

The Subversive Power of Aesthetics in Izumi Kyōka's "Yōken Kibun"

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Abstract: Izumi Kyōka (1873 - 1939) is widely regarded for the highly aestheticized world of his stories. While he frequently sided with the underclass and outcasts, his writing has been disregarded as social critique by most scholars. However, this paper argues that Izumi Kyōka's aesthetics in "Yōken Kibun" are a critique of discrimination against the *burakumin*. A summary of the plot is included along with a translation of key passages necessary for analysis, as the story has not yet been translated in full. It establishes a theoretical background drawing from Kyōka's own essay "Tasogare no Aji" and Jean François Lyotard's theories on the figural qualities of language as the origin of subversion in literature. The first part of the paper provides a vision of the author's aesthetics as a critical tool. The second section of the paper analyses the images used to describe the female outcast character Omachi and how these images connect with Kyōka's aesthetic concept of "twilight" aesthetics—a concept that diffuses concrete knowledge about the object and therefore renders an essentialist image of the *burakumin* people impossible. Furthermore, the third section of this paper analyses Kyōka's symbolic use of blood in the text. Making use of Susan Babcock's theories of symbolic inversion, this paper will demonstrate how Kyōka, through his use of aesthetics, subverts the image of polluted blood, which is so often a symbol of discrimination. By subverting the symbol, the author lays bare the discriminatory system against the *burakumin*. As a result, this paper opens up new possibilities for the study of Kyōka's *burakumin*-related stories in the same light, and proposes that Kyōka and his "twilight" world vision offer a way of subverting discrimination through aesthetic inversion of the symbolic.

Keywords: Izumi Kyōka, aesthetics, twilight, Lyotard, Symbolic inversion, *burakumin*

Introduction

There has been an ongoing debate concerning the issue of discrimination against the *burakumin* outcasts in the research on Izumi Kyōka's work and, by extension, the issue of whether there is any critical will behind his writing. It seems that there has been a certain consensus in claiming that the inclusion of these outcasts is merely a plot device in Kyōka¹'s personal writing. Such is the opinion of critics writing in English, and at least, an opinion that is shared by Japanese researchers like such as Gamo Kin'ichirō who postulates what he considers to be a feeling of resistance against the samurai class in Kyōka's writing that takes many forms, including the theme of *burakumin* people. Recently, scholars such as Taneda Wakako and Kobayashi Teruya have revived the debate on this issue, and their work claims a deeper consideration of the critical possibilities in Kyōka's oeuvre. This is also the case even in authors outside the field of literary criticism who have looked at Kyōka's work. Mitani Hiroshi, for example, looks into children's tales in his book on the birth of Japanese nationalism; his analysis of *Kaisen no yoha* (*Ripples of the Sea Battle*) coincides somewhat with the purpose of this paper. In his analysis of a work that, in appearance, supports the war efforts against China (derogatory and scornful terms against the Chinese appear in this work), Mitani identifies a feeling of resistance against compliance with the government in the way Kyōka chooses to emphasize the loss of the "Dragon King's palace", the place that stands for imagination and beauty as well as the tragic loss of many lives (Mitani 2011, 127-28).

This paper focuses specifically on Izumi Kyōka's "Yōken Kibun" (1920), translated by Charles Inouye as "The Blood-Tempered Sword" in his critical biography of the author. It was first published under the name "Edomiyage" (An Account of Edo) and "Shin-Edomiyage" (A New Account of Edo) in the Magazine "Shin-shōsetsu" in 1920. It was later included in a compilation called *Kagerōshū* (*The Dragonfly Collection*) in 1921. Since then "Yōken Kibun" has been gradually relegated to a secondary position among Kyōka's oeuvre. The title was later changed to "Yōken Kibun" in 1926 when it was included in volume 11 of his complete works published by Shun'yōdō. However, from the first publication of Kyōka's complete works by Iwanami in 1940 until today's edition, this story has been relegated to the supplementary volume

¹ Following the Japanese convention, in this paper I refer to Izumi Kyōka by his pen name, Kyōka.

(*bekkan*) alongside essays and other ‘minor’ stories. Whereas scholarship on this story is scarce in Japanese, the three major books on Kyōka written in English mention it to a certain extent. I consider that the powerful imagery developed by Kyōka, especially one that is related to blood, deserves a closer look in relation to the problem of discrimination. In order to do so, this paper will address the question of whether or not aesthetics can be used as a critical tool towards society and knowledge. Aesthetics in this paper refers to both the way an author chooses to represent characters according to a set of rules based on his/her taste as well as to the textual form it takes, namely metaphors and metonymy that conform to Kyōka’s figurative force. This paper contends that Izumi Kyōka’s aesthetics and figurative force are rooted, on the one hand, in his essay “Tasogare no Aji” (“The Taste of Twilight”), and on the other hand, in a deep preoccupation with the concept of pollution. The latter seeks to diffuse then subvert stereotypical images while the former is a fundamental criterion for Kyōka in his creation of female characters for his stories. Taking Mitani and Gamo’s shared perception of Kyōka’s feeling of resistance, it will seek to extend the research on Kyōka’s social critique, his use of overtly aestheticized literature as a critical tool against discrimination (the *burakumin* being one prominent aspect), and his offering of alternative realities based on beauty, art and feelings.

