

**When She Felt So Awkward and Unhappy:
Hermeneutical Studies of Higuchi Ichiyō's
Takekurabe, Gender, Interpretation, and
Japanese Modernism**

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「樋口一葉『たけくらべ』の解釈学的研究
—ジェンダー、解釈、モダニズムをめぐる問題—

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Hermeneuticsとは元来ギリシャ神話に登場する大神ゼウスのメッセージを人類に伝達する役目を担った伝達神ヘルメスに由来しており、神の言葉の解釈という意識過程から聖書解釈に発展した後、現在ではReception Theory（受容理論）、Reader-Response Theory（読者解釈理論）と密接な関係を持つ。文字どおり、解釈学とは一定の観点からテキスト解釈を限定するのではなく、（読者の）主体的視点の構築という主題を基礎として、テキストの生成とそれに付随するインターテクスチュアリティを生み出し、ダイナミックで多義的な解釈を志す理論的枠組みである。

樋口一葉の『たけくらべ』研究において、「憂く恥かしく、つゝましき事」という一節は、主人公が初潮を向かえることによって少女から女へと変貌する分岐点の象徴として解釈されてきた。しかしながら、佐多稲子が、従来の定説に反論し、この美登利の変貌を初潮によるものではなく、初めての吉原での身売りの経験と処女喪失によるものであると解釈した後、この一節の解釈をめぐる、いわゆる「たけくらべ論争」が起こった。

本稿では、Hermeneuticsという理論的観点から、この『たけくらべ』の一節における解釈批評を分析し、テキストに散在するこの一節の機能的意義のメカニズムを体系化する。その過程において、ジェンダー構造（「少女」から「女」への社会的構築）と、『たけくらべ』に見られる、樋口一葉のモダニズム的意識（人間性を複雑に織りまぜたテキスト生成）に焦点をあてる。また、最終的にこの一節に対するナラティブ上の解釈が欠落していることによって、逆説的に解釈の不在が解釈のダイナミズムを誘発するという理論的認識が解釈のヒエラルキー性の脱構築という意識上の改革に結びつく点について言及する。

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One simple passage from Higuchi Ichiyō's *Takekurabe* (Child's Play), "Ureiku hazukashiku, tsutsumashiki koto..." ("When she felt so awkward and unhappy...") (120), has been discussed in terms of hermeneutical issues by a number of literary critics (especially feminist critics); even though their critical stances regarding the interpretation of this passage are too distanced to be compatible, these scholars seemingly share a similar idea: i.e. that this sentence is critically important in clarifying Higuchi Ichiyō's literary intentions. The academic debate on this subject, which takes its place among the essential research materials on Higuchi Ichiyō, is undoubtedly related to the "absence" of the narrator's voice in this passage: i.e. with the fact that the narrator leaves the sentence uninterpreted.

In a formalist-structuralist sphere, the critical analyzability, readability and understandability of a text cannot be isolated from its verbal orientation (the visible words on a page), but this approach has certain limitations. For example, a number of scholars believe that Propp's famous structuralist-narratological work, *Morphology of the Folktale*, "has unfortunately dealt with the structure of text alone" (Dundes xii), paying no attention either to socio-cultural complexity or to the gaps in textual discourse. In contrast, post-structuralists such as Derrida attempt to show how the concept of *differance* may also accompany the reader throughout the process of reading a text (*lecture*), seeing a text as "the end of the book and the beginning of writing" (Derrida 6). Thus, they focus on the theme of absence, the unwritten portion of a story, instead of merely focusing on its existing narrative structure.

The literal, ideological, and political possibilities of "absence" are now being discussed more and more frequently in (once-) marginalized disciplines, e.g. feminism and postcolonialism, the principal discourses of which derive from "silenced" people. For feminist critics, insofar as "absence" indicates the validity of multiple interpretations produced by an open-ended interaction among text, author and reader, it "discloses the arbitrariness of patriarchal hegemony [and] puts into question the authority of authors, that is to say the propriety of paternity" (Furman 71). The reader's task throughout the process of reading should not be just passively following the words on the page; as Stanley Fish points out, "[i]nterpretation is not the art of construing but the art of constructing" (327). The aesthetic of subjective creation enables the careful reader to find out the locations in a text in which "absence" inescapably operates in terms of the subversive and challengeable potential of alterity discourse.

In their epistemological interpretation of the famous passage in *Takekurabe* mentioned above, scholars can generally be divided into two major categories: those who view it in terms of the protagonist's first menstruation vs. those who view it in terms of her lost virginity. The issue of interpretation here is complex, and it should not be discussed without considering the antithetical relationship between textual essentialism and pragmatism. In this paper, I shall examine this controversial passage

in terms of three basic aspects: gender, interpretation, and (Japanese) modernity. If we can agree with the idea that “[m]any of the most interesting forms of modern criticism ask not what the work has in mind but what it forgets, not what it says but what it takes for granted” (Culler 177), the “absence” manifested in *Takekurabe* can provide a theoretical perspective from which to analyze gender, interpretation, and modernism, and from which to search for new approaches to Ichiyō’s literature.

The Battle over Interpretations: First Menstruation vs. Lost Virginity

As the English title indicates, Ichiyō’s *Child’s Play* is a story about children who are on the threshold of adulthood. Their struggle for spiritual self-definition arises out of a dualistic distinction between reality (adulthood) and fantasy (childhood). Perhaps the most obvious psychological ambivalence in this respect can be seen in the boy characters in *Takekurabe*, Nobuyuki, Shōtarō and Sangorō. Nobuyuki, the son of a priest, shows his vulnerable sensitivity; he cannot stand up to his worldly-minded father. As the dependable leader of the main-street gang and the lonely grandson of a notorious money-lender, Shōtarō also cannot free himself from the difficult choice between childhood idealism and the painful realities of adult life. Sangorō’s ontological fluctuation has its roots in his economic difficulties, as well as in the inevitable gap between adulthood and childhood.

In contrast to these three boys, the complicated, harsh realities of whose lives minutely reflect their divided sense of self, Midori is initially not aware of the necessity of living according to the paradigms set by adults. For Midori, the sister of a successful Oiran (high-class prostitute), the word “*Yoshiwara*” (a Tokyo prostitution quarter) seems to possess an almost magical power; however, when it becomes a definite reality, it loses much of this power for her. Midori’s childlike, innocent temperament prevents her from fully recognizing “what price Omaki [Midori’s sister] might have paid to reign supreme in her profession” (Ichiyō 271). Still immersed in the imaginary realm of childhood, Midori has no intention of trying to understand what is jokingly said around her: “I’d like to see her [Midori] three years from now! young men leaving the quarter would remark when they [noticed] her returning from the morning bath” (Ichiyō 259). However, when Chōkichi calls her a “tramp,” during his sudden attack on Sangorō on the eve of the Festival, Midori does experience a minor identity crisis. Nonetheless, although “the shame [can]not be scrubbed away so easily” (Ichiyō 269), Midori is portrayed as mentally strong enough to show her independence as “Midori of Daikokuya.” Reminding herself of “[w]here Daikokuya would be without her sister...the owner of the house [Daikokuya] was never curt with Midori” (Ichiyō 269), and this enables her to restore the self-control needed to reconstruct her identity.

Now we should ask: what makes “Midori [become] a different person”