

Hearn's Idea of Women in "Yuki-Onna": Idealization of Femininity and Exploration of Motherhood

01E014 Takuro Hirosawa

Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904) is known as a retelling-story writer. He was successful in retelling to recolor and reshape the stories that already existed. Hearn came to Japan in 1890 and, since then, he started collecting sources from mostly old Japanese myths and legends and re-told them to introduce vanishing aspects of old Japan to the West. This unique style of re-telling rendered his writing distinctive, for which Hearn was much acknowledged. Then, he married a Japanese woman, Setsuko Koizumi, and in 1896 he became a naturalized Japanese and changed his name to Yakumo Koizumi. He died of the heart attack in 1904.

"Yuki-onna" is one of the stories from Hearn's *Kwaidan* (1904), a compilation of quaint tales, which was published right after his death. There is no original script ever written for "Yuki-onna." Hearn heard of this story from a farmer which was a legend of his native village in Musashi province, which is now a part of Tokyo.

This thesis will offer an overview of Hearn's idea of women expressed in "Yuki-onna." However, the purpose of my thesis is neither to place him in a certain category in a comparative study of literature, nor to criticize his idea of women as a gender study from a modern point of view. More generally, this thesis is dealing with how a man, who had passed away just a century before I started writing this, obtained some ideas of women and expressed them in "Yuki-onna" as a writer. So, in the first section, Hearn's idea of women expressed in Yuki-onna will be discussed. It is quite possible that he took women as a divine sex and idealized their femininity. Then, Hearn's view of men and women seen in the relationship between Minokichi and Yuki-onna will be presented. This section will explain how Hearn developed his idea of both sexes through the relationship of his parents. The final section will focus on Hearn's idea of the motherhood expressed in Yuki-onna. Here, how he perceived motherhood in Yuki-onna will be explained.

1. Hearn's View of Women as Ideal

Yuki-onna is quite an intricate being. As her name itself indicates, "Yuki" represents various aspects of snow in Nature and "onna" could be a wife or mother according to her relation to a man. Some may take snow as gentle and tender substance but, on the other hand, others may associate it with destruction. Likewise, one may abuse his wife and some may worship her as a god. In such an intricacy, some aspects portrayed by a writer will illustrate his ideal woman. First, how Hearn described Yuki-onna will be discussed. Yuki-onna is an embodiment of Nature, whose aspects show its harshness and gentleness. Second, how Hearn perceived Yuki-onna's

femininity will be presented. He might see femininity in Nature. Finally, Hearn's idealization of Yuki-onna's femininity will be explained. He associated it with a kind of divinity.

Yuki-onna's Character: Harshness and Gentleness

In the first part of "Yuki-onna," where Minokichi encounters Yuki-onna, Hearn characterized her as an ambivalent being, expressing contrast between Nature's cruelty and generosity. First, Yuki-onna is partly described as a cold, merciless snowstorm. She freezes Mokichi, an old woodcutter to whom Minokichi apprenticed, and takes his life. Moreover, the snowstorm is described as a threatening and destructive one. In the hut where they take shelter from the snowstorm, Minokichi hears "the awful wind, and the continual slashing of the snow" against the door. The wind is "driving furiously" into the hut. (45, 46) So the cold, merciless snow symbolizes the harsh aspect of Nature. In contrast, Yuki-onna also represents tender and graceful snow for her features are described as gentle and beautiful ones.

The white woman bent down over him, lower and lower, until her face almost touched him; and he saw that she was very beautiful, — though her eyes made him afraid. (46)

This scene also expresses silently tensed space in the hut, comparing with the furious snowstorm outside. Besides that, Yuki-onna shows Minokichi her mercy and saves his life. She also serves Minokichi and his mother as a caring wife and daughter and bears ten children later. So all she does for them expresses Nature's generosity. Therefore, it can be said that Hearn gave Yuki-onna the ambivalent characteristics to convey the two aspects of Nature: harshness and gentleness.

Yuki-onna's Femininity

Why Hearn gave such intricate characteristics to Yuki-onna will be explained when we see how he perceived "femininity." In his essay "Of the Eternal Feminine" Hearn wrote "through all the centuries, Western fancy has been making Nature more and more feminine." Then, he went on to say that "all sights, or sounds, or sensations that can touch our love of loveliness, of delicacy, of sweetness, of gentleness, make for us vague dreams of woman." (*Out of the East*, 100) Here he explained that Western men saw femininity in Nature. As far as this tendency to associate the feminine beauty with Nature is concerned, Stephen Bygrave explains, taking a piece of poetry of William Wordsworth, an acknowledged English poet in the Romantic era, for example. It is one way of emphasizing one's feeling and exceeding the material world to identify woman with Nature, and "nature provides Wordsworth with symbols for the unknown beauty of" the women he portrayed in his poetry. (Bygrave, 6)¹ Additionally, the English words "Mother Nature" prove this feminization of Nature. Thus, it is highly probable that Hearn himself, as a Westerner, had the same view of Nature and perceived femininity in both aspects of Nature: cruelty and generosity. Therefore, it seems natural that he attached the two aspects of Nature with Yuki-onna and saw femininity in her cruel and generous character.