Plot Summary

As the story has not yet been fully translated, I will provide a summary of the plot in order to make the later analysis clearer to readers.

“Yōken Kibun”, like many of Kyōka’s stories, contains two different minor plots that finally merge into a more or less cohesive narrative. In this case, the narrator follows Takamatsu Seizaburō, a young and handsome page who works for the samurai Ōtsuka Gen’noshin as they travel together with the guiding monk Issen. The three of them are travelling to meet Sakuden, a mountain priest and head of the “Waterfall Temple”, where the priest will face the magical and evil forces that are said to be the cause of many deaths by drowning in the lake near the waterfall. As the travellers try to cross the river, they meet Omachi, a young and beautiful *torioi* (a street musician), with whom Seizaburō instantly falls in love. However, her origins as a *hinin* (non-human outcast) cut short their courting, and Seizaburō and the rest leave to meet Sakuden. Once they meet him they discuss their plans to dive into the

waterfall lake near the temple. After a ritual, Sakuden dives and enters a magical cave through one of the two holes in the bottom of the lake, leading him to a place that appears to be a paradise on earth. There, he finds a sword that he believes is the source of the evil killing so many people in the area. He takes it and locks it in the Fudō-do Hall of the Waterfall Temple. However, the sword disappears at night only to be found in the cave again the next morning, a cycle that is repeated several times. This supernatural event finally has a natural explanation: Omachi has been stealing the mysterious sword every night to purify her blood by cutting herself. One night she cuts too deep, and it is then that Seizaburō finds her as she lies dying. Seizaburō finally accepts her despite her origins and declares her his wife. As a definitive proof that he is not repulsed by her blood he drinks it as it gushes from her chest. In that precise moment, Seizaburō acquires the knowledge to forge some of the best swords of Japan, fulfilling his lifelong dream and is nominally reborn as Hinin Kiyomitsu. The story ends with an older Kiyomitsu giving away one of his swords while he sees the ghost of Omachi in the distance, smiling at him, as readers are left without an answer regarding the curse or the underwater paradise.

Aesthetics as criticism

In order to lay down the theoretical background with which the story will be analysed, I begin by presenting Izumi Kyōka's aesthetics as defined by Kyōka himself, and then introduce Jean François Lyotard's theories on aesthetics, focusing on their function as a tool for critical knowledge and politics. Finally, I bring forward the concept of symbolic inversion, as it was introduced in Susan Babcock's *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society*, and explore its significance to the final scene of this story.

Izumi Kyōka created a unique sense of liminal aesthetics in his essay "Tasogare no Aji" ("The Taste of Twilight"). In this essay he attempts to separate the concept of "dusk" (*yūgure*) and "twilight" (*tasogare*), normally conflated, by defining twilight thus:

About dusk, we can say that the main feeling is that of the colour of darkness and night. However, twilight is not merely the colour of darkness nor the colour night. That said it is not only the colour of day, nor the colour of light...The world that exists in the instant where it turns from day into night, the boundary of the instant where it enters darkness from light, isn't

there that the twilight world is? ...Entering darkness from light, night from day, during that instant there is a world with a peculiar essence and subtle colors, which is what I think is the twilight world (Kyōka 1996b, 243-44).

His ideal world and aesthetics emphasize the “space in-between”, the moment of transformation. In the essay he mentions how, in terms of the human condition, he favours that moment in which a person goes from good to evil and vice versa. This is visible mostly in the male characters of his work, when they face moral choices that inevitably shape their fates. When we think about twilight also in terms of temporal reality it is a moment where vision is hindered, at times literally in Kyōka’s stories we encounter the main characters being unable to clearly *see* what is going on. Rosemary Jackson indicated how Fantastic literature always problematizes vision, the sense that is given privilege in relation with the possibility of knowing. Thus, twilight is that moment where all things are possible and concrete scientific knowledge impossible. Gerald Figal comments on this particular aspect of Kyōka’s aesthetic approach as a critical one, for the indeterminacy of twilight “defer(s) if not deconstruct(s) the night-and-day logic grounding the bureaucratic reason that seemingly conducted modern civilization and enlightenment in Meiji Japan” (Figal 1999, 6). Later in the same paragraph he points out that Kyōka wanted to implicitly experiment with alternative ways of being and knowing, distinct from those of the mainstream. Kamei Hideo also indicated that Kyōka’s intent was to “tear down the logical distinctions between one thing and another (as well as the class discriminations between people)” (Poulton 1995, 76-77).

This night-and-day logic is related to the structuralist Saussure and his theory of the binary opposition by which language units acquire meaning. According to Saussure, a word only acquires meaning by being the negation of another word; therefore, everything exists in pairs. The downside of this worldview is that a value would inevitably be attached to a unit of meaning or a concept, creating a system in which a superior concept would be set against an inferior one, thus justifying different forms of discrimination. Kyōka’s ‘twilight’ is very much like Bessière’s concept of fantasy, where fantasy breaks “single, reductive ‘truths.’ The fantastic traces a space within a society’s cognitive frame. It introduces multiple, contradictory ‘truths’: it becomes polysemic” (Jackson 1981, 23). Kyōka offers complete indeterminacy by hindering Seizaburō’s vision (and thus the reader’s as well) and by ending the story without giving a definite explanation about the nature of Omachi or the magic in

the lake. Furthermore, as Charles Inouye and Kawakami Chiyoko have pointed out, the quality of his aesthetics is closely related to the visual image. Kawakami noted that “for Kyōka, the picture is the original source of narrative; the story emerges from the illustrations, not the selfhood of the characters” (Kawakami 1999, 199). Those images Kyōka created are a pictorial alternative to realist conventions, a pictorial tradition that originated in the late Edo *Kusazōshi* literary genre. It is this visual aspect that leads me to approach Kyōka’s writing technique as something closer to painting with words rather than simply writing.

