

The Quest for Ultimate Truth in Ryūnosuke Akutagawa’s “In a Grove”

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Abstract

The paper focuses on Akutagawa's story "In a Grove" and examines it through the framework of literary modernism and the concepts of traditional Japanese aesthetics such as traditional images of ghosts and women in tales and fables of old Japan. The paper studies the motif of ultimate truth and the search for it as well as the impossibility to find it as distinctive features of modernism. It analyzes compositional features of the story, examines the origins of the plot and the possible literary influences. The paper deals with the change in the situational and psychological roles of the main characters and addresses the use of the fantastic as a writing technique, proving that said elements underscore the sense of uncertainty in the unknowable world. A unique narrative is created, and it surpasses the modernist strategies, marked by epistemological uncertainty, which is simultaneously the characteristic feature of Japanese literature of the twentieth century, with its ambiguous attitude to truth, reality and fantasy.

Keywords: Akutagawa, final (ultimate) truth, modernism, unreliable narrator

The nature of truth, as well as our access to it, has been at the core of philosophical controversy for ages. Until late modernism,¹ though, the very possibility of truth has never been doubted. According to Jeff Malpas, “in this sense, the post-modern era is also post-truth” (Malpas 288). Japanese writer Ryūnosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927) way ahead of his time, ponders the nature of truth and questions its very possibility in his short story “In a Grove” (1922) which is in the center of this paper.

Akutagawa is known as one of the most prominent writers of the twentieth century. He is considered to be an innovator in literature, a master of the short story. Lippit underlines Akutagawa’s role in the modernist movement in Japan and outside of it that famously doubts the realist notion of a secure world constructed around a consolidated narrator (Lippit, 2014, p. 68). Even in his early works, Akutagawa presents outstanding features of his innovative manner – estranged and ironic position of the narrator, epenthetic humorous plots. These features are also revealed in his masterpiece “In a Grove”. Struhatsky in his research points out that Akutagawa’s stories are interesting not only because of their stylistic and language specificity but for creating bright, complex images with just a few words (Struhatsky, 1985, pp. 3–24). Akutagawa is well-known to as a critic of naturalism, though in the end of his life he used this particular narrative technique in his works.

Scholars like Hibbet (1970), Ueda (1976) and Keene (1998) have stressed out that Akutagawa’s writing deals with the depths of human personal existence. Thus, Hibbett claims that Akutagawa’s writings possess “an elaborately varied poetic vision of human frailty and suffering” (Hibbet, 1970, p. 427). In his short stories, existential problems and issues of human condition are represented as moral choice a person always faces. With the help of the quest motifs, Akutagawa addresses meaningful questions of life, and some of his characters (like those of “In a Grove”, “Cogwheels”, “Rashōmon” and so on) make their moral choices that require considerable courage and steadfastness. The fate of Akutagawa’s characters is connected to the quest of the earthly life mortality. The writer works with these categories in accordance with the centuries-old Zen traditions: unobtrusively, pathos without false, easily and subtly.

In his short stories, particularly in “In a Grove” and “Cogwheels”, Akutagawa captures the tragic and fractured nature of human being of the twentieth century. As Yoshida summarizes, “the process of modernization was in fact one of the key themes of Akutagawa’s fiction, although this was not always apparent on the surface. His early works were often set in premodern Japan, yet his concerns were ultimately contemporary” (Yoshida, 1958, p. 174). The author links such modernistic views (existential problems, human condition, fragmented sense of self, search for identity, problematic notion of truth) to historical and cultural counterparts from other geographical, historical and cultural layers, thus fitting it into a global cultural perspective of modernism.²

¹ A concept that originated in Western culture but was spread all over the globe, including Japan.

² For more detailed study of literary modernism, its origins, main concepts and significance see Mellors (2005), Gillies and Mahood (2007), Childs (2008), Hindrichs (2011).

