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The Irony of Sin: Akutagawa's "Yabu no Naka" and Ambrose Bierce's "The Moonlit Road"

Tsutomu Takahashi

To the student of modern Japanese and comparative literature, it is an alluring piece of evidence that Akutagawa Ryunosuke was keenly interested in Ambrose Bierce, an American journalist, satirist, and author of short stories.[1] Akutagawa, in his literary essay "Tenshin" [Snacks], introduces this now little-known American writer to Japan for the first time, stating "Few writers are so precisely skillful in constructing short stories as Ambrose Bierce."[2] Akutagawa then elaborates upon Bierce's technique of irony and his aesthetic propensity for fantastic and supernatural elements, drawing in comparison upon the master of the fantastic, Edgar Alan Poe. In another essay, titled "Chikagoro no Yurei"

1 Nishikawa Masami, for instance, has pointed out significant parallels in the lives, personalities, and creative styles of Akutagawa and Bierce. See Nishikawa Masami, "Akutagawa Ryunosuke to Anburozu Biasu" [Akutagawa Ryunosuke and Ambrose Bierce], *Nihon Bungaku Kenkyushiryo Sosho: Akutagawa Ryunosuke II* [Studies in Japanese Literature Series: Akutagawa Ryunosuke] (Tokyo: Yuseido, 1977) 181-86. As for comparative studies of "Yabu no Naka" and "The Moonlit Road," see especially Yoshida Seiichi, "Akutagawa Ryunosuke to *Konjaku Monogatari*—'Yabu no Naka' ni tuite" [Akutagawa Ryunosuke and Tales of Times Now Past—About "Yabu no Naka"], *Kokubungakiu Kaishaku to Kansho* 25 [Japanese Literature: Interpretation and Appreciation] (September 1960): 136-40; Nakamura Mitsuo, "Yabu no Naka kara" [Out of the Grove], *Bessatsu Kokubungaku II: Akutagawa Ryunosuke Hikkei* [A Companion to Akutagawa Ryunosuke], ed. Miyoshi Yukio (Tokyo: Gakutosha, 1979) 194-200; Tsuruta Kinya, "'Yabu no Naka' to Shinso Sagashi" ["Yabu no Naka" and the Search for the Truth], *Akutagawa Bungaku: Kaigai no Hyoka* [Akutagawa Literature: International Appraisals], eds. Yoshida Seiichi, Takeda Katsuhiko, and Tsuruta Kinya (Tokyo: Waseda UP, 1972) 143-69.

2 Akutagawa Ryunosuke, "Tenshin," *Akutagawa Ryunosuke Zenshu* (Akutagawa Ryunosuke: Complete Works), vol. 4 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1971) 105. All quotations from Akutagawa's works are based on this edition and are indicated with abbreviation *ARZ* in this essay, followed by volume and page references. If not otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

[Ghosts of Today], Akutagawa claims, a little overemphatically: "In dealing with mysterious things, Bierce would be the best writer after Poe in English and American literature." Akutagawa's fascination with the American writer is also demonstrated in his editorial efforts at *The Modern Series of English Literature for Higher Education*, a high school English reader, in which he anthologized two of Bierce's stories, including "The Moonlit Road."[3]

Yoshida Seiichi, a renowned critic of Japanese literature, initiated debates over Akutagawa's literary indebtedness to Bierce, by pointing out the similarity of narrative patterns between Akutagawa's "Yabu no Naka" [In a Grove] and Bierce's "The Moonlit Road."[4] In fact, the narrative techniques of the two stories closely resemble each other; and this structural parallel has been put forward as unquestionable evidence of the literary kinship between the two writers. In "The Moonlit Road," for instance, Bierce engages three confessional statements made by the characters—a sequence that ultimately unravels a mysterious murder case. In a similar manner, Akutagawa's story is composed of seven statements involving a murder: the first four testimonies, functioning to give detailed descriptions of the incident, are immediately followed by three confessional testimonies of the main characters. The final statements in the respective stories are impressively akin to each other: they are recounted by the dead victims through the medium of either a shaman or a priestess.

In the past scholarship, however, the comparative studies of the two stories have exclusively been focused upon this structural parallel; the issues of their thematic patterns and stylistic integration, on the other hand, have largely remained unexplored. Their thematic resemblances, in particular, look rather conspicuous: both stories deal with sexual assaults, whether real or imagined, involve love and jealousy, and fatal misunderstandings between husbands and wives. The marital bonds, supposedly long stable and peaceful, are abruptly shattered by the traumatic incidents, thereby confronting the husbands and wives in naked, vengeful relationships. The two stories, moreover, are similarly haunted by the visions of guilt and sin. The confessional statements by the major characters not only reveal their profound awareness of guilt involved in the

3 Yoshida, "Akutagawa Ryunosuke to Konjaku Monogatari" 139.

4 Yoshida 139.

traumatic experiences, but also demonstrate their strong psychological urge to disclose their inner desires and conflicts. In both stories, in other words, themes and stylistic techniques are united in the rhetoric of confession.