However, it is interesting that he found femininity in the even destructive aspect of Nature.

Hearn wrote about terrible Nature as follow:

Nay, even the terrible itself, if fraught with terrible beauty, — even Destruction, if only shaped with the grace of destroyers, — becomes for us feminine. (*Out of the East*, 100)

So, noticeably, he saw femininity even in the negative aspect of Nature if he could perceive the "terrible beauty" there: the beauty seen in horrible Nature. In fact, Yuki-onna also has this "terrible beauty," which is expressed in Minokichi's first impression of her. "He saw that she was very beautiful, — though her eyes made him afraid." (46) So with this "terrible beauty" on her face, the negative aspect of Nature in Yuki-onna expresses, for Hearn, femininity as much as her positive one. Therefore, it is highly probable that he portrayed Yuki-onna as a perfect manifestation of femininity, possessing both the cruel and generous aspects of Nature.

Woman as a God

While Hearn associated Yuki-onna's femininity with Nature's cruelty and generosity, he also might see a kind of divinity in women and idealize their femininity. In the introduction of Hearn's *Interpretations of Literature*, he explained that:

...in western countries woman is a cult, a religion, or... I shall say that in western countries woman is a god...Gods are beings superior to man, capable of assisting or injuring him... (Vol.1, 3)

Here "gods" refer to ones just as appeared in Greek myths. According to Hearn, in Western societies men worshipped women just as they worshipped a god. This worship toward women was originated, he observed, in the concept of women being the mother of human beings. This shows how men in Western countries saw women as divine beings and worshipped them. As you may be aware, the idea of a god being "capable of assisting or injuring" men is correlated with the ambivalence of Yuki-onna's character discussed previously. Thus, necessarily, this idea will coincide with the two aspects of Nature: generosity and cruelty. Judging from those correlations, it is highly probable that Hearn linked Yuki-onna with Nature and god and created her as a feminine and divine being. It might also be true that he idealized her femininity by identifying her with Nature and god.

However, his ideal woman expressed in Yuki-onna was not realistic but abstract. Moreover, this women worship was only practiced by men, who belonged to the upper class or the middle class of society at the time. Therefore, it might be true that admiring women and treating them as gods were nothing but the ways they satisfied their desires to serve something divine, which would yield a highly spiritual perception. Additionally, the abstract ideas of women shaped by men were a mere illusion to please them. So it is more likely that Hearn created, in his mind, an idealized woman out of his desire of what he wanted women to be like, and that was the figure of Yuki-onna.

What Hearn did in creating Yuki-onna was his thorough idealization. First, he created her as an embodiment of Nature, which has the aspects of harshness and gentleness. In her harsh aspect, he saw the "terrible beauty." On the other hand, in the gentle aspect of Yuki-onna, he perceived a kind of generosity and helpfulness. Moreover, Yuki-onna was much dignified by being associated with divinity. Although he might self-centeredly idealize her femininity to please his desire to serve something divine, this is how he idealized Yuki-onna and created her as a perfect manifestation of his ideal woman.

2 . Hearn's View of Men and Women

The relations between men and women that Hearn described in his stories have much in common and both sexes are typically characterized. This section will deal with Hearn's idea about men and women. First, how he viewed Minokichi will be discussed. This section will take the story of Urashima-Taro that Hearn also retold as a counterpart of "Yuki-onna," and examine his idea of the two men appeared in those stories. Second, how the relationship of his parents affected his idea of men and women will be focused on. He regarded his mother as a weak victim in that romantic relationship.

Trust and Betrayal

In order to view Hearn's idea of men and women, it is important to see how he described the end of the romantic relationship between Minokichi and Yuki-onna. One night, Minokichi carelessly tells O-yuki about seeing Yuki-onna. Suddenly, she gives a scream of sadness. She sadly shouts that it was her whom Minokichi saw that night and that she promised to kill him if he ever talked about it. However, she says that she won't kill him because of their children and makes him swear to take good care of them. She warns him that she would come to kill him if he neglected his duty. As she says so, her voice becomes thinner and finally, she disappears. Here, Yuki-onna's anger for Minokichi and her sorrow about leaving her children seem to be emphasized. Before Minokichi talks about Yuki-onna, their relationship is based on Yuki-onna's trust in him that he never talks about her. However, he ends up betraying her. Symbolically, Minokichi's betrayal to Yuki-onna signifies both the end of Yuki-onna's trust in Minokichi and of their romantic relationship.