The French philosopher Jean François Lyotard argues in his essay *The Visible and the Invisible* that

‘To paint with words’ is to refuse to respect the intervals determined by the language system that serve as the foundation of meaning. To paint with words is to make metaphor or figure the primary critical characteristic of language. Indirection, ambiguity, suggestiveness, uncertainty are all demanded of critical discourse here, for what matters more than the ‘manifest meaning of each word and of each image’ are the ‘lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers [virements] and their exchanges (Carroll 1987, 33).

His vision is opposed to that of traditional philosophy, where aesthetics are usually relegated to measure questions of taste and are deemed free of critical or political purpose, and where philosophy is the study of knowledge and morality. Thus traditional philosophy creates an opposition between itself and aesthetics. In opposition to this, Lyotard proposes a more comprehensive vision that includes both in an equal relationship. Within that vision, aesthetics are the “fracture” and “vault in which the undersides of this scene could be seen being overturned or reversed, a pathway allowing me to skirt or divert the political scene itself...Hence the equation: aesthetics = the workshop for the forging of the most discriminating critical concepts” (Carroll 1987, 28). Lyotard attributes these qualities generally to the visual arts, and specifically the avant-garde. However, as I previously mentioned, when he looks at discourse, the written text, he does not shun it for being simply inferior to visual art: he grants discourse the possibility of critical force in discourse as well, as he searches for the visual qualities inside words. He claimed that “only from within discourse can one move to and into the figure...one can move into the figure without leaving language because the figure *is lodged* there...the figure is both outside and inside” (Carroll 1987, 31; emphasis mine).

We have now two important concepts to consider. First the concept of art and aesthetics as the place where politics can be overturned, and secondly, the idea of the figural within discourse as the driving force for the critical possibility of language and literature, both of which are set within an aesthetic worldview that looks for alternatives to binary oppositions and discrimination. Kyōka's aestheticism is widely noted and is one of the reasons why his stories remain popular. It is so strong that it led Kawakami Chiyoko to claim that by "ignoring the mainstream obsession with the 'self', Kyōka created protagonists who carried no heavy conceptual baggage: they are stereotyped rather than individuated, sentimental rather than analytic, and aesthetic rather than intellectual" (Kawakami 1999, 196). Thus, characters are landscapes rendered as pure image: devoid of interiority they stand for something else. It is this particular point that makes a clear connection with Lyotard, as his language is anchored in what Lyotard considers its more subversive aspect: the pictorial. For Lyotard there is a difference between seeing and reading, where the first is related to feelings and the latter to intellect. Thus when a work is purely visual it "goes beyond descriptions of it and theories about it" (Crome and Williams 2006, 15) and has a special relation with the senses. Kyōka, much like Lyotard, gives pre-eminence to feelings and the visual as the core for the figurative force in his essay "Bungei wa Kanjō no Sanbutsu Nari" ("Literature is the Product of Feelings"). Moreover, Kyōka's almost religious belief in the power of letters, which he believed to have the actual power to make things real or even bring the dead back to life, affects the way he used language, conceiving words themselves as *bakemono* (Inouye 1996, 33), liminal entities that multiply their meanings and transform into something else through their visual aspect.

These aesthetics are manifest in "Yōken Kibun" as landscape, but most importantly, as the female protagonist of the story, the outcast street musician Omachi. As will be shown later, Omachi's representation defies and diffuses the traditional conception of the *burakumin* through layers of intertextuality and aesthetic symbols. Yet, Kyōka gives another twist to the symbolic world of "Yōken Kibun" by putting into effect a symbolic inversion in Omachi's blood. I use Susan Babcock's term 'symbolic inversion' to explain this phenomenon because, as she herself states in the introduction, referring to negation in this way gives negation the critical and constructive power that it deserves. According to Kenneth Burke, this symbolic inversion is a negation of an "aesthetic negative" (Babcock 1978, 19); in other words, we can refer to symbolic inversion whenever an aspect of society that is considered dangerous or marginal is reversed in a literary

work or ritual festivity. That double negation provides man with an understanding of the system by which society runs, and allows him to know that he is master of that system; at the same time, it also allows society to talk about itself (Babcock 1978, 20). Izumi Kyōka deploys this inversion in order to lay bare the system of discrimination that subjugated (and to a lesser degree continues to subjugate) the *burakumin*.

“Yōken Kibun” as an aestheticized critique

Divine Beauty: Omachi and Kakitsubata

In the story there are three symbols that identify Omachi: the *kakitsubata* flower, the liminal (including the monstrous), and finally, her blood. These symbols determine not only how Omachi is represented—and therefore Kyōka’s intention in using the outcasts in this narrative, but also give cohesion to the work by continuously echoing each other. The echoes build until they create a greater harmony between the two minor plots that make up “Yōken Kibun”. Without them the text would be fragmented and episodic.