Quite surprisingly, no serious critical attention has been paid to the reading experience of the two stories, given the fact that both call for close interaction between the reader and the text. In “The Moonlit Road,” Bierce successfully uncovers the truth of the murder case, whereas in “Yabu no Naka,” the three major statements function to contradict each other and sharply disrupt the reader’s response to the text. Bierce’s text ultimately succeeds in establishing a sense of objective reality through the ostensibly desultory statements, while Akutagawa’s intentionally conceals it. Nakamura Mitsuo, for instance, indicates the structural weakness of Akutagawa’s story, saying that the story, in contrast to “The Moonlit Road,” prevents the reader from shaping a logical response to the text.[5] Akutagawa’s story, says Nakamura, does not show “life beyond the text,” and is unable to give a unified sense of reading experience to the reader. More commonsensical than critical, Nakamura’s argument is unable to explain the crucial aspect of Akutagawa’s story: the open-endedness of the story is obviously intentional on the part of the author. By disorienting the reader’s response, Akutagawa intentionally shifts the reader’s attention to the dramatic conflicts between the characters, creating and disrupting the illusion of reality behind their testimonies. In this essay, we shall examine the integration of narrative technique and thematic patterns in “Yabu no Naka” and “The Moonlit Road,” with special reference to the vision of sin and the manner of confession.

1. Subversion of the Text

Akutagawa’s “Yabu no Naka” (1921) has been considered as one of the most problematic, if not one of the best, stories in Akutagawa’s works, because of its textual indeterminacy. To the international readers, the story has been widely known through Kurosawa Akira’s acclaimed film adaptation *Rashomon*, which received the grand prix at the Venice International Film Festival in 1951 as well as the Academy Award for the Best Foreign Film in 1952. Although the main

5 Nakamura 199.

plot of "Yabu no Naka," as borrowed from the tenth-century narrative *Konjaku Monogatari* [Tales of Times Now Past], is set in medieval Japan,[7] Akutagawa's strategy of storytelling, with a keen sense of irony and a hint of epistemological depth, has ever attracted the modern reader both in Japan and abroad.[8]

The narrative begins with official testimonies by four witnesses: a woodcutter, a traveling priest, a constable, and an old woman. They testify respectively that: a dead body was found in the woods; the victim was stabbed in the heart; there was a trace of struggle, with a woman's comb and a rope discovered at the site; Takehiro, the dead man, was traveling with his wife, Masago, now missing; and the suspect is Tajomaru, a notorious robber. The story, thus, ostensibly starts with the manner of a detective story, arousing curiosity and a sense of suspense in the reader. In the

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6 Akutagawa's "Yabu no Naka" is, as many of his stories are, based upon the storylines of tenth-century narrative *Konjaku Monogatari* [Tales of Times Now Past]. The original plot is rather simple: a samurai, traveling on the road with his wife, is deceived by a bandit and lured into the woods where the robber surprises the samurai and rapes his wife. The bandit runs away; and the distressed couple continue their journey home. The story ends with a moral warning against man's credulity. The literary motif of a woman assaulted and violated before the eyes of her husband is extensively found in world literature. Sato Teruo investigates the motif comparatively in "Yabu no Naka," *Konjaku Monogatari*, and the thirteenth-century French tale, *La Fille du comte de Pontieu*, and draws upon four other stories with similar motifs that were compiled by Alexander Haggerty Krappe in *Zeitschrift fur Romanische Philologie* [Journal for Romance Philology] 49 (1929). See Sato Teruo, "Furansu 13 Seki no Denki Monogatari 'Ponchu Haku no Musume' no Tema ni tuite—Setsuwa no Hikaku ni tuite no Kokoromi" [The Theme of *La Fille du comte de Pontieu*, A Thirteenth Century Story: An Attempt to Compare Tales], *Hikaku Bungaku Nenshi* 3 (1966): 104-20.

7 Cathy N. Davidson, for instance, argues that major modern writers including Akutagawa, Borges, and Cortazar have been creatively indebted to Bierce in employing the techniques of dislocated plot lines, of disrupted chronological sequence, and abrupt departures from expected fictional resolutions. Cathy N. Davidson, *The Experimental Fictions of Ambrose Bierce: Structuring the Ineffable* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1984) 5. In addition to Bierce, several other sources for "Yabu no Naka" have been suggested by Japanese scholars: the technique of dramatic monologue, for instance, has been considered as a direct influence from Robert Browning's *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69); and the theme of unknowable reality has been discussed in relation to Pirandello's *Cosie (se vi pare)* [That's the Way Things Are—If They Seem That Way to You] (1917).

8 Tsuruta 152.

first half of Tajomaru's statement that follows, the reader is further informed of more detailed circumstances of the incident: the robber encountered the young couple on the road, had a sudden passion for the wife; the robber, alluring the couple into the woods with a false story of hidden treasures, suddenly surprised the husband and ultimately bound him to a tree stump. Tajomaru then consummated his desire, raping Masago before the eyes of her husband. In this way, the sequence of the narrative successively reveals the incident from five different points of view, and when Tajomaru, the suspect, admits that he did murder Takehiro in the sword fight, it appears that the whole case comes to a close with the factual evidence established and the victim and the victimizer well identified.

The following confessions by the three major characters, Tajomaru, Masago, and Takehiro, however, sharply undermine the linear progress of the narrative, by providing the reader with mutually contradicting presentations of the incident. Tajomaru, in the latter half of his statement, testifies that he killed Takehiro after a dramatic duel (Tajomaru emphasizes that he exchanged twenty-three passes with Takehiro); Masago confesses with tears that she stabbed her husband in an attempt to commit double suicide; and Takehiro, the victim, says through the medium that he did kill himself out of humiliation. The three statements mutually cancel each other out, and the sense of external reality that the initial sequence of the testimonies has built up is radically subverted by the deeply traumatic visions of the characters. The story thus ends open-ended, with the objective truth of the incident forever unknowable to the reader.