While Akutagawa is generally accepted as a forerunner of Japanese literary modernism and clearly influenced by western literary tradition (H. G. Wells, E. A. Poe, J. Swift and so on), his stories are often based on distinctly Japanese material. Indeed, Akutagawa, in Keene's words, "was likened, even by admiring critics, to a mosaicist, piecing together fresh masterpieces out of the materials gleaned from many books" (Keene, 1998, p. 565). The Japanese material includes revised Japanese legends and ancient tales. With their help, Akutagawa creates fantastic, dark, funny and frightening stories. As it was pointed out, "while the Japanese fascination with tales of the grotesque is nothing new, Akutagawa was among the first to take ancient folklore and imbue it with a menace and uncertainty that resonated with a turn-of-the-century Japanese audience" (Henninger, 2009, par.1). At the same time, Akutagawa "is known in both Japan and the West for his imaginative and often surprising fantasies which incorporate both "impossible" situations with an attitude toward the real that is fascinatingly ambivalent" (Napier, 1996, p. 1–15), which is especially true for the story "In a Grove".

The story "In a Grove" written in 1922, is viewed by critics (Napier, 1996; Morrison, 2012 and so on) as a striking literary work that is unique in the history of literature, for it raises frank illogic to the highest artistic level. It is also known for exemplifying the concept of an unreliable narrator³, another distinct device of modernist literature.⁴ In Akutagawa's story, several people talk about the events of the murder, and every character has its own version of what happened, and it is hard to establish what really occurred in the forest, and, perhaps, that is exactly Akutagawa's goal here. Besides, the title of the story may also present itself a metaphor of the unknowability of human relationships and truths so deep and dark it resembles the dark woods hard to navigate.

Critics have always regarded the story very highly and much has been written on it.⁵ Being an example of virtuoso and innovating plot building, it made its way into various anthologies and was even turned into a movie by famous Kurosawa.⁶ Here I will focus on the author's problematic vision of truth and consider the peculiarity of the plot in regards to this issue. Morrison gives the opinion that "criticism focuses on the purported 'philosophical' message of the work, namely the idea that there is no ultimate reality or truth but only an irreducible multiplicity of subjective perspectives" (Morrison, 2012, par. 3). In this paper, I will take a

³ The term was used by Wayne C. Booth in his *The Rhetoric of Fiction* in 1961.

⁴ In his lecture in Oregon State University, Professor Neil Davison gives an exhaustive summary, history and examples of what an "unreliable narrator" is. Among other things, the researcher specifies the role of the device in Modernist literature:

This first-person unreliable narrator became popular in Western literature during the Modernist period from the end of the 19th (1890's) through the 20th century. An influential Modernist writer from Ireland, James Joyce, employed the technique in some of his earliest short stories. Later in his career, and along with other American Modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein, William Faulkner, and Ralph Ellison, he pushed the technique further into a different kind of first-person narration called Stream-of-Consciousness (Davison par. 7).

⁵ Among those, who thoroughly studied Akutagawa's work in general and "In a Grove" in particular, are Keene (1998), Makoto (1976), Lippit (2014), Hibbett (1970).

⁶ Kurosawa's award-winning work *Rashōmon* (1950) actually combined two of Akutagawa's stories, "In a Grove" and "Rashōmon".

closer look into modernist understanding of truth and Akutagawa's take on it in particular and analyze the story in accordance to this task.

Thus, this paper attempts the analysis of the main categories of modernism and traditional Japanese poetics embodied in Akutagawa's story "In a Grove". It highlights the way in which Akutagawa develops an experimental textual strategy in the story "In a Grove" in order to grapple more fully with the complexities of representing the quest for truth. In this paper, there are shown specific features of psychologism and quest for ultimate truth as well as impossibility to find it as distinctive items of literary modernism and the ways it was incorporated into the story.