As in many of Kyōka’s stories, “Yōken Kibun” is constructed through layers of intertextuality. Taneda Wakako has stated in her analysis of this story that even though the love story between Seizaburō and Omachi is of Kyōka’s original invention, textually speaking the story is not, pointing out different texts from the Edo and Meiji period that inform the story and create the framework of “Yōken Kibun”. Among these intertexts there is one that is of interest for this discussion, as it relates to the female character Omachi and the way in which she is portrayed—the Noh play *Kakitsubata*.

In both *Kakitsubata* and Kyōka’s “Yōken Kibun”, the male character encounters the female character by the river. The play makes the link between flower and woman explicit, and explains that the woman is in fact the spirit of the flower, appearing before the monk in order to edify the Buddhist teaching by which all sentient beings, including flowers, can reach enlightenment. Kyōka, however, takes this straightforward explanation further, linking woman and flower throughout the whole work by both juxtaposing and replacing one for the other in several occasions, for example:

Facing this iris, a young, beautiful and slender *torioi* is standing still. Her figure and the landscape struck my heart deeply. Just by calling it a sweet-

faced flower I do not know if I can describe correctly that karmic color... Well, let our tale begin (Kyōka 1989, 64).

The *torioi* was a female wandering musician peddled her music for money mostly at New Year, but after the formation of the Burakumin rights organization in 1922, *torioi* became a synonym for *hinin* or *eta* as the use of those words began to be severely censored. Kyōka's *torioi* is compared with the flower, and their identities merge due to the pivot word かよほ花 *kayohobana*, meaning both “iris” and “beautiful woman”. It also links the work back to the Noh play, for the *waki* refers to the lilies with the very same name. The narrator starts commenting on the karmic connections evoked by the color of the flower, foreshadowing Seizaburō and Omachi's meeting:

“Yes, I am going,” she said with a youthful voice, keeping to herself any further reply. And although she dropped the samisen's body as if it were a white puppy by the doorframe, with one hand she kept holding absent-mindedly the straw hat she had on. She got out to the edge of the river, moving her slender waist smoothly, the crimson crepe undergarment against her snow-like bare feet. She wore her lustrous hair tied up in the Shimada style, like exuding coquetry in drops. This young *torioi* singer was more splendid and charming than an iris flower (Kyōka 1989, 81).

Omachi is presented as a beautiful woman associated with the white of her skin and the body of her samisen. She is symbolized as pure and innocent, an innocence shown in her self-conscious reluctance to give in to Seizaburō. On the other hand, the scarlet tones of her silk undergarment symbolize a potential sexuality, highlighted through the contrast with her skin. At this point her sexuality is not threatening, for she is associated with the flower, and this starts a series of poetic associations that irremediably sets the tone of Seizaburō and Omachi's relationship. The flower is linked to the play and the play is linked to a poem in the *Ise monogatari* by Ariwara no Narihira. This famous poem whose lines begin with each letter from the word *kakitsubata* was composed to express Narihira's longing for his wife while he was away from her, and he composed it while he was crossing an eight-plank bridge above a marsh of irises. This feeling of longing is sustained in “Yōken Kibun”, and it forces the characters to stay apart until the end, when it will already be too late.

However, at their first meeting, Seizaburō is not yet conscious of her *hinin* origins, and he falls in love with her at first sight. Timidly, he starts

wooing her the moment she guides them across the river to the place where they will encounter the numinous—a term coined by Rudolf Otto to describe that which is “wholly other” and cannot be described nor comprehended by reason. “The numinous is the *mysterium tremendum* (fearful mystery)” (Otto 1928, 31) that is associated to what Otto calls a “daemoniac dread that is shown in the potent attraction again and again exercised by the element of horror and ‘shudder’ in ghost stories [...] the physical reaction this unique ‘dread’ of the uncanny gives rise is also unique, and is not found in the case of any ‘natural’ fear or terror” (Otto 1928, 16). Therefore, what they will meet beyond the river will be a fearful experience with the “daemoniac”. It is important to note the presence again of a small bridge next to the flower. At that moment we see:

“Miss,” said Seizaburō, somehow thinking on going back, of returning directly to the riverbank, lowering his body he folded the skirts of his *hakama*.

“Could you give me that flower?”

Just in the fashion of the Musashino songs, the blossom of a single purple flower was blossoming. Separated from the young torioi by the single narrow plank bridge, the man on the other hand, just like the root pins for Ikebana. Arranged in the water. A couple of flowers.

“Yes, which one...ah...” When her eyelids seemed to be affected by the dazzle that made her look up, the handsome boy wiped a drop of sweat like a jewel off his forehead.

“There is nothing to say, please take it, well even if I say so...that flower blossoming in the water...I am ashamed to give it as if it were something of mine. There, you...” Looking at how the flower fluttered, swinging and bending when he tried to pick it up, she said:

“Don’t take it by the root, sir...No, like that your hand will be blemished. Please wait, I will be right back”

So saying she quickly went in and out with quick short steps she returned quickly before the samisen, bringing back a thinly bladed-kitchen knife.