By disrupting the reader's response, nevertheless, Akutagawa successfully shifts the focus of the narrative from the external factuality to the inner psychological drama of the three characters. In reading the three statements, the reader is unexpectedly led into the mind of each character with his or her conscious and unconscious desires, conflicts, and visions of sin. As Tsuruta Kinya observes, the narrative sequence serves not to clarify the truth of the external circumstances, but to uncover the inner truths of the characters.[9] What the reader encounters

9 Ambrose Bierce, "The Moonlit Road," *Can Such Things Be?, The Collected Works of Ambrose Bierce*, vol. 3 (New York: Gordian, 1909-1912) 62-80. All quotations from Bierce's works are based on this edition and are indicated with abbreviation *CAB* in this essay, followed by volume and page numbers.

there is not “life beyond the text,” but the characters’ individual lives within the text. It is, therefore, a critical fallacy to look for the way “out of the grove,” as the title of Nakamura’s essay suggests, for the story inevitably leads the reader into the grove, the darkness of which corresponds to the darkness of the minds and also to the darkness of the text.

Akutagawa’s narrative style, despite its similar use of confessional statements, is keenly contrasted to Bierce’s “The Moonlit Road.” In fact, Akutagawa seems to respond, by way of a parody, to Bierce’s technique, dramatically reversing the narrative sequence and disrupting the reader’s logical response to the text. By means of juxtaposing the two stories, we are enabled to present a case of fundamental parity in creative intention as well as two different aspects of confessional rhetoric. Let us briefly turn to “The Moonlit Road” and see how Bierce manipulates the three statements (and the reader’s response) so as to establish a sense of the external truth about another murder case.

“The Moonlit Road” is composed of three confessional statements about a murder case provided by members of the Hetman family. The story begins with the statement of Joel Hetman, Jr., the son, from which the reader learns the general circumstances of the incident: the young man, a student at Yale, comes to learn the news that his mother was savagely murdered by somebody while the father was away on business; the father, upon returning home, witnessed a strange figure stealing away from the house; his wife was found dead in her bedroom. The father became deranged after the incident; and on a moonlit night he encountered a ghastly vision of his dead wife. He has been missing ever since.

The subsequent statements provided by Caspar Grattan (the assumed name of Joel Hetman, Sr., the father) and Julia Hetman (the dead mother) are constructed so as to unravel the mysteries of Joel’s statement. In a way quite similar to Akutagawa’s story, Bierce’s narrative has a phase of a detective story carefully calculated to proceed with a maneuver of simultaneously revealing and concealing secrets about the incident. In the first statement by Joel, for instance, the reader comes across the son’s confession of the “somber secret” (*CAB* 3: 62) [10]

10 Stanley Weintraub suggests that Hetman’s assumed name, Caspar Grattan, has symbolic meanings. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, he says, “gratten” (or “grattan” as an alternative spelling) is the after-grass growing in the mown stubble. Thus, Bierce may

which discloses the mysterious case of murder. At the same time, however, the son's statement creates a new mystery about the circumstances of the incident and the condition of the father. The extreme terror evinced by the father at the vision of the dead wife and his subsequent disappearance remain enigmatic, whereas the ending of the statement carefully conceals the secret: "no whisper of his fate has come across the borderland of conjecture from the realm of the unknown" (*CAB* 3: 66).

In the second statement by Caspar Grattan, the reader is confronted with the appalling truth that the murderer was the father himself. Jealous and suspicious about the wife's faithfulness, the father surreptitiously tried to test her faithfulness through a feigned business trip. He returned home early and discovered a strange figure stealing out of the house. Burning with rage and never questioning the assumed evidence of his wife's betrayal, he rushed up to the wife's bedroom and ultimately strangled her to death. The unraveling of the story, however, simultaneously creates other misgivings and doubts in the mind of the reader. Was the mother really unfaithful? Who was that strange figure stealing out of the house? Why was the mother crouching in the dark corner of the room when her husband rushed in? In the final statement by Julia Hetman, the dead mother, the reader learns the whole truth of the incident: the mother was innocent. Terrified at the sounds of a trespasser, she had hidden herself in the corner of her room, when her husband, whose identity she never learned in the dark, rushed in and strangled her to death. On one moonlit night, she appeared as a ghost before her husband and son; and the husband, obsessed with the increasing awareness of guilt, was panic striken and disappeared into the darkness. The narrative is circular in that it ends at the scene of the moonlit road where it began, and the ending reflects back upon the beginning with an ironical twist.

The representation of the action, however, is neither so linear nor so straightforward as this account. Each statement, told in the form of dramatic

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have intended the surname as a metaphor for a posthumous life, which fits Hetman since he has spiritually died and returned to life as another person. Also the first name, Caspar, may be related to one of the mythical "three great kings" who brings gifts to the infant Jesus—thus a hint of death and resurrection in the story of Jesus as in Bierce's story. Stanley Weintraub, personal interview, Pennsylvania State University, 19 September 1990.

monologue, is rendered extremely vague, not only through the obscurity of visions and memories, but also through the disruptions of chronological time and events. Immediately after the son's statement, for instance, the reader encounters a totally unknown personage named Caspar Grattan, who begins his statement with an intimation of his death and his loss of identity. "I see nothing clearly" (*CAB* 3: 69), Caspar says of his past; and his mind, vaguely haunted by fragmented memories of sins and crimes, has completely lost a sense of reality. Throughout the first half of Caspar Grattan's statement, in fact, the reader would find no connection between this statement and the first statement by the son. This temporary disruption of the reader's response is, of course, intentional on the part of the author. As Caspar begins to narrate his obsessive dream vision of the past, the reader is led to discover rather astonishingly that Caspar is old Joel Hetman, the missing husband of the dead woman. Overwhelmingly, moreover, the reader comes to learn the horrifying truth that Joel himself murdered his wife out of jealousy. Thus, the truth is revealed in a dream vision and the consciousness of one's identity is created out of unconscious compulsion. Caspar's psychological urge for confession doubtlessly corresponds to his subconscious quest for his lost identity, which is simultaneously enacted within the sequence of the narrative. The reader's response, temporarily deferred by Caspar's obscure vision of the self, receives the full impact and intensity of these dramatic revelations.