This paper while arguing the irrepresentability of truth addressed by Akutagawa in his work, presents compositional features of the story, studies the origins of the plot and the possible literary influences to help understand the story and the author's message. The paper also examines the change in situational and psychological roles of the main characters, which can back up the idea of irrepresentability of truth. I also focus here on the use of the fantastic elements as writing technique, and prove that these elements underscore the attitude of uncertainty in the unknowable world, which expand the understanding (or rather its impossibility) of truth and how it is seen by Akutagawa. Furthermore, the work represents the influence of Zen philosophy, with its emphasis on the relativity of any truth. Combined, all these ideas and concepts, coming from different literary and cultural tradition, help us see how exactly Akutagawa addresses the concept of truth in all its cultural and epistemological complexity. In this paper, I attempt to interpret the concept of truth depicted in Akutagawa's story as an ambiguous reality, as a conflicting essence of a human being, as woman's nature, as a representation of guilt, as an ironic interpretation of the I-narrative technique in Japanese literature. Studying how the author depicts truth from all these perspectives allows us to see better how he finally denies its representability.

Origins of the Plot and Compositional Structure of Akutagawa's "In a Grove"

Compositionally, the story resembles dramatic poem *The Ring and the Book* (1868-1869) by Robert Browning, which gives three versions of the same events, but, unlike Akutagawa's work, it is known who committed the crime. A similar collision/conflict between spouses was described in Japanese family saga of the thirteenth century *Rise and Fall of Genji and Heike* (*Genpei Seisui Monogatari*) that allows us to speak about imitation of the ancient Japanese plots in which the writer often drew inspiration. This assumption can also be confirmed by the use of the name of Tajomaru, a mythical robber, famous in the past. This "gentleman of the road" becomes the hero of many medieval stories, and many of these narratives were altered into dramatic works and performed on the scene. Critics also consider that the plot of the story was adapted by the author from the Japanese collection of over a thousand *Tales of Times Now Past* (*Konjaku-Monogatari*) written during the late Heian period (794-1185). In this book, one can find a small story which has a name that can be translated as "How a Man Who Was Accompanying His Wife to Tanba Province Got Trussed Up at Oeyama" (*Tales of Times Now Past*, 1993, pp. 184–185). It is an example of a traditional narrative prose. Its title almost totally

reveals the plot, except that the woman was raped and abandoned along with her husband. The plot of Akutagawa's story almost coincides with the story from *Tales of Times Now Past (Konjaku-Monogatari)*. Akutagawa does not introduce any change in its developments, except that in the story from *Konjaku-Monogatari* there is no plotline pertaining to murder.

According to the classification given in Veller's theoretical work *Technology of the Short Story*, Akutagawa's work has a composition determined as "a turret" or "revolver" (Veller, 1989). In the stories with this kind of plot, events are given from different perspectives through the eyes of several characters. This allows considering dialectically what is going on and showing the characters from both outside and inside perspectives. Veller identifies the following types of "revolver" stories: each of the characters repeats its own version of the same events; or, narrators are replaced as the events keep on developing (Veller, 1989). As one can see, Akutagawa builds his story by the former principle, so that from the confessions of the characters, like from a mosaic, it seems to be possible to reproduce the whole picture. However, in fact, it is not so. The genius of the writer is manifested in the fact that after reading the story there is no coherent picture of the said events. The story remains illogical and incomprehensible till the very end.

The plot of Akutagawa's story presents the murder and the rape that took place in a bamboo forest near Kyoto, and the story is based on setting the events in motion by questioning witnesses and participants and presenting their testimonies and confessions. The story consists of seven parts; the first four are testimonies of four witnesses: the woodcutter who found the body, the priest who saw the deceased and his wife on their way, the mother of a young woman and the guard who caught the robber Tajomaru. At this point, the plot develops quite traditionally and consistently according to the expectations of the reader: though the testimonies contradict each other, they do it not in an obvious way. In the last three parts of the story, the word is given to direct participants of the events, and Akutagawa presents: questioning of Tajomaru and his confession in the court; confession of the raped widow in the temple Kiyomidzu; and the story of the murdered samurai himself, whose spirit was called upon by a medium.