Her fingertips slightly trembling, also took the flower from where Seizaburō’s hand was placed. While holding it with the other hand, she tried to make at least the stem of the Iris longer with the cutting blade: the kindness of a warm-hearted woman. Suddenly, holding it sideways, like shaving the surface of the water, the blade flashed like the silver backs of young Ayu fishes, while they hooked each other’s fingers like making a pledge to each other. The crimson color that flickered in the

water like a gush of blood was the reflection of her Kimono's cuff
(Kyōka 1989, 82-83).

The romantic exchange is symbolized by the flower, which in turn represents Omachi. Reading the scene along these lines we can see that Omachi is embarrassed to give him the flower at first, but as he is from a higher rank, she gives in, bending like the flower when he tries to pick it up. The language used in this long exchange is a good example of the visual characteristics of Kyōka's style, verbs are elided unless completely necessary, something that cannot be completely rendered into English, and creates the feeling of reading a very visual poem, a style that I consider close to painting with words, which affects all levels of the text: from the structure of the scene, to the sentence and then going into the visual aspect of words.² Visual elements—such as the color white (present in the unusual Chinese characters that Kyōka selects to describe the silver backs of the *ayu* fish 白銀), the crimson color of blood, the blade, the flower and Omachi—foreshadow the last scene where Omachi will be 'cut down'. During the whole exchange she is afraid that he will be polluted by the flower's sap. The symbols and themes of blood and impurity (*kegare*) are thus introduced into the text; they are symbols of great importance in other *burakumin*-centred narratives, since *burakumin* discrimination is often linked to issues of origin and heritage as well as the question of pollution. Considering gender in this story also sheds light on the importance of pollution at the core of Kyōka's aesthetics. Kyōka's memorable characters are always women, and we must not forget that women's menstruation and birth was also a source of deep concern and taboo for both Buddhism and Shintoism in medieval Japan (Marra 1993, 89), which makes Omachi subject to double pollution, and links her with characters such as *Uta Andon's* Omie, a Geisha (another occupation directly linked to pollution that is used repeatedly by Kyōka) born of a blind street musician. Furthermore, this scene also presents us with the clear image of flower as woman and woman as flower that remains with us until the end of the story. And yet, there is another meaning that starts to become apparent when we consider the Noh play and Omachi's profession. Omachi is a street musician who is related to the iris flower. Similarly, in the original play the same flower is associated, if not

² For a deeper discussion on the visual qualities of Kyōka's language read Charles Inouye's *Izumi Kyōka and Language*.

confused with the very same Ariwara no Narihira through the wearing of robes. Narihira is at the same time considered the personification of the Bodhisattva of Music and the god of conjugal love within the play (Shimazaki 1976-1981, 75). Kyōka starts here the conflation of different characters with Omachi based on resonance of three qualities: music, iris and water. Omachi resonates with the flower, and the flower in the Noh play resonates with Ariwara no Narihira through music. As I will show later this is further developed with the inclusion of the Goddess Benzaiten. Thus, Kyōka imbues Omachi with quasi-divine dimensions.

Liminal entities: Bridges, monsters and burakumin

By this point in the story we know that there might be something uncanny about Omachi, as the place where she is living is described as a complex of three or four houses amongst overgrown grass near a small gutter-like stream. Curiously, the people living in the area have constructed a small windmill that imitates a real windmill belonging to the Shogun. Seeing this, the monk accompanying Seizaburō and his master is prompted to describe these people as:

They set up a watermill of about one armful of width and decorated with a banner for the boy's festival. Why did they imitate the aspect of the other watermill in the neighborhood, the one that even the Shogun would go to see? Was it for fun to show to the kids? Or just the adults amusing themselves? In whatever case, in the sympathetic nature of that period, just like the *foxes (kitsune)* and *badges (tanuki)* thoughtlessly imitate humans, with what appears to be the sad pathos of *mononoaware*, the watermill was spinning lonesomely with a grating sound, 'gishiri gishiri' (Kyōka, 1989, 80; emphasis mine).

As such, Omachi belongs to the race of *tanuki* or *kitsune*, traditional monsters in Japanese lore that can transform into people. The implication here is that although they may look human, they are in fact monsters. Kobayashi Teruya, in his study of the problem of the untouchable communities in Kyōka's works has identified several of the discriminatory words used against the *hinin* or *eta* in the Kanazawa area. Among these expressions we can find the following example that, similarly to the description in Kyōka's work, makes reference to a bridge and monsters: "ano hashi watattara obake ni augayazo" (Kobayashi 1997, 2) meaning that "if you cross that bridge you will meet the monsters". Since his early childhood Kyōka came to associate the *bakemono* with the

burakumin. This might have affected his feelings towards both, and explains why on several occasions the outcast has been shown to belong to the same category, often appearing alongside mountain witches and itinerant monks. That is the case in “Yōken Kibun”, the simple association of both *hinin* and *bakemono* within the text projects the historical and socially-charged qualities of one onto the other. Mountains and bodies of water (such as rivers or lakes) are considered liminal spaces, thresholds to other worlds, or as Michelle Marra explains “the bridge is a potent carrier of symbolism in its functional purpose of letting someone pass from one space to another by an act of crossing over a third, less defined, and more fluid zone” (Marra 1993, 65) where the numinous resides. The presentation of Omachi as the guide over a bridge to encounter the supernatural only confirms her liminal nature, a trait further illustrated by also her ability to dive into the mysterious cave (another liminal space) at will. Her connection with the bridge makes her a representation of the ambiguity of symbols and meanings, hindering our capacity to grasp her ‘definite’ meaning. Thus Kyōka introduces the theme of discrimination against these people while going on to create a character that can be seen as attractive and repulsive, pure and impure.