In fact, there is a story that has much in common with "Yuki-onna": the allegedly true story of "Urashima-Taro," which Hearn retold in his recollective essay, "The Dream of a Summer Day." This tale also has a similar tragic end of the romantic relationship between Urashima and the Daughter of the Dragon King. The time of the story was fourteen hundred and sixty years before Hearn's time, according to him, when there was a fisherman called Urashima. While he is at work, he happens to catch a tortoise. As the old tradition says that a tortoise is a sacred animal of the sea, he releases it. Then, the daughter of the Dragon King emerges from the sea and escorts him to her father's palace in a remote unknown island. There he is kindly welcomed and married to the Sea God's daughter. After staying there for three years, he recalls of his parents and decides to go home temporarily. The sad princess gives him a small box and tells him that it

will help to come back, but not to open it. Assuring her, he goes back to his hometown and finds that everything has changed. More than four hundred years have passed since he disappeared. In his despair, he opens the box that the princess gave him. Then he finds himself aging instantly and dies. Here Urashima is described as a reckless man who opens the box though it is prohibited to do by the daughter. Because he breaks his promise to her, he cannot go back to the island and their relationship has to end.

Reckless Men

Of the correlations between these two tales, the most distinctive one is this tragic end of the romantic relationships, and the relationships in these tragedies will show us Hearn's own view of men and women respectively. First, his interpretation of the Urashima's betrayal will be cited. After Urashima's death, people felt pity for him so much and they built a shrine to him. However, Hearn is quite critical of this:

Is it right to pity Urashima at all? Of course he was bewildered by the gods. But who is not bewildered by the gods? What is Life itself but a bewilderment? And Urashima in his bewilderment doubted the purpose of the gods, and opened the box.... Why, then, so much pity? ("The Dream of a Summer Day," Selected Writings of Lafcadio Hearn, 130)

It might be better to replace the word "gods" with "women," whom Hearn took as a divine sex. As you can see now, he blamed Urashima for opening the box against "the purpose of the gods" and for causing the tragic break-up with the princess. In addition, "the purpose of the gods" could be interpreted as what Hearn thought men should stick to the relation with women: their trust and promise. From Hearn's point of view, the unforgivable were those who break a promise to a divine woman and betray her. After Urashima opens the box, he is at a loss:

And Urashima then knew that he had destroyed his own happiness—that he could never again return to his beloved... So that he wept and cried out bitterly in his despair. (124, 125)

Thus, in order to make his sorrow profounder as a punishment, Hearn emphasized that Urashima lost his paradise due to, ironically, his dishonesty to the princess. So he might feel that Urashima was a reckless and dishonest man to women.

In this way, Hearn shows his criticism of Urashima who recklessly opens the box. So it is natural that he likewise characterized Minokichi, who breaks his promise to Yuki-onna. Moreover, Hearn's conclusion prepared for Urashima would best describe Minokichi's state of mind after Yuki-onna leaves him. The sudden vanishing of Yuki-onna will make us speculate about Minokichi's regretting for his dishonesty to her, which, ironically, costs him his beloved wife as with Urashima. Therefore, it might be true that Hearn with his criticism and irony described Minokichi as a dishonest man to women.

Women Suffering from Men's Dishonesty

In fact, Hearn's unfortunate childhood might explain why he remained so outraged with dishonest men and sympathetic to women. His idea about men and women seems to have been established in his mind from his early youth, when he stayed together with his affectionate mother and hated his father, who had abandoned them. Lafcadio Hearn was born in a Greek island, Lefkas, on January 27, 1850, to his mother, Rosa Cassimati, a native of the island, and to his father, Charles Bush Hearn, a surgeon in the British navy. Since his father was a temporarily posted military man, his father was away from him for long periods of time, and his mother looked after him. When he was two, his mother moved to Dublin with him, where his paternal great aunt lived. Soon his father lost interest in his mother and left her for another woman, whom his father remarried. Eventually, his mother left him in the care of his great aunt and returned to her home. He saw neither of them after that. As he grew up, it appeared to him that his mother was the weak victim of a dishonest man and, since then, he attributed the cause of their separation to his father's betrayal. Thus he might have the idea that women have to suffer from men's dishonesty since his youth, which was patterned after the relationship of his parents.

