within the plot becomes a difficult task.

This unbalanced look at Yoshihide creates a sense of "otherness" out of him. Though as a reader we have reason to doubt the narrator, we are hammered with unflattering tales about Yoshihide. A nameless critic accused Yoshihide of practicing the devil's art, his lips are described as "far-too-red" and depicted in an eerie grin, and his artistry described as having a "fanatic intensity" -- there is nothing Yoshihide does that does not elicit fear and distrust, if the narrator is to be believed (Akutagawa 48, 56).
Despite the fact that we know the narrator to be undependable, if we are not continuously conscious of this, we can easily become part of this intermental system of fear surrounding Yoshihide. Here, Akutagawa has directed us in such a way that we become uncertain of our own theory of mind capabilities -- and he will continue to do so.

A good example of the game being played with our theory of mind capabilities centers around Yoshihide's daughter. The narrator continuously doubts that the Lord is sexually pursuing Yoshihide's daughter despite consistent rumors to the contrary. During one of the few scenes for which the narrator is present, he witnesses her crying and the shadow of a pursuer. Upon questioning her as to the identity of her pursuer, he receives no answer. There is likely one candidate (the Lord) who would elicit such fear in the girl, yet he categorically denies the possibility time and time again (Akutagawa 62). We see her as a sympathetic character for a multitude of reasons: she is powerless, we witness her hurt (and ultimately killed), her father appears to be more monster-than-man and the community seems to adore her as the narrator consistently mentions. The tricky part lies within in the last two reasons. She earns our sympathy for two reasons that both rely on us trusting the intermental activity of the community, which we also may be suspicious of at times.

Yet, regardless of the amount of readings one does of the text, it would feel insincere to suggest an alternative narrative where the daughter is not a victim. There's an amount of certainty the reader is led to feel in her characterization, but we receive no knowledge of her internal thoughts and few scenes of action. We trust in our ability to read her physical descriptions (helpless, crying, etc.) as reflective of a good girl in a bad
situation, but most of all we are trusting in the same community to tell us Yoshihide's
daughter is likable, when they also seem to suggest stories that sound tall -- did all of
Yoshihide's women die after he painted them? (Akutagawa 48). We have no objective
way of knowing.

Something interesting happens when we remove the colorful narration and
intermental thought of the community. When we focus on direct discourse and physical
descriptors only, alternative narratives open up. In one scene, Yoshihide requires one of
his apprentices to pose naked for him, wrapped in chains: "Sorry, but I need you naked
again. I want to see a person in chains, so do what I tell you. Sorry about this, but it will
just take a little while" (Akutagawa 55). Isolated, there is nothing all-too-strange about
the request. Artists require models all the time, and even if the subject matter is darker-
in-nature, it is not unexpected territory for painting. In fact, Yoshihide apologizes
repeatedly for the inconvenience. Yet, with the narrator allowed to speak, we are told that
"Yoshihide could mouth apologetic phrases, but he issued his cold commands without the
least show of sympathy" -- all from a man who was not present in the room. It follows
with the description of Yoshihide allegedly "pouncing" on the apprentice's back to get the
job done. This is presumable re-told by the apprentice to many people, but given the
culture of fear surrounding Yoshihide, its credibility is up in the air. (Akutagawa 55)

We may also turn to the actual physical descriptors of Yoshihide. When we
remove the scene where Yoshihide is having a nightmare and talking fearfully in his sleep
-- without the culture of dread surrounding him, we might feel pity for him. After all, he
is only an old man having a nightmare where someone is taking him to Hell (Akutagawa
Later on, without the insinuations put forth by the narrator and the rumor mill, we might see him as heroic as he stops a snake from biting his chained apprentice (Akutagawa 56).

However, if we turn to direct discourse as the means by which we "truly know" Yoshihide, we cannot deny the fact that he asks for a woman to be sacrificed for his art. When he does so, the narrator describes him as speaking with "rare humility, [in a] voice barely audible" (Akuagawa 65). We may be able to infer from his low voice that he has an amount of remorse for his request, but it does not negate the unsavory act he requires to complete the Hell Screen. Up until now, there has been reason to doubt the narrator and the community, but the possibilities are larger than that. This scene suggests there may have been a level of truth in what we have heard about Yoshihide up until this point. We can see this as the birth of an ever-shifting spectrum where the truth exists. Rather than existing at extremes where the narrator and the community are one-hundred percent wrong, the complex truth is there is an unknown percentage by which they may have been providing accurate information.

Our understanding of Yoshihide is further complicated by the final chapters of the short story, in which it is revealed that (unknown to him) Yoshihide's daughter is the chosen sacrifice. Our theory of mind capabilities are thoroughly tested as Yoshihide starts moving towards the flames -- but stops -- and is described as having the appearance of "religious ecstasy." The fact that the narrator is physically present for this scene lends more weight than his re-told stories, but we cannot know for sure. After all, he mentions being at a distance from Yoshihide at one point and then next describes being able to see
him in full detail (Akutagawa 69-70). We can attempt to read his actions as described by the narrator and question if his "religious ecstasy" is a form of madness, revealing of an inner nature, or a transformation from the father/artist duality into merely the artist with the "fanatic intensity" spoken of before.

In terms of the "spectrum" of truth mentioned before, the final scene serves to lend credence to the plausibility of the community's tales. If the first half of the novel has set up the potential to closely read the text and give doubt to the narrator and the community, the second half serves to give their words some actual weight. In Japanese poetry, the term "elegant confusion" describes when the poet draws a comparison under the pretense that the speaker/observer is confused at what he is seeing. For example, the speaker mistaking snow on a tree for cherry blossoms ("Shaping Words"). The reader could be said to be affected in such a way. At one point, we may be taken in by the narrator. At another, we may see the narrator and the community as influenced by tall tales and gossip. However, we may also see the "evil" in Yoshihide and no longer know exactly what was true or false. We are, in a sense, "elegantly confused." We can only re-read the tale and search again for some truth we feel we must have missed on previous readings.

During the "novel without plot" debate, Akutagawa's argument for the "plotless novel" may be mistaken for him calling plot completely unnecessary. The truth is Akutagawa was speaking against the typical plot of "protagonist v. antagonist" (Ueda 132). The structure of "Hell Screen" lends itself well to his point. The lack of clear protagonist or antagonist and the lack of a concrete "truth" creates a story that is capable
of being read multiple times with numerous interpretations. This "poetic spirit" Akutagawa speaks of is akin to a fluidity of narrative -- a narrative in which there is no one absolute truth; at least not in the sense of the typical "novel with plot." Without necessarily describing it as such, Akutagawa was touching on the ability for a story to unnerve us, to force us to question, and to think about how we really perceive people and events. In other words, we are not meant to tell the snow from the blossoms. By robbing us of an Archimedean point from which we can uncover an absolute truth, Akutagawa emphasizes the journey over the destination and proves that novels can be successful without "plot."

**Works Cited**