Thus, Akutagawa builds the plot in such a way that the answer to the question "Who is the killer?" is deliberately not given and the problem of whose account of events is the true one remains purposefully unsolved. By applying the principle of variability, the author addresses the problem of irrepresentability of truth. Koblenkova comments on this as follows: "As a result, the idea of the unknowability of man and the world, which has become one of the conceptual ideas in modernism, turns out to be enclosed, in essence, in a postmodern construction, since the text creates several realities independent of each other" (Koblenkova, 2003, p. 64).⁷ Everything which is considered as a reality or truth, becomes in Akutagawa's story nothing but a representation of it and depends on perspective which changes and shifts throughout the story.

⁷ Translation is mine. The original text is as follows: "В результате идея о непознаваемости человека и мира, ставшая в модернизме одной из концептуальных идей, оказывается заключённой, по существу, в постмодернистскую конструкцию, так как текст творит несколько реальностей, независимых друг от друга..." (Koblenkova 2003, p. 64).

To make it even more ambiguous, the author uses fantastic elements in his story, which I am going to address below.

Fantastic Elements of Akutagawa's "In a Grove"

Based on folktales of the past, "In a Grove" appears to contain a certain number of fantastic features. Presentation of the "content" already indicates its potential unreliability – judicial officials have interest only in the testimonies performed directly in the court. However, the writer is clearly interested in the concept of "truth" which he tries to reinvent and in the end of the story (as I will prove later) he shows the impossibility of such reinvention. Each participant of the unfortunate events making their respective confessions claims to be telling the truth. The robber appears in court and nobly confesses claiming he is the one to blame. The woman confesses in a temple (it seems to be unreasonable to tell lies in a holy place while talking only to a deity and herself with no witnesses around).

Confession of a samurai's ghost deserves a separate specification. In this regard the role of the fantastic elements of the story should be noted. According to the tradition of the stories of the miraculous and unbelievable, known in Japanese literary tradition as genre *kaidan*,⁸ the words of the spirit represent truth, by definition. Spirits in Japanese folklore (and other genres influenced by it) often serve to solve complex issues and find the final truth of what really happened.⁹ It is the ghost of the story according to all genre rules one would expect to be a bringer of a "traditional" truth and solve the puzzle. However, Akutagawa challenges this tradition providing a playful reinterpretation of it. Thus, the appearance of the spirit is presented as a fact in the title of the last part of the story and is only a means of conveying the story, which belongs to the deceased samurai. Thus, if in the traditional *kaidan* stories the appearance of the representative of another world usually puts everything in its place, because its version of events is treated as a kind of "ultimate truth", the testimony of the given spirit is even more confusing, because it is not less controversial or subjective than the confessions of a robber or a woman. In other words, the use of fantastic elements as writing technique only emphasizes the attitude of uncertainty in the unknowable world, so modernist in its essence.

Speaking of modernist understanding of truth, Karl Benesch, the researcher of Heidegger, a prominent modernist philosopher, summarizes Heidegger's views on the problem as follows: "to speak the truth can manifest itself in two, fundamentally opposite ways: for one, it can be an uncovering or dis-covering (ent-decken) and, for another, a covering-up, a "zu-decken" and "ver-decken" of Being" (Benesch, 2020, p. 4), and it seems, in Akutagawa's story, the difference between covering-up and discovering the truth is indistinct. None of the direct

⁸ *Kaidan* (怪談) literary means, if we take a look at the Chinese characters of the word, "the talk or narrative about mysterious, strange, or bewitching ghosts or apparitions", which is often referred to ghost stories or horror stories. Noriko T. Reider, who studies the genre, explains that the term is used in connection to Japanese literary and oral tradition specifically of Edo period (1600-1867) (266), and it has been already established that Akutagawa had no problem borrowing plots, characters, devices and atmosphere from the stories of the past.