Compassion for Women

In addition, Hearn himself was the person who couldn't overlook such injustices as the betrayal and mistreatment of women committed by men. Hearn's wife, Setsuko Koizumi, said in her essay *Omoideno-ki*, or her reminiscence, "Nothing made him more outraged than ill-treating the weak such as women and children." (41)² Also, there is an episode in the same essay in which Hearn refused to meet a visitor who had been famous for abusing his wife. Therefore, it might be true that his father's betrayal created in Hearn a sense of hatred for dishonest men and that his unfortunate mother nourished his feeling of compassionate and protective affection for those who were exploited by men. Furthermore, it is obvious that he saw his beloved mother's shadow behind Yuki-onna, who is victimized by Minokichi's dishonesty. At the same time, Hearn was convinced that these women were weak victims in a romantic relationship and he was critical of men's insincerity to women.

Overall Hearn stood for women and insisted on the necessity for their protection. However, some may think that Hearn was a man of arrogance and self-centeredly defined women as being passive and in a lower class. Moreover, he idealized women, and insisted on their protection to satisfy his gentlemanlike nature. (Umemoto 143)³ By standing for weak women, it can be said that Hearn might fantasize himself protecting his beloved mother. It is also probable that he generalized his wretched idea of the relationship of his parents and tried to see the same case in all romantic relationships, where he remained supportive with women. With women in the lower class, his heroism and benevolent nature might compel him to see women weak and those whom he needed to protect.

Hearn's idea of men and women was established quite early and it was based on the poor relationship between his father and his mother. Due to his father's betrayal, his family collapsed

and his beloved mother had to leave him. Since then, his idea about the relationship of men and women was that a weak woman always has to suffer from a man's betrayal. Then he found the same sad romantic relationship in "Yuki-onna" as his parents' relationship and that is why he could not help standing for Yuki-onna and being critical of Minokichi's dishonesty. Moreover, since women were socially placed lower than men and sometimes abused by them at the time, his heroism insisted on the necessity of protecting women.

3 . Hearn's Idea of Motherhood

This final section will focus on how Hearn saw his mother and perceived motherhood. First, how his images of his mother were created will be discussed. The images of his mother were not actual, but visionary. Second, how the images of his mother was described in "Yuki-onna" will be presented. Hearn saw Yuki-onna as his mother and tried to see motherhood there. Finally, how he could encounter motherhood will be discussed. Because the images of his mother were faint, he could see motherhood only in a dreamlike illusion.

Hearn's Memory of His Mother

Hearn rarely described his mother as an actual individual, for he had only his vague memory of his mother. It was when he was four years old that his mother left him. He was then too young to remember about either his mother or his father. So his images of his mother took shape partly through his great aunt who later took care of him. About why his mother left him, his great aunt told him that she had had to leave him with a grave sorrow as a result of her divorce and it was his father's fault. Such comments about his mother inculcated upon him the idea that she was an unfortunate woman who got abused by her husband and had to leave her beloved son.

However, the story is partly true and partly false. His mother, Rosa Cassimati, was distressed in consequence of her divorce and became neurotic. Moreover, she went back to her hometown for a cure and never came back to see Hearn. About the reason why his great aunt said such a thing, Miyoko Kudo explains that because she could not forgive Hearn's father for having divorced to Rosa, she put herself on Rosa's side. So it is true that Hearn's hatred of his father and his compassion for his mother were developed by his great aunt's remarks on his mother. (Kudo, 163)

Without knowing the truth of his mother, Hearn magnified his images of her more and more. Furthermore, he himself found the images of his mother in his reminiscence. The quotation below is what seems to be Hearn's "memory" of his mother.

I have memory of a place and a magical time in which the Sun and the Moon were larger and brighter than now... And all that country and time were softly ruled by One who thought only of ways to make me happy... she was divine... she would tell me stories that made me tingle from head to foot with pleasure... And when the pleasure became too great, she would sing a weird little song which always brought sleep. ("The Dream of a Summer Day," 131-2)

Here his mother is described as a divine, caring and affectionate mother, who thinks only of him. However, as mentioned above, he was too young to remember his mother and, above all, his idea of his mother was based on hardly accurate information. Therefore, it is obvious that he magnified his images of his mother and idealized motherhood so a mother is always caring and affectionate to her son.

Yuki-onna as a Mother

Therefore, it is understandable that Hearn created Yuki-onna as a mother patterned after his images of his mother. From this point of view, it is possible that we see "Yuki-onna" as the story of Hearn's mother. As affectionate and compassionate he was toward the idea of his mother, it seems natural that he described Yuki-onna likewise. O-yuki's voice is "as pleasant to the ear as the voice of a song-bird." (47) This would refer to the voice of his mother who told him a lot of stories and sang songs. Moreover, after becoming the mother of ten children, O-yuki remains "as young and fresh as on the day" when she first came to Minokichi's village. (47) Probably, Hearn's mother, too, never ages in his images and remains as fresh and young as the figure of his mother he created.

