GIVING BODY TO THE POETIC SPIRIT
A CASE FOR THE NOVEL WITHOUT PLOT

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Abstract

In 1927, Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō engaged in the "novel without plot" debate. In this debate, Akutagawa argued for the "poetic spirit" of the novel being purer than a novel that puts the plot at the forefront. Within this research is a reading of Akutagawa's "Hell Screen" with tools provided from the field of Cognitive Literary Studies. Since some have claimed it was not Akutagawa's argument but rather the abstract method in which he chose to explain it that caused him to "lose" the debate, the aim of this work is to give body to the poetic spirit in order to defend his position.

Introduction

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and Tanizaki Jun'ichirō are tremendous figures in Japanese literary history. Even today, Akutagawa is referred to by his monicker of "father of the Japanese short story," while Tanizaki is recently enjoying a modern revival through an exhibition at the Kanagawa Museum of Modern Literature. Although both artists have exhibited grand influence on modern Japanese literature, they did not outwardly agree on what could be considered a "literary philosophy." According to Orbaugh, their disconnect could be seen as puzzling. Among other similarities, both shared a "disregard for the literary establishment" and maintained a friendship. Despite

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the matters in which they found commonalities, for Tanizaki and Akutagawa there was a real debate to be had over the defining element of good storytelling. The fundamental argument in their debate became Tanizaki's support of what he deemed the “the beauty of the architecture,” whereas Akutagawa championed the “poetic spirit.” In doing so, Akutagawa introduced the concept of a “novel without plot” and argued for its purity over the constructed novel of Tanizaki's fancy.

A “victor” in the debate is difficult to determine, though most literary historians could argue that Tanizaki, in his composure and ability to express himself, was able to successfully defend his position. In the debate, Tanizaki criticized Akutagawa:

Beauty of construction can also be called architectural beauty. The realization of this kind of beauty, therefore, must entail a process of unfolding, and requires a fair amount of space. Mr. Akutagawa, who finds the beauty of construction even in haiku, would no doubt find it in a tea-room but the tea-room does not convey a sense of accumulation, of layered building.

Akutagawa, on the other hand, was “consistently on the defensive and continued to retreat slowly.” Before the debate's end, Akutagawa described the “poetic spirit” of a work in vague terms without clear definition. He tied this in with his notion of the “novel without plot,” but the closest Akutagawa could offer as a definition is thus:

The novel without “plot” is obviously not merely a novel that describes matters of daily life. Of all the possible kinds of novels this most closely resembles poetry. Yet it is still much closer to the novel than to something like prose poetry.... if one were to consider it in terms of “purity,” in the

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5 Kōjin, Origins of Modern Japanese Literature, 156

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sense that it has no vulgar interest, it is the purest kind of novel. To use
the example of painting again, there can be no painting without a drawing
or dessin. (With the exception of a few paintings such as Kandinsky's
Improvisation). Yet it is possible to have a painting that depends more on
color than on the dessin for its vitality. This fact is clearly proven by those
few paintings by Cézanne which, to our great fortune, found their way to
Japan. I am interested in novels that resemble such paintings.  

Akutagawa committed suicide before he could define his argument.

Akutagawa may have been the weaker presence in the debate, owing in part to
severe depression and anxiety over his own mental health (he lived in fear that his
mother's mental illness was hereditary), he is only able to describe his literary philosophy
in vague terminology. The “novel without plot” becomes a concept of obscurity – a
floating spirit without a corporeal body. In this paper, I argue that the “novel without
plot” is not only a possibility but has already been exemplified through Akutagawa's past
work. In this paper, I will encase the poetic spirit in flesh by using tools borrowed from
the field of literary cognitive studies to perform a close reading of Akutagawa's 1918
short story “Hell Screen” (Jigokuhen). In this analysis, the form of the poetic spirit will
be made evident as a definable method and the “novel without plot” will be argued as a
successful literary philosophy.