⁹ For more information about the peculiarity of *kaidan* ghost stories of Edo period see Reider's works "The Appeal of 'Kaidan, Tales of the Strange'" and "The Emergence of 'Kaidan-Shū' the Collection of Tales of the Strange and Mysterious in the Edo Period" as well as *World within Walls: Japanese Literature of the Pre-Modern Era, 1600–1867* by Donald Keene (1999).

participants have any serious reasons to tell lies and invent things and yet everyone narrates his own version of “reality”. All of them talk with passion so it may seem they really believe in their own words. As Morrison outlines, “the reader wants to piece together the puzzle, but the pieces don’t fit. Without any omniscient narrator to tell us what actually happened, the story ends with the truth lost somewhere in the *yabu no naka*” (Morrison, 2012, par. 4). By doing so, Akutagawa denies the very possibility of the truth – in modern world there are as many “truths”, as there are perspectives and participants of a certain event, so there is no point figuring out whose story is the true one. Below, I look closely into each and every truth presented by the participants of the event.

The Plot: Common Facts and Differences in the Versions of What Happened

The plot of “In a Grove” revolves around a murder that takes place in a bamboo grove. The story is presented as a series of testimonies from various characters involved in or connected to the crime. Each character provides their perspective on the events transpired in the grove. In this section, I would like to look closely into the differences among the accounts of the events that happened in a grove. My goal here is by no means to reconstruct the plot but to show how Akutagawa addresses the idea of truth and its irrepresentability by offering multiple perspectives on the same events showing that truth stays beyond any representation.

There are a few facts that remain the same in each narrative: Tajomaru leads the spouse to the forest; Kanazawa no Takehiko (samurai) is dead; Tajomaru raped Masago (wife of the samurai); Tajomaru steals Takehiko’s bow, quiver and horse. In each of the testimonies, Masago wants Takehiko to be killed. Masago and Tajomaru do not end up together.

Differences between the stories of the characters vary from trivial to fundamental. Thus, the comb described by the woodcutter, is not brought up by any of the other characters. “Fierce fighting”, which results in the pile of trampled leaves which the woodcutter describes, is present only in version of Tajomaru. The woodman also argues that the samurai was killed with a sword but from the first attempt. According to versions of Masago and Takehiko, he was killed with a dagger not a sword. The woodman argues that Takehiko’s hat was a Kyoto-style *sabi-eboshi* however the woman’s mother insists that Takehiko has never been to Kyoto. Here the author obviously wants to draw attention to this point, and the investigator deliberately asks whether Takehiko is from Kyoto. Wandering priest says: “Well, the man was armed with a sword as well as a bow and arrows. And I remember that he carried some twenty odd arrows in his quiver” (Akutagawa, 1952, p. 19). The guard, who caught Tajomaru, argues that there were only seventeen arrows. The woodman says Takehiko was dressed in a blue kimono. Buddhist priest says Masago was wearing a purple kimono. But Masago herself says that it was her husband who was wearing purple kimono and Tajomaru was in a blue one. Tajomaru does not say anything about how the woman’s dagger disappears. In versions of Takehiko and Tajomaru, there is a description of a long conversation between a woman and a robber after the rape, during which she asks Tajomaru to take her with him. Masago in her confession chooses to miss the point completely. Additionally, Masago does not say how Takehiko’s sword disappears from the scene. It also seems unlikely that Masago fails to commit suicide so

many times in a row, especially considering the first attempt, when she cannot stick the dagger in her throat. Masago says that it was her who actually killed Takehiko after being raped. However, Takehiko says that he was not killed by her. On the contrary, she demanded that the robber kill him. According to the robber, samurai still loved his wife and was willing to fight for her. Samurai proves it when he says that his wife was never so beautiful as in the moment after the rape. Then Takehiko introduces a new character who never appears on a stage: this character takes the dagger from Takehiko's chest just a few seconds before his death. But woodcutter points out that all the blood had been dried up, when he came, while Takehiko says that when someone pulled out his dagger, blood was gushing to his mouth. Masago and Takehiko claim that he robber badly hit her after the rape, but the robber did not mention this.