Akutagawa's narrative method, despite its similar use of dramatic monologues, completely reverses the direction of the reader's response to the text: his narrative, as opposed to Bierce's technique, leads the reader from a surface meaning into hidden ambiguities, from the conscious into the unconscious, and from light into darkness. By setting up three contradicting statements, Akutagawa not only disorients the reader's response to the text, but also invalidates any quest for the reality of the circumstances. Apparently inspired by Bierce's keen sense of irony, Akutagawa has attempted to create another ironical tale in which the validity of human perception and communication is directly questioned. In "Yabu no Naka," the reader confronts the three characters reading in their own ways the same text of a murder case and is obliged to judge which character/reader is telling the truth or at least comes closest to the truth. It is a process of

reading the readers who, in their sincere attempts to tell the truth, unconsciously subvert it.

2. Textual Indeterminacies

It becomes clear here that the dramatic power and ironical tension of the two stories are largely dependent on textual indeterminacies. That is, in order to understand the peculiarly characteristic construction of meaning in each story, it is essential to pay close attention to the temporal sequence of reading and the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. As in a reading act of detective stories, the reader is obliged to strain himself to discover the meaning of the narrative, attempting to decipher textual correspondences and venturing to infer gaps of narration.

In Ambrose Bierce's story, the reader is greatly affected by the uncertainty of the visions, as represented symbolically by the images of darkness. In addition to the visual obscurity — the two crucial scenes in the story, those of the murder and of the husband's encounter with the dead wife, respectively take place in a dark chamber and on a moonlit night,—, the characters' inner lives, as revealed through the statements, are seriously marred by the vague and uncertain frame of their consciousness. Joel Hetman, Jr., Caspar Grattan, and Julia Hetman are all intensely aware of their split personalities after the incident. Joel, in spite of his wealth and status, thinks that he is "the most unfortunate of men" (*CAB* 3: 62), keenly aware of the "contrast between [his] outer and [his] inner life" (*CAB* 3: 62); old Joel Hetman, already a lost and mere fragment of man, is haunted by obscure visions of the past, with his fictitious name "Caspar Grattan" merely serving him as a mask, for "in this world one must have a name… even when it does not establish one's identity" (*CAB* 3: 78);[11] Julia Hetman, the dead wife, who is keenly conscious of "the broken bonds between the living and the dead,"

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11 Richard Griffith's comment on Kurosawa's *Rashomon* may hold good for Akutagawa's story, too: "Speech is a method for disguising emotion as well as expressing it.… The three participants in the murder describe it eloquently in words, but their eloquence is false. Like convicts 'playing with the evidence,' they dress up their stories to their advantage." Richard Griffith, *The Saturday Review*, January 19, 1952, rpt. in *Rashomon*, ed. Donald Richie (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1987) 132.

dwells in "the Valley of Shadow" (*CAB* 3: 78) — a spiritual realm in which her former self and the present condition mingle into each other. The tragic incident did inflict such an overwhelming impact upon their consciousness that it shattered their sense of identity, inevitably resulting in the obscurities of their visions and their consciousness. The successive revelations about the mystery of the case, therefore, do not rest upon their conscious and intentional acts; instead, it is largely dependent upon the reader's discovery process: the reader interprets the respective statements and infers a coherent sense of reality behind their obscure visions.

In Akutagawa's "Yabu no Naka," on the other hand, the indeterminacy of the text is paradoxically created by the rhetorical power of the three statements: the reader is overwhelmed by the sheer force and intensity of the three confessional speeches and is obliged to oscillate between the three different interpretations of the incident.[12] Indeed, Akutagawa's characters, like Bierce's, have gone through traumatic experiences that dislocate, if not totally overthrow, their perception and sense of reality. Unlike Bierce's characters, however, Tajomaru, Masago, and Takehiro subconsciously attempt to restore the unity of self by creating ideal images of themselves in their respective accounts of the incident. "The real function of each witness's story," Parker Tyler comments upon Kurosawa's cinematic adaptation of the story, "is to salvage his own sense of reality;"[13] and each character recreates a vision of reality "as consistent with his ideal image of himself."[14] Their subjective visions of reality, therefore, become the source of rhetorical ambiguity. The sincerity and authenticity of each statement ironically disorient the reader's expectation, and the intensity of their emotion merely produces bewilderment and perplexity in him.

Moreover, there are constant suggestions in Akutagawa's story of the indeterminacy of language and also of the gaps of communication. The problems of lying and of one's total inability to make oneself understood are directly linked

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12 Parker Tyler, "*Rashomon* as Modern Art," 1952, rpt. in Parker Tyler, *The Three Faces of the Film* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960) 40.