Cognitive Literary Studies, and an explanation of Theory of Mind

First, a brief description of the tools at my disposal. As covered by the
introduction to Cognitive Literary Studies: Current Themes and New Directions, CLS is a
field we “address questions such as why we care so deeply about fictional characters,

6 Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Bungeitekina, amari ni Bungeitekina,” in Akutagawa Ryūnosuke Zenshū
(Complete Works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke), 12 vols. (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1977-78), vol. 9, 3-80

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what brain activities are sparked when we read literature, and how literary works and scholarship can inform the cognitive sciences.” Cognitive Literary Studies uses various concepts to explore the relationship between readers and fiction and becomes a means by which we can define what is happening to the human brain as we engage works of fiction. It manages to come up with conclusions and conjecture regarding why we feel heartbreak, excitement, love, etc. from ink blots on a page. The tools within CLS are also helpful for understanding the methods in which an author drums up these emotions.

It is precisely because Cognitive Literary Studies addresses the reader-work dynamic that makes it an appropriate tool for this research. As will be evident in my analysis of the text, I will primarily focus on two theories: theory of mind and social minds.

Theory of mind is a term from cognitive science that relates to our ability to ascribe mental states to other people based on a number of factors (reading physical indicators, attributing words or habits as indicative of emotional states, etc.) It is important for the research in this paper to bare in mind that our theory of mind abilities are by no stretch of the imagination perfect. We routinely misinterpret signals, make assumptions, and erroneously assign meanings (such as assuming body language means the same from person-to-person or culture-to-culture).

Meanwhile, the concept of “social minds” is introduced by Alan Palmer. Whereas in most study of narration in literature has focused on the inner speech of a character,

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7 Isabel Jaén and Julien Jacques Simon, ed. Cognitive Literary Studies: Current Themes and New Directions (University of Texas Press, 2013), Introduction
Palmer highlights the “intermental thought” of groups. In essence, the power of “group thought” is highly influential and can both inform thought (both the thought of other characters and the reader in the attempt to interpret and attribute mental states), but also add layers for potential interpretations. An example of “social minds” can be found in the concept of the rumor mill – the generating of ideas, supported or unsupported, by a larger group that influence other people (fictional characters or even the reader) in terms of interpreting other characters, events, etc. Social minds can also include other situations such as when we see the “wave” performed at a baseball game, the joint effort of two people to search for a lost item (“Did you check in this place?” “Where did you last see it?”), or the influence of cultural thought on a population (manners, faux pas, etc). Succinctly put by Palmer: “an important part of the social mind is our capacity for intermental thought, which is joint, group, shared, or collective thought, as opposed to intramental, or individual or private thought.”

These concepts, as will be explained, crop up repeatedly throughout the short story and are by far the more frequent concepts Akutagawa manipulates to craft the poetic spirit.

**Analysis of “Hell Screen”**

In the 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.

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in a work of literature. 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. "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

11 Palmer, “Social Minds in Little Dorrit,” 28
are indicative of emotional states. 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." 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 ... crueler 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."\(^{13}\) 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.\(^{14}\) Despite the fact that we

\(^{13}\) Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Hell Screen,” 43-44, 47  
\(^{14}\) Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Hell Screen,” 48, 56
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 continues 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.\textsuperscript{15} 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

\textsuperscript{15} Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Hell Screen,” 62
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?\textsuperscript{16} 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."\textsuperscript{17} 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.\textsuperscript{18}

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

\textsuperscript{16} Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Hell Screen,” 48
\textsuperscript{17} Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Hell Screen,” 55
\textsuperscript{18} Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “Hell Screen,” 55
is only an old man having a nightmare where someone is taking him to Hell!\textsuperscript{19} 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.\textsuperscript{20}

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."\textsuperscript{21} 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

\textsuperscript{19} Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Hell Screen," 54
\textsuperscript{20} Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Hell Screen," 56
\textsuperscript{21} Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "Hell Screen," 65
being at a distance from Yoshihide at one point and then next describes being able to see him in full detail.\textsuperscript{22} 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 or the direct opposite.\textsuperscript{23} 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.

\section*{Conclusion}

During the "novel without plot" debate, Akutagawa's argument for the "plotless

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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novel" may be mistaken for him calling plot completely unnecessary. The truth is
Akutagawa was speaking against the typical plot of "protagonist v. antagonist."24 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." In this way,
the poetic spirit can be considered corporeal – with concrete, examinable elements that
elicit feelings of excitement, wonder and joy from the reader.

24 Makoto Ueda, Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature (Stanford, CA: Stanford
University Press, 1976), 132
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