To summarize, every testimony contains at least one thing that contradicts the statements of the others which underlines the impossibility to find universal truth. The author does not make any comments upon characters' narrations and versions of the mentioned events, he takes the neutral position, leaving it to the reader to recognize the futility of the quest for truth. The striking feature of Akutagawa's work is the shifting nature of subjectivity: situational and psychological roles constantly change in the story. One can say that Akutagawa reveals to the reader the secret corners of the inner world of a human being, and in this the purpose of the writer is also fulfilled. Akutagawa uses the story from *Tales of Times Now Past (Konjaku Monogatari)* only as a basis to show the inner life of each of the characters, exposing their substance that motivated their actions. Akutagawa developed three versions of the description of events in order to present psychological background of characters' actions, creating three-dimensional picture of the characters and their social relations. In all three cases, the woman, one way or another, was ready to abandon her husband but she never abandons demonic Tajomaru, showing thereby the downside of obedience and chastity of Japanese samurai's wife. Takehiko (samurai) and Tajomaru (the robber) also behave differently than one would assume according to their assigned traditional models of behaviour: the first one who is supposed to be the sample of valour and honour, is greedy and weak in battle, another one, the carrier of immoral qualities, however, shows nobleness: he is not willing to kill Takehiko (according not only to his own words but to Takehiko's testimony as well) and is forced to fight with him, and in the version where he kills him (his own version) he kills him in a fair fight. In general, it seems that an external appearance of the characters is completely opposite to their essence.

As my purpose here is not to reconstruct what actually transpired in Akutagawa's story, I would like to underline once again the importance of how each narrative varies from one another. It is clear that by introducing small and much bigger differences in every conflicting testimony, Akutagawa reflects on human subjectivity and questions the possibility of existence of one objective truth, leaving, instead, more room for the ambiguity of any human experience. Not only does the author demonstrate the problematic nature of truth but shows in a creative and culturally specific manner the unknowability of human nature.

The Shifting Role of a Woman

Another aspect of the story has been pointed out by researchers: the change of situational and psychological roles of the protagonists (Koblenkova, 2003, pp. 62–67), and perhaps the most striking shift happens to the female character. Thus, the woman first appears as a victim, but in the course of the situation she turns into opposite – the one who wants the samurai dead. Morrison focuses his only on the woman’s role and considers the story “a meditation on the question: what is woman?” The researcher points out that “in each of the seven testimonies Masago embodies a different aspect or archetype of woman” (Morrison, 2012, par. 7). Following his analysis of the changes in woman’s role, we can see yet again the relativity of truth.

In the woodcutter’s testimony there is no mention of the woman and it presents Masago as absence. The testimony given by the wandering priest presents her as enigma. The priest narrates “catching a glimpse of Masago, whose face is veiled in a dark red and blue cloth” (Morrison, 2012, par. 11) – an image, as Morrison claims, evoking a mood of mystery and exoticism. Morrison underlines that in priest’s narrative “she is the enigmatic noblewoman behind the screen, much like that female archetype that appears in so many of Tanizaki’s works. The fact that he is a Buddhist priest may also explain why he refers to her only indirectly, as women are generally regarded as impure in Buddhist teachings. A woman as a nameless object of male desire appears in the fourth testimony of the magistrate who describes Tajomaru as a “lustful *onnazuki* (fancier of women)” (Morrison, 2012, par. 13), alluding that Masago was his target. The next statement given by the woman’s mother presents her as the obedient daughter and faithful wife. Tajomaru’s confession shows Masago as a “modern woman” (*kindai jousei*). Masago’s testimony presents herself as *yamato nadeshiko*, the traditional ideal in Japan.¹⁰ Thus, as Morrison underlines, “Masago has tried to present herself as a devout, principled (as defined by the male-dominated order), self-sacrificing, but ultimately weak woman” (Morrison, 2012, par. 23).