13 Tyler 42.

14 Akutagawa Ryunosuke, "Yabu no Naka," *ARZ* 2: 380-87. All references to the story are based on this edition.

to the overall scheme of the story: the crucial discrepancy between the signifier and the signified. The three contradicting statements in reference to one particular incident not only attest to the unreliability of human speech, but also suggest the discrepancy between human perception and the external reality. The tragic incident, in point of fact, was symbolically induced by Tajomaru's false words about hidden treasures and Takehiro's naive credulity. At the court scene, Tajomaru himself expresses the unreliability of human speech. "I use my sword to kill, but you don't," says Tajomaru, "You use power, money, and you would even *kill with hypocritical words*." (italics mine).[15]

The motif of misunderstanding, moreover, is dramatically illustrated by the statements of Masago and Takehiro, in which their words and silence originate a fatal gap in communication. The fact that Takehiro is deprived of speech, due to gagging, symbolically represents the main theme of the story. Unable to speak, Takahiro signals to his wife with his eyes, trying to communicate : "Don't listen to what he [Tajomaru] says. Whatever he says, they are all false" (*ARZ* 2: 386). Whrereupon, Masago perceives "a cold despising light" (*ARZ* 2: 385) in her husband's eyes and immediately associates it with her sense of shame and humiliation. "Being speechless," she says, "my husband communicated everything to me with that glance of his eyes" (*ARZ* 2: 385). It is clear here that the function of human speech is seriously undermined by the emotional and psychological projections. While contributing to enhance the overall theme of the story, the uncertainty of human speech dramatically deconstructs the story by disrupting the validity and authenticity of the three confessional statements themselves. To this effect Masago admits in her statement: "I really don't know how to express my feelings then" (*ARZ* 2: 385).

Thus, in reading the confessional statements of Tajomaru, Mazago, and

15 In response to Fukuda Tsuneari's argument that the theme of the story is the incomprehensibility of truth, Ooka Shohei says that Akutagawa's intention is not conceptual, but merely aims to create ironical effects of tension and disruption through the similarities and differences of the statements. Ooka Shohei, "Akutagawa Ryunosuke o Bengosuru—Jijitsu to Shosetsu no aida" [In Defense of Akutagawa Ryunosuke: Between Facts and Fiction], *Bungei Dokuhon: Akutagawa Ryunosuke* [A Reader's Guide to Akutagawa Ryunosuke] (Tokyo: Kawade Shobo, 1975) 100.

Takehiro, the reader is placed in the same situation as the three characters are as he or she is confronted with the indeterminacy of language and communication. The reader performs the part of a character, participating in and interpreting the vision of reality which is forever obscured by human speech. As Tajomaru testifies that Takehiro was allured gradually by his false tale and was led into the darkness of the grove, the reader, likewise, is credulously led by the characters' confessional tales into the darkness of the text, where they would "kill" him with their "hypocritical words," thus ultimately subverting the objective reality of the incident.

3. Into the Heart of Darkness

Upon reading "Yabu no Naka" more closely, the reader will discover that some important elements of the statements interact with each other despite their apparent contradictions about the incident. In fact, the three statements are not separate, but function in relation to each other, building up and also disrupting a sense of reality in the text.[16] None of the statements, for instance, contradicts the circumstantial facts established by the first four statements: the rope, the sword and arrows, the rape of Masago, and the binding and gagging of Takehiro. Then, the critic's job should not be merely to point out gaps between the objective facts of the incident and the subjective interpretations of the characters, but to examine where the three interpretations correspond or contradict with each other and see how these interactions invite or alienate the reader's response. The similarities and differences in the three statements, when closely examined, will not only illuminate the psychological reality of the three characters, but also clarify the narrative technique by which the author achieves the ironical disruption of the reader's response.

First of all, let us examine the personalities of the three major characters by referring to the first four factual statements. Tajomaru is said to be "particularly promiscuous" (*ARZ* 2: 381) and is regarded as a suspect of another murder involving a court woman; Takahiro, in contrast, is "of gentle nature" (*ARZ* 2:

16 This argument is indebted to Tsuruta, who particularly underscores the sexual motif in the story. He says that "Takehiro is to confront his sexual impotence" as he witnesses Masago sensually responding to Tajomaru's act of violation. Tsuruta 165.

381) while Masago is "as strong and passionate as a man, but she never knew a man other than Takehiro" (*ARZ* 2: 381). Here in the preliminary sketches of their characters, the author hints at their subsequent relationships in reference to violence and sex.[17] Tajomaru and Masago potentially share a strong sexual attraction, from which the "gentle" Takehiro is somehow alienated. Tajomaru's confession, following right after, confirms these personal traits, thus simultaneously establishing the circumstantial facts: Masago demonstrates her "fierceness" in fighting back against his assault, whereas Takehiro, being surprised, is subdued without much resistance. Narrating his initial encounter with the young couple, Tajomaru unconsciously reveals his own character and foretells their subsequent relationship: "I determined at that instant that I would steal the woman even if I had to kill the man" (*ARZ* 2: 382).

Despite the fact that Bierce's "The Moonlit Road" deals with the similar problem of jealousy and misunderstanding between husband and wife, the story is totally devoid of psychological depth and complications. In fact, the dramatic power of "The Moonlit Road" heavily owes to the fact that Julia, the wife, remains innocent throughout and is totally unaware of her husband's act and irrational jealousy. Julia is an innocent Desdemona, fatally victimized by her husband's jealousy and misunderstanding. The shock of recognition with which the identities of the characters are created, and with which the truth of the murder case is unintentionally disclosed, altogether intensifies the irony of the circumstances.