As Seizaburō safely crosses the small bridge and meets his companions, who inform him of Omachi’s origins. Issen points out that she is from the untouchables and that, therefore, his body will be polluted. Then his master says:

“Urgh, so dirty, unholy!” Seizaburō’s hand instinctively let go and threw the flower in the water as a response to Gen’noshin’s declamation, as if obeying those words. The Iris spun repeatedly in the waterwheel, and kept spinning, scattering in drops like jewels. Meanwhile, Omachi had been gazing at this scene intently (Kyōka 1989, 85).

It is this moment of repulsion and rejection that seals Omachi’s fate. She is devastated because the flower (herself) has been cast away and she seeks a way to cleanse and purify her blood. Kyōka continues to touch upon the traditional views of the *burakumin* in order to create the negative image of the beautiful flower throughout the story. The scene with the flower in the beginning, where Omachi did not want Seizaburō to touch it is repeated again but with her blood, and she refuses to be touched at the end of the story, even if she is mortally wounded:

“You are about to touch my body, please don’t! [...] Sir, you probably know it, don’t you? I am the impure³ woman of this neighbourhood. The people of this realm say that if we get close, the water turns into mud and the lantern’s colour darkens” (Kyōka 1989, 122-23).

Kyōka refuses to give us a clear-cut explanation about Omachi and we are left without a final answer about how to interpret her body: she has been ‘twilighted’. By this I refer to the process by which Kyōka creates his characters, especially the female ones, by showing contradictory layers of the same character one after the other. He does not mix purity and impurity into a third entity, a sort of grey, but offers different possibilities of understanding the same character at the same time, without validating one as true and the other false. Thus, she starts to contain all possibilities within herself. As such, I consider Omachi the embodiment of the previously discussed twilight aesthetic.

This process crystallizes more clearly in the scene where, once the sword has been retrieved from the magic cave in the river, we get a glimpse of Seizaburō looking forlorn and wandering aimlessly. When the moment of *tasogare* or twilight is approaching he sees the figure of Omachi through a small opening in the Fudō-do Hall. As this passage summarises appropriately all the ideas I introduced so far I decided to translate and quote in full detail:

Quietly, he entered the temple grounds.

Near the washbasin, there seemed to be growing red peppers rather than poppies, and although there was a little garden surrounded by tiles, there were no flowers blooming anywhere. Seeing that there was not even the shadow of an iris in the water of the washbasin, he looked as if he had lost his original intention. With a vacant face, he stopped facing the frame of the door. Nonetheless he carried on aimlessly, and, as he leaned with one knee on the platform, he straightened the sword’s scabbard suddenly and elegantly tied the part of the sleeve with the family crest. Then he pushed the lattice door with one fair hand but, being bolted from the inside, the joint only loosened and opened about nine centimeters.

³ The word ‘impure’ in this sentence is referred to as *kegareta* in the original Japanese, implying a sense of impurity whose origin is not sexual but in her blood. This term is generally associated to *hinin* and *burakumin* as a derogatory term.

With a single look, his chest tightened all of a sudden and he stepped back. —The Goddess *Benzaiten*⁴ from the main altar! —What if she had taken a female body? He could not possibly keep looking at her; he might as well go blind on the spot.

She was near the offertory box, covered in a thin garment slightly blackened by the haze of the burning incense. And although half the waist was covered, he noticed first the roundness of her smooth shoulders, glowing snow. Then, from the elegance of her Shimada hairstyle, one could clearly see her naked spine and it became clear that there was a woman with her pale body naked, sitting with her back towards him. As he mused over the situation, a sudden noise brought him back to his senses making his side locks stir, and he stood there in astonishment.

Then he noticed her slim waist was tied firmly by the crimson undergarment and she was covering her breasts with both hands. He caught a glance at the profile face that belonged to those two plump arms, as she almost imperceptibly looked back over her shoulder. He realized that her cheek had a constrained and fearful air to it, and the bridge of that nose and those long and elegant eyebrows brought him memories of a previous life.

Seizaburō drew back, further, further and further back as he stood up shivering all over.

And then, for some time, behind the door, one could not feel the presence of anything.

Nonsense, this was unthinkable...Was it an apparition? Was it a dream? As his senses came back to him the figure faded, and as it faded the whole area suddenly became slightly dark, showing that the arrival of twilight was near (Kyōka 1989, 110).

In this moment of infinite possibilities he catches a glimpse of a half-naked female body, white as snow and just as beautiful, but everything is hazy and he cannot grasp her essence. She is described in a very eroticised way and he recognises her from a past life but he speculates that she is the reincarnation of the Goddess of Water, Benzaiten, and finally a *maboroshi* figure, an apparition that fades away in the end. Unable to grasp her in her totality he escapes dumbfounded while the twilight passes, covering everything in darkness.

⁴ A goddess of music, eloquence, wealth and wisdom; being originally a deification of a river, her shrines are often built by the sea, rivers and lakes.