The last narration given by the spirit of the dead samurai presents Masago as “pure, unbridled feminine desire or will” (Morrison, 2012, par. 7). Interestingly, Takehiko’s ghost notices that it is precisely at the moment of being with another man she looks to her husband more perfect than ever before: “While the criminal talked, my wife raised her face as if in a trance. She had never looked so beautiful as at that moment” (Akutagawa, 1952, p. 27). But when he realizes

¹⁰ *Yamato nadeshiko* (大和撫子), as it is stated in *Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* 5th edition, is “personification of an idealized Japanese woman”. Tamura in her book *Michi's Memories. The Story of a Japanese War Bride*, analyzes the meaning of the term and the concept as follows:

“Yamato means ‘pure Japanese’” without any foreign influence. *Nadeshiko* is a type of plant which belongs to the *dianthus* genus and has pink flowers in early autumn. Although this term was traditionally used to describe the delicate beauty of Japanese women, in contemporary Japan, “Yamato nadeshiko” is generally regarded as old-fashioned and rarely used to praise the virtues of Japanese women” (Tamura, 2001, pp. 93-94).

Tamura also claims that the term does not only describe the physical ideal, and may refer to Japanese women being “flexible but resilient in change, just as the flower might sway in a strong wind but never break” (Tamura, 2001, p. 94).

her truly self, “he is so horrified by her that he plunges the dagger into his breast and kills himself” (Morrison, 2012, par. 25).

Such interpretation leaves other characters beyond the critic’s attention which makes the study incomplete. Besides, Morrison claims that the most trustful testimony is the one by Takehiko but it is more likely that the whole traditional concept of wise spirit revealing all the truth is reconsidered in Akutagawa’s masterpiece. My argument here is that trying to prove the impossibility of any truth, Akutagawa offers the figure of the spirit in an ironic way representing unreliability of all subjective narratives. In the next section, I attempt to show how the spirit’s testimony, while being the key here, is not the key to understanding the truth, but that truth is no longer possible in this ever so changing and complex world of constantly conflicting subjectivities.

Narrating Guilt, I-Novel Critique and Zen Motifs

As mentioned above, while Morrison states that the whole concept of truth in the story is concealed in the woman’s role: “she is a beautiful, wilful, vain, and ruthless femme fatale capable of anything, even matricide” (Morrison, 2012, par. 26), the supporters of traditional *kaidan* genre (see section 2) would expect the spirit of the dead to deliver the ultimate truth from behind the grave. However, I am going to risk arguing against such interpretation because of the permutations in the versions of what happened that do not necessarily have anything to do either with the woman or with the spirit. For instance, the role of the robber also changes: being the culprit and the master of the situation eventually he becomes a murder weapon; moreover, he refuses to kill as well as participate in further events at all. However, it might be easy to fall under the impression that the key role is associated with the samurai himself. He is not directly involved in the confrontation and coming together of his wife and Tajomaru. He stands apart from the initial conflict but he is the one to be killed, while a woman and a robber are still alive. The only “key” he may present here, though, is to understanding of Akutagawa’s “new concept of truth” – there is no such thing, shows the writer in this story. However, apart from truth, though closely connected to it, there is another issue that needs addressing here, which is the concept of guilt, also widespread in modernist writing.

Akutagawa chooses the crime to be the story’s central event and it is represented in every narrative of the three characters. Moreover, all of them plead guilty. And in such a way author raises the philosophical problem of the story. Obviously, it is impossible to determine who is a real “criminal” here and which version of the events is truthful, if any. However, the fact that all of them confessed of a murder, indicates a shaped concept of a guilt / sin rooted in their confessions.

As Napier points out, “modern psychology with its new awareness of the self obviously stimulated a consciousness of the psyche’s complexities” (Napier, 1996, p. 112). Such modernistic tendency with its awareness of one’s guilt, representations of identity crisis and the complicated state of human’s mind can also be found in Akutagawa’s story. Motives of guilt create the concept of the crisis of faith and hint at the unknowability of ultimate truth.

It is also possible to regard Akutagawa's story as the representation of the critique of the naturalistic techniques which flourished in Japanese literature in the beginning of the twentieth century (e.g. Shiga Naoya, Tayama Katai, Kunikida Doppo, and so on). Not only does the short story question the essence of literary realism but also shows skepticism toward narrative strategies of naturalistic I-novels based on confessions and testimonies that constitute the long-lasting tradition of Japanese literature. Thus, the story is also an ironical interpretation of a Japanese I-novel technique.