Akutagawa, on the other hand, dramatizes the psychological interactions of the three characters. The interactions of the textual elements in the final three statements illuminate the motives, the methods, and the consequences of the murder. Most prominently, the imagery of the eyes brings such a strong impression to the reader that it conveys a sense of reality as to the motives of the murder. Tajomaru, powerfully attracted by Masago's "burning eyes" (*ARZ* 2: 384), says, "When I had a glance at her eyes, I thought that I must take her to wife even if struck by lightening" (*ARZ* 2: 384). Masago, after assaulted and violated by Tajomaru, looks towards her husband and sees a "cold, despising, and hateful

17 Fukuda Tsuneari, "Kokai Nisshi 4" [Open Diary], *Bungakkai* [Literay World], October 1970, rpt. in *Nihon Bungaku Kenkyushiryo Sosho* 59.

color" in his eyes. "Ashamed, sad, and angry" (*ARZ* 2: 385), Masago determines herself to commit a double suicide and kills her husband. The imagery of the eyes is not only closely associated with one's sexual power but also function to reflect and deflect the beholders' desires and psychological conflicts. The eye imagery thus becomes a reflecting mirror picturing their inner circumstances: the three characters project their desires and fear onto their interpretations of the others. Tajomaru sees the reflection of his sexual impulse in Masago's eyes, while Masago suffers from the sense of guilt and shame reflected in her husband's cold eyes. In discovering Masago more beautiful than ever before after Tajomaru's act of raping, Takehiro confronts his own powerlessness and humiliation.

Furthermore, there are psychological implications that the three statements share in common: (1) Masago intended to kill her husband; (2) Takehiro and Tajomaru had a sense of distrust towards the woman; and the two men, despite the victim-victimizer relationship, come to embrace sympathetic feelings for each other. The reader is struck by the fact that the three statements nearly converge into one another with regard to Masago's intention to kill her husband. In each of the three versions of the incident, Masago similarly hints at the murder of her husband. In Tajamaru's statement, Masago says to the robber: "I wish one of you to be dead, either you or my husband. I would rather choose my own death if I am to expose my shame to two men. I will go either with you or him, whoever survives" (*ARZ* 2: 383). In her own testimony, Masago says to his husband, "But please die with me. You have seen my shame. I cannot leave you alone in this world" (*ARZ* 2: 385). Takehiro, on the other hand, recalls it differently: pointing towards him, Masago allegedly says to the robber, "Kill him. As long as he lives, I cannot come with you" (*ARZ* 2: 386). Besides the similarity of these reports, the reader will immediately recognize the deepening tone of Masago's words, increasing in intensity, brevity, and cruelty. Whatever the reality of Masago's words is, Takehiro, now tortured by an increasing sense of guilt and humiliation, receives (maybe partly magnifies) a full impact of Masago's cruel remark.

> "Kill him"—her words, like a thunderstorm, would sweep me headlong into the dark, profound depth. I wonder if such hateful words as

> these have ever come out a human mouth. I wonder if such cursed words as these have entered a human ear. Ever? (*ARZ* 2: 386)

The reader inevitably associates Masago's cruel words with Takehiro's "cold and despising" glance upon his assaulted wife, the circumstances that suggest that their relationship has changed into a naked and vengeful opposition. Between Tajomaru and Takehiro, on the other hand, arises a feeling of sympathy; and their emotional outlet is directed toward the sensual and unfaithful woman. It is interesting to note that throughout the three statements the robber himself rebuked and struck Masago after the sexual assault. Takehiro observes that, no sooner did Tajomaru catch Masago's implication that she wanted to have her husband killed, the robber immediately struck Masago down and asked the husband if he should kill her. Takehiro, then, reflects, "I could forgive his crime for these words alone" (*ARZ* 2: 387). In Tajomaru's statement, in turn, Tajomaru honors Takehiro for his prowess in sword fighting. The story thus shifts its central focus from the external victim-victimizer circumstances to the inner drama of the male-female relationship. Takehiro discloses his keen distrust of his wife and moves towards establishing a male relationship with Tajomaru.

This psychological pattern recurrently surfaces in Akutagawa's stories. "Yabu no Naka" will be related to Akutagawa's other stories, such as "Kesa to Morito" [Kesa and Morito] and "Chuto" [The Robbers], in terms of the man-woman relationship. The triangular relationship in "Yabu no Naka" (Masago-Takehiro-Tajomaru) corresponds to the love triangle in "Kesa to Morito" (Kesa-Wataru-Morito) or to the one in "Chuto" (Sakin-Taro-Jiro). One pair in each relationship is bound by marriage, while the other pair is based upon a sensual and mutually destructive relationship. Thus, the women, Masago, Kesa, and Sakin, play the dual roles of faithful wife and opportunistic whore, oscillating between their conscious ideals and unconscious desires. Furthermore, these women similarly hint at the murders of their husbands for the sake of their illicit love. Kesa stoops to consent Morito's suggestion to kill her husband; and Sakin reveals to Jiro her intention to kill Taro. The men's responses are surprisingly similar to each other. Morito becomes sympathetic to Wataru, the husband, regarding Kesa as "whore" in his mind, whereas in "Chuto," Taro and Jiro

recover their brotherly love and savagely murder Sakin, the sensual woman.