On the other hand, Yuki-onna is also described as an unfortunate wife and mother. Minokichi breaks his promise to her and her happy life suddenly comes to an end. Similarly, Hearn's family collapsed because his father abandoned him and his mother, which made her, in his mind, leave Hearn in the care of someone else. The same goes to Yuki-onna who leaves her ten children in Minokichi's care. Therefore, it is obvious that he saw Yuki-onna as his beloved mother. Although the images of his mother are a faint memory, it can be said that Hearn's idea about his mother is best described in Yuki-onna, positively and negatively, and that he perceived motherhood in Yuki-onna.

Dreamlike Illusion

Although Hearn saw his mother in Yuki-onna, his idea of his mother is hardly based on a real existence, but on his imagination. That is why his way of describing his mother always had to be symbolical and visionary. Hearn's Yuki-onna is also described as such a symbolical figure. When she appears for the first time, Minokichi is in the state of half-dreaming and half awake. As soon as Mosaku and Minokichi find the hut in which they take shelter from the snowstorm, Mosaku falls asleep. Minokichi is awake for a while, but at last, he too falls asleep. When he is awakened by snow slashing in his face, he finds Yuki-onna in the hut. This drowsy state symbolizes Hearn's imaginary bridge between reality and illusion, where Hearn could find the figure of his mother. Minokichi says that:

Indeed, I have never been sure whether it was a dream that I saw, or the Woman of the Snow. (*Kwaidan*, 48)

Also in the story of "Urashima-Taro," Urashima is in such a drowsy state when the daughter

appears. After he releases the sacred turtle, a summer day sheds light on him:

And the day was very warm; and sea and air and all things were very, very silent. And a great drowsiness grew upon him— and he slept in his drifting boat. Then out of the dreaming of the sea rose up a beautiful girl, ("The Dream of a Summer Day," 120)

So through this drowsy state, Hearn could find a way that would lead him to something motherly and perceive motherhood. Sukehiro Hirakawa thinks that the drowsy state or the dreamlike illusion is Hearn's ideal home, where he could encounter motherhood. (Hirakawa, 110)⁴ Also, a famed psychiatrist Sigmund Freud proposed that one satisfies his or her desire by means of dreaming. (Freud, 160)⁵ This drowsy imagining explains why Hearn wrote a lot of ghost stories and especially female ghost tales. Therefore, Hearn created Yuki-onna out of his desire to project his images of his mother onto her. Moreover, Hearn's encounter with motherhood was made through this dreamlike illusion.

Hearn's idea about his mother was not actual, but more visionary. Since he had few recollections of his mother, he made up his own images of his mother according to what his great aunt had told him, and to his faintly perceived memories of his mother. There his mother is described as being caring and affectionate to Hearn. With the same maternal attitude of Yuki-onna, he tried to see motherhood in her. However, as visionary his idea of his mother was, his encounter with motherhood was made through the dreamlike illusion, which Minokichi and Urashima both experienced. Therefore, Hearn could find motherhood in illusion, which was confined to the world of Hearn's imagination.

Conclusion

Hearn expressed harshness and gentleness in Yuki-onna when she is symbolized as an embodiment of Nature. Then, he attached divinity with her from the same perspective. On the other hand, he illustrated motherhood in Yuki-onna when she is portrayed as a caring and gentle woman. Since he had a special sentiment for his mother, it can be said that he was attracted by a woman with such motherhood. With divinity and motherhood in Yuki-onna, what he intended to create was the perfect figure of his ideal woman. He took women as the divine and motherly sex. As a result, he idealized Yuki-onna and described her as his ideal woman, sometimes as a mother, and sometimes as a wife.

However, his encounter with his ideal was not made through his experience with reality, but through the dreamlike illusion, where his mother was still alive as his blurred memory. Furthermore, he interpreted the end of the encounter with motherhood as the end of a romantic relationship caused by men's dishonesty. That is why he understood that Yuki-onna has to leave her family as his own mother had to leave him. Therefore, his idea of women expressed in "Yuki-onna" is that they are divine, motherly but unfortunate beings whom he could see only in his imagination.

Notes

- 1 On the general idea of the Romantic poets, see Bygrave.
- 2 Author translated.
- 3 Author translated.
- 4 Author translated.
- 5 Author translated.

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(卒業論文指導教員 杉村使乃)