Besides, the influence of Zen philosophy should not be unobserved, with its emphasis on the relativity of any truth. As Napier boldly (and justly) stated, "final truth is never discovered". She argues that it is "the unknowability of the truth" that is discovered by the author rather than "the end of all truth" (Napier, 1996, p. 112). However, there is another specificity of Akutagawa's short story that should be underlined. Rudnev claims that "In a Grove" represents the idea of the playful attitude of the author to its work that can be analysed in the framework of the philosophy of the event which is characteristic of the twentieth century art and literature (Rudnev). Thus, the short story can be considered in the following way: events represented in the story are not contradictory. All versions can be true, but the story cannot be reduced to a simple chronological sequence. The art of the twentieth century problematizes the idea of logocentrism, and Akutagawa turns his story into a kind of Dzen *koan* where all versions have equal standing and can be true and all the contradictions are not contradictory at all, and the search for truth itself is considered an illusion.

Koblenkova seems to have reached the similar opinion: "Akutagawa obviously admitted that the world is the coexistence of many subjective realities and that ultimate truth (...) is either unknowable or does not exist at all" (Koblenkova, 2003, p. 63).¹¹ It is worth mentioning that Akutagawa forestalls such views on truth and reality, since in modernist literature there will be later others examples of this idea of "parallel truths", the most vivid of which can be found in William Faulkner's works such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930). This puts Akutagawa's search for truth in a broader literary context.

Conclusion

The question of truth and its representability was at the core of modernist literary tradition, and Japanese literature of the time with its search for new modes of expression was not left behind. Akutagawa is now known for his nuanced and innovative short stories, which often draw upon traditional Japanese tales and legends but are written in a modern style that reflects the author's interest in Western literature and psychology. In the best tradition of western modernism (and often ahead of it), Akutagawa's stories are characterized by their psychological depth and complexity of characters. The writer often explores themes such as the nature of identity, the meaning of existence, and the conflict between traditional Japanese values and the influence of

¹¹ Translation of the author. The original text is as follows: "Акутагава, очевидно, допускал, что мир — это сосуществование множества субъективных реальностей и та конечная истина, которой одной ведомо, как сводятся в вечности концы с концами, или непознаваема, или не существует вовсе" (Koblenkova 2003, p. 63).

the West, and the problem of personal and objective truth is among them. Not only did Akutagawa inherit traditional traits of Japanese literature but also put them provocatively on display thus accentuating his new ideas about multivalence of artistic effects in approaching ultimate truth.

In this paper I attempted to analyze Akutagawa's "In a Grove" from the thematic point of view showing the motif of searching and ultimately not finding the final truth – the task that the author completed by using a "revolver" compositional structure (by the definition of Veller, 1989) and a number of unreliable narrators, neither of whom seems to have had the reason to lie and yet all the accounts ended up different. The paper offered a brief list literary pieces of the past that may have served as the basis of the story. Furthermore, the article addresses Morrison's model of shifting roles of a woman (Morrison, 2012) in the story and argues that though she is certainly one of the central characters, she is not the main one, for, since the truth has never been discovered, there cannot be any main characters (nor their confessions) at all. The testimonies of every narrator here are equally contradicting and ambiguous. In this way, Akutagawa creates a peculiar narrative which demonstrates that the real account of events may never have existed and it is simply impossible to ever learn the "truth".

The idea of the unknowability of the world and a man in it has become one of the leading concepts in modernism. Akutagawa's "In a Grove" incorporates the modernist search for truth and intrinsic to it a multi-layered and often conflicting vision of events. The story questions the very ability to produce and accept the objective truth. However, Akutagawa's short story creates new realities, independent of each other. This strategy of narration is not limited to Akutagawa and Japanese literature but is explored more (though later) in the texts of western modernists, William Faulkner being the greatest example. Thus, Akutagawa's work can be placed into the worldwide modernist tradition since Akutagawa's stories often feature fragmented narratives and multiple perspectives, which reflect the modernist interest in subjectivity, complexity of human experience and unreliability of any ultimate truth.

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