4. Vision of Sin

With critical attention devoted primarily to the narrative structures, little notice has been taken of the thematic affinity between Akutagawa's "Yabu no Naka" and Bierce's "The Moonlit Road": the characters in both stories suffer from an intense awareness of sin. In the second statement of Bierce's story, the reader finds himself entering into the guilt-ridden mind of Caspar Grattan, or old Joel Hetman — the progress of the narrative being identified with the discovery of sin in his mind. Significantly, his statement begins with an intimation of suicide: "To-day I am said to live; to-morrow, here in this room, will live a senseless shape of clay that all too long was I" (*CAB* 3: 67). With his sense of identity shattered and his memory blended into illusions, Caspar's frame of mind is constantly threatened and invaded by pointed fragments of both external and internal realities. His memory of the past is "attended by gibbering obscenity, peals of joyless laughter, the clang of iron doors" (*CAB* 3: 68), whereas his tormented psyche has been translated into a nightmarish and even infernal vision: "witch-fires glowing still and red in a great desolation" (*CAB* 3: 68). He is deeply obsessed with "an overmastering sense of crime in punishment of wrong and of terror in punishment of crime" (*CAB* 3: 70). Looking back upon his life, Casper says that it is an "epic of suffering with episodes of sin" (*CAB* 3: 69).

As Hetman narrates his past, moreover, the reader is led to discover that Hetman has murdered his wife and that he has suffered from a horrifying sense of guilt ever since with the recurring memory of the incident. "I have revealed it in the past tense," says he, "but the present would be the fitter form, for again and again the somber tragedy reenacts itself in my consciousness" (*CAB* 3: 71-72). He is now at the "phase of expiation," by which he means atonement by way of killing himself. Thus, the intimation of suicide at the beginning of his statement is confirmed at the end.

> My penance, constant in degree, is mutable in kind; one of its variant is tranquility. After all, it is only a life-sentence. "To Hell for life"— that is a foolish penalty: the culprit chooses the duration of his

> punishment. To-day my term expires. To each and all, the peace that was not mine. (*CAB* 3: 73)

In this way, Caspar subconsciously reveals his guilt in his confessional statement as he struggles with the memory of the past to reach for his sense of identity.

In the dramatic monologues of "Yabu no Naka," the reader also discovers a personality trait which the three characters share in common: they are keenly conscious of their guilt and demonstrate a strong propensity to commit suicide. The profound awareness of sin and the desire to kill oneself, as a matter of fact, predominate in their confessions and give a thematic unity to the three statements. It should be noted that the progress of the narrative serves to enhance the intensity of the characters' awareness of guilt and humiliation, and that this psychological implication culminates in the suicide of Takehiro at the end of the story. Tajomaru, for instance, is haunted by the keen awareness of guilt and is perfectly resigned to a death penalty. In the following statement, Masago expresses her strong desire to commit suicide to compensate for her sense of shame for being violated, the feelings that are inseparably merged with the vision of sin. After several suicide attempts, she finally comes to Kiyomizu Temple for repentance, though thoroughly aware that "she was forsaken by the great mercy of Buddha" (*ARZ* 2: 386). Takehiro's final statement reverses the preceding two statements: he was not murdered either by Tajomaru or Masago, but he killed himself out of shame and humiliation.

It seems, however, that the manners of confession in the two stories are significantly contrasted to each other. Caspar reveals his vision of sin by unconscious compulsion, whereas Masago, Tajomaru, and Takehiro, as Fukuda Tsuneari points out, conceal their vision of sin through self-dramatization.[18] Tajomaru, thus, emphasizes the fairness of the duel as a means of winning Masago's love; Masago idealizes her image as a faithful wife; and Takehiro saves his honor by committing suicide at the end. Interestingly enough, Fukuda's observation precisely concurs with Kurosawa Akira's comment upon the story. When asked by his assistant directors during the production of *Rashomon* in

18 Kurosawa Akira, *Gama no Abura* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1984) 388. Audie E. Bock, trans., *Something Like an Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 1982) 183.

1950 about the meaning of the story, Kurosawa responded:

> Human beings are unable to be honest with themselves about themselves. They cannot talk about themselves without embellishing. This script portrays such human beings—the kind who cannot survive without lies to make them feel they are better people than they really are. It even shows this sinful need for flattering falsehood going beyond the grave—even the character who dies cannot give up his lies when he speaks to the living through a medium. Egoism is a sin the human being carries with him from birth; it is the most difficult to redeem. This film is like a strange picture scroll that is unrolled and displayed by the ego. You say that you can't understand this script at all, but that is because the human heart itself is impossible to understand. If you focus on the impossibility of truly understanding human psychology and read the script one more time, I think you will grasp the point of it.[19]

It seems apparent that Kurosawa interprets Akutagawa's story as a cynical study of human egoism, implying that the three characters consciously make up false tales in their confessions. In his cinematic adaptation in *Rashomon*, Kurosawa underscores this moralistic dimension thoroughly by adding the fourth statement by the woodcutter who is expected to review the whole scene more or less objectively and also by providing an embarrassingly didactic scene of an abandoned baby at the end of the film.

What Kurosawa fails to see, if not willfully misunderstands, however, is that their strong tendency to self-dramatization is not consciously intentional, but

19 Donald Richie, commenting on Kurosawa's adaptation of Akutagawa's story, argues that each of the three statements is similarly characterized by a sense of pride. Richie says, "One confesses only what one is openly or secretly proud of, which is the reason that contrition is rarely sincere." Richie's observation, however, fails to consider a more important aspect of their confessional statements: their strong awareness of guilt. The inclination to dramatizing themselves in their respective statement does not derive from their sense of pride, but rather it can be interpreted as reverse sides of their awareness of guilt. Donald Richie, *Rashomon: A Film by Akira Kurosawa* (New York: Grove Press, 1969) 225.