However, even as concrete knowledge about her is impossible, because of Seizaburō's rejection she has been trying to purify her *hinin* blood in the place for Buddhist purification by stabbing herself with the sword that Sakuden found in the magic cave. She prayed to Fudō to help her with her 'problem', but as it was to no avail she finally stabbed herself too deep. It is at that moment that we find the reunion and spiritual marriage between them Seizaburō declares:

"It's only you...I longed for you, I missed you, since then I cannot sleep well. I am that person"

—Evading the young boy's cheeks that had approached her so suddenly, Omachi said, as if holding her breath, "beside you, sir, there is a vulgar woman."

"What?"

"If not that, at best a concubine."

"Nay, we are a married couple, you are my wife. My better half"
(Kyōka 1989, 116).

Again images of purity and fidelity are juxtaposed with those of filth and eroticism. Seizaburō embodies the romantic spirit and accepts her, ignoring her origins although she is, again, very aware of them, and believes what people say about her kin. In the end, they are spiritually married but she is mortally wounded. Therefore their time together is short. It is precisely this fact that puts into question whether Kyōka is actually being sympathetic with her or not. It has been pointed out before that a more ideal and socially compromising ending would be the two of them living as a couple. Gamo in his chapter on the problem of the *burakumin* in Kyōka's stories points out that the love between the protagonists in all of the stories featuring *burakumin* end up either in death or the relationship is cut short due to social stigma. He interprets the abrupt and sad endings as a deep "commoner's inferiority complex" (Gamo 1978, 212). A question that arises from Omachi's death is whether the narrator hates the character or not, as she suffers such a sad death. However, a high degree of sympathy is afforded to her by the narrator, for example, in the opening of the story: "As far as flowers are concerned, there is none that I dislike. However, since I was a child, I have always loved the iris" (Kyōka 1989, 63). The narrator, an unidentified 'I', introduces the story by aligning himself with this particular flower that represents and is represented by Omachi. Critics such as Kobayashi have pointed out that Kyōka had a special affection for outcasts, as he lived

near them as a child (Kobayashi 1997, 10), and his father lived in a situation of borderline poverty. Kobayashi also points out that Kyōka's father's name and pen name are hidden in the usage of kanji for the name Seizaburō/Kiyomitsu (Izumi Seiji or Seikō) (Kobayashi 1997, 8). Furthermore, Poulton indicates that, even though the *burakumin* retain their power to terrify us, there is a positive side, albeit devoid of any critical social commentary, in the fact that Kyōka makes us side with the underclass. However, I want to suggest that he is not only displacing the binary opposition worldview with a more fluid and “twilight-like” aesthetics, but he is also pointing at the source of the *burakumin* discrimination directly: their blood.

Impure blood/divine blood

The last scene between the main characters and the consequences of Omachi's death, although it is characteristically melodramatic, it illustrates how Izumi Kyōka effects a symbolic inversion of the *burakumin* blood.

I stabbed myself just now, when I entered the river. There's nothing I can do now, so let there be no regrets...I'm able to talk to you only because of the power of Fudō. When I think upon your words and how your concern has unravelled the knot of my heart, I feel as if I'm melting and flowing away. Watch out! Don't get near my blood, or you'll be polluted. Don't let it touch you. You'll be polluted. It's the blood of a *hinin*! Of an *eta*!”

She opened her silk kimono, and from the wound beneath her breast gushed a scarlet stream...

“Who cares about pollution? Let me have your blood!”

Seizaburō writhed with passion. He grabbed her hand in his and pulled her into his tight embrace. Before the color faded from her lips, he put his mouth to her bosom and greedily drank her blood!

He fell to his knees in the river. Holding erect the frozen blade that reflected the snowy whiteness of her face, he sucked the clots of blood from its tip.

It was at this moment, with the smell of her life on his tongue and lips, that he grasped the hidden secrets of sword-making...He was the young man who later became the famous sword smith, Kiyomitsu, a man who

publicly disclosed to all the world that he himself was an outcaste (Kyōka 1989, 127-28).⁵

In this climactic scene we must consider several things. First of all, why does Seizaburō drink her blood? Cornyetz looks at this scene, taking into consideration Krysteva's ideas on the Abject, and regards it a reversal of healthy maternal milk, transformed into "tainted, deathly blood" (Cornyetz 1999, 55). Although the study of Kyōka using Krysteva is interesting, Cornyetz ignores details that clearly deny both the deathliness and pollution that she attributes to the scene. On the other hand Charles Inouye, when discussing the blood sacrifice so overtly present in Kyōka's oeuvre, points at the English teacher he had as a child, and that "although he was most likely drawn to her for reasons other than particulars of Christian soteriology [...] the possible influence of a Christian sense of blood sacrifice on Kyōka's romantic formula is considerable" (Inouye 1998, 28). This scene is reminiscent of the blood of Christ in the Eucharist and makes Omachi a sacrifice for Seizaburō's sins. In other words, having rejected her for discriminatory reasons, he is united with her in death. During the whole story her blood has been said to be polluted, tainted, and she refuses to allow him to touch her claiming various reasons. However, it is important to note that Seizaburō, by drinking her blood first then touching his lips to the supposedly magical sword, supernaturally acquires the knowledge of sword making. This is the *raison d'être* of tragedy in the story, and in no other way (or not as powerful) could Kyōka invert the symbol for the origin of pollution. Not included in Inouye's translation is the notion that this knowledge is verbalized by Kyōka as *shinkai* (godly or spiritual) written with the Chinese characters *shin* (神) "god" and *kai* (会) "meeting". This communion with gods gives her blood not the pollutive characteristics that were attributed to her throughout the story but the complete opposite: the symbol has been *inverted*. Borrowing Burke's term, in "Yōken Kibun" the aesthetic negative is precisely the pollutive nature of the outcast people, which is finally reversed in the blood-drinking scene in order to show how discrimination is part of a system which we can control and can invert at will. Through the haemophagia, Takamatsu Seizaburō is reborn as Hinin Kiyomitsu, one of the best sword smiths of Japan, and thus the story of their love reaches a closure. It is necessary to clarify,

⁵ Translation from Inouye 1998, 287.

nonetheless, that Seizaburō does not become a *hinin* himself, but he adopts the discriminatory term as his own, and reverses the negative connotation with a great sense of pride. It is also worth noting the way in which Izumi Kyōka maintains the ambivalence of this ‘miraculous’ act, as the narrator cannot tell whether this is the work of Gods or Devils.

The lack of definite knowledge leaves the question of the origin of his transformation somewhat open, my interpretation being that it is the blood and not the sword that is the originator. The sacrificial and religious significance of the act, immediately after they have been united in spiritual marriage, leads me to believe it is related to transcendence rather than damnation. This further destabilisation of meaning could be read as Kyōka attempting to convey his message subtly due to what Gamo calls an inferiority complex—one born partly out of the Edo period *gesaku* that Kyōka loved so much, where the conflict of *giri* (duty) vs. *ninjō* (human emotion) always ended crushing those without power. On the other hand, it could also be a sign of his never-ending obsession with the two forces that govern man: *kannonriki* and *kijinriki*, literally the force of the Goddess of Mercy or the force of the demons. According to Kyōka, humans are powerless against them and they are always present, never giving pre-eminence to either of them, for as Poulton noted, this seemingly dualistic vision of the world is not quite so. And “while his overriding faith was in Kannon, he nevertheless shows a remarkable affinity for the darker side of the demon deity. Kyōka goes on to write that ‘even the most fearful demons may make themselves known to me as my dearest friends’” (Poulton 1995, 273).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to find the subversive possibilities of aesthetics in “Yōken Kibun”, justifying the use of stereotyped characters: the *burakumin* women are normally depicted as beautiful and highly sexual while men are normally associated with deviation. Taneda identifies this as one possible sin of the modern Japanese literature, but she does not deny the possibility of *Yōken Kibun* using the same model, as such the story could be accused of ‘exoticising’ the figure of the *torioi* and therefore of failing to present an egalitarian vision of the *buraku* people. However, this paper has demonstrated that not only are the aesthetics of this story consistent with previous works by Kyōka, but it is also consistent with Kyōka’s literary focus. His aesthetics create a world in

this story where the *burakumin* woman is presented not simply as beautiful and sexual but simultaneously pure, divine and monstrous without giving pre-eminence to either or offering any definite explanation about her. In doing so, Kyōka manages to transform a conventional figure of discrimination into one that refuses any kind of stable perspective. Omachi diffuses our gaze and challenges one's knowledge of who she is and how to approach her: that is the power of Kyōka's aesthetics. The fact that those aesthetics are anchored heavily in visual images from a Noh play connects with Lyotard ideas of the visual aspects of language as its source of criticism. Lyotard's concept of aesthetics position metaphor as a destabilising element of language and offers a privileged status to the most aesthetically oriented literature as a workshop for social criticism. A closer reading of the implications of this theory necessitates that we consider the possibility that a metaphor may become predictable if used always within the parameters of the canon. This "repetition" or appropriation of old poetic images in order to create something new but that still retains the taste of tradition is of great importance in Japanese pre-modern literary tradition, having the *utamakura* or pivotal words as an example. Thus, the combination of both theories helps us understand the critical possibilities of Kyōka's twilight aesthetics inasmuch as it contains a worldview that opposes a conservative and stable one based on binary oppositions, and does so by making the figural, the image within language, play the most important role in his discourse. In "Yōken Kibun" the target for this destabilization is the figure of the *burakumin*, and thus Kyōka is pointing his aesthetic and critical finger to a discrimination system whose logic functions precisely in a contrary fashion from that of the twilight world: it essentializes pollution and discrimination by linking them to blood and lineage. Finally, I analyzed the symbolic inversion of the image of that *burakumin* blood, which provides with a final twist to the story and the characterisation of Omachi. Despite the fact that she dies, the ending of the story with blood that turns out to have magical or divine powers provides the reader with an alternative—a negation or challenge to the prejudiced views and portrayals of the *burakumin*. The ghastly scene where Seizaburō drinks her blood only to be reborn destabilizes the reader's preconceptions and opens the door to a multiplicity of knowledge based not on rationality but intuition and passion, and grants political power to aesthetics. Further analysis from this point of view of the rest of Izumi Kyōka's works that feature *burakumin* is necessary in order to fully understand his approach towards discrimination and aesthetics.

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