subconsciously motivated by their awareness of guilt and sin involved in the incident. They are not dramatizing or defending themselves for their egotistical reasons, as Kurosawa and Fukuda similarly suggests, but their perceptions of reality are unconsciously subverted by their awareness of guilt.[20] The close linkage between guilt and self-dramatization is clearly demonstrated in the paradoxical fact that the three characters idealize themselves in the process of confessing their sins and crimes. Explaining their psychological process, Parker Tyler aptly relates their awareness of guilt to the falsity of their statements: "That each participant assumes guilt, including the dead man, reveals the comprehensiveness and irresistibility of the disorder. A lie, then, actually becomes the symbol of the operation by which these people mutually regain their moral identities."[21] The three characters are not consciously aware of their prevarications, for they are telling what they believe is the truth of the incident. Their confessions are, therefore, both sincere and false. The more profound and complex their awareness of sin is, the more acute is their wish to conform to the dramatically enhanced images of themselves, unconsciously deviating from the external circumstances of the incident. The devastating experiences of sex and violence, and the intense awareness of guilt which follows, ultimately end in the dislocation of self and reality as a consequential effect of defense mechanism.

5. Irony of the Mind

The dramatic power of irony in Bierce's stories, which Akutagawa praises so much and tries to emulate in his own, will further illustrate and also discriminate the manners of confession in "Yabu no Naka" and "The Moonlit Road." The final confessional statement by Julia Hetman, in which the reader see the murder case from the victim's point of view, is ironically opposed to the second

20 Tyler 41.

21 Stuart Woodruff, for instance, observers that Bierce's stories are regularly focused upon the duality of vision. The ironical power of Bierce's stories, therefore, derives from the tension and conflict between his polar visions. M. E. Grenander also points out that the dynamics of Biercec's irony is located in the discrepancy between the rational thinking and the emotional and psychological reality. See Stuart C. Woodruff, *The Short Stories of Ambrose Bierce: A Study in Polarity* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1964); and M. E. Grenander, *Ambrose Bierce* (New York: Twayne, 1971) 93-99.

statement by Caspar Grattan. No sooner has she heard the first trespasser retreating than she hears the different, more rapid footfalls on the stairs approaching; and, extremely terrified, she escapes into the corner of the room and crouches upon the floor in the dark. Having read Caspar's statement, the reader instantly recognizes that it is the jealous husband coming up to strangle his wife. With poignant irony, she states, "I tried to pray. I tried to call the name of my dear husband" (*CAB* 3: 77). A moment later, the reader is seized by the overwhelming description of the murder: "When I revived I felt a strangling clutch upon my throat—felt my tongue thrusting itself from between my teeth!" (*CAB* 3: 77) The irony works in two ways: the innocent wife is savagely murdered through misunderstanding; and the wife's innocence puts into dramatic relief the husband's irrational jealousy and the enormity of his crime.

The following scene on the moonlit road, moreover, serves to enhance the effect of this dramatic irony: the wife, now a ghost, threatens the guilt-ridden mind of the husband. The wife's love causes terror in the husband; and her ignorance tortures her husband in his knowledge. The reader inevitably connects the husband's condition with the one obsessed with "episodes of sin," and understands that his guilty conscience is cruelly tortured by his wife's love and innocence. Ironically, the wife approaches her husband, "smiling and consciously beautiful, to offer [herself] to his arms, to comfort him with endearments" (*CAB* 3: 79). By juxtaposing the contrasted values of the characters, not only does the author succeed to heighten the psychological tension experienced by the husband, but also to highlight the total isolation of individual existence. Here the ghost's comment is aptly suggestive: "we know only that we terrify even those whom we most wish to comfort, and from whom we most crave tenderness and sympathy" (*CAB* 3: 78).

In his stories collected in *In the Midst of Life* and *Can Such Things Be?*, Ambrose Bierce intentionally creates ironical situations by juxtaposing innocence and experience, ideal and reality, and the illusion of love and understanding and the ruthless reality of total isolation.[22] Furthermore, the author succeeds in dramatizing this irony of situation by the technique of sudden unexpected

22 Several critics including Fukuda Tsuneari and Kataoka Ryoichi have pointed out that the theme of "Yabu no Naka" is the incomprehensibility of reality. Tsuruta 4.

revelations, a narrative device that precipitates the reader into an awareness of the tragic reality of life. This technique of irony, striking the reader with the fatality of circumstances, suggests that life is eternally indifferent to one's hopes and ideals and always serve to overwhelm one's belittled presence.

Akutagawa's use of irony in "Yabu no Naka" is clearly differentiated from Bierce's. In "Yabu no Naka," the ironical effects are created out of a latent suggestion that one's understanding is distinctly separated from the external world, an implication that one is totally imprisoned in consciousness and creates one's own reality. It is an irony of mind, suggesting that each person fatally determines his or her own life out of uncertainty. In reading the three confessional statements of Tajomaru, Masago, and Takehiro, the reader will not find any objective truth about the incident, not because the characters are not capable of comprehending the true reality of life, as some critics suggest, but because there is no external reality beyond the consciousness of their individual minds. Reality exists only in the minds of the characters, which simultaneously exist within the framework of the text. Thus the death of Takehiro symbolically identified with the end of the text or the death of the story. A passage from "Kesa to Morito" will aptly illustrate the point:

> The mind of man is but a mere darkness,
> Desires burn, and life will soon be ashes.

The darkness of the mind is parallel to the darkness of the grove and the darkness of the text. What the reader encounters there is the conscious and unconscious desires of the individuals, their psychological conflicts, and their visions of sin. Ultimately, the reader is left with an ironic implication that life ends within the total subjectivity of one's mind. On reading Akutagawa's "Yabu no Naka," the reader will not discover a "life beyond the text, " for there is nothing beyond the text, except a sense of irony and faint feeling of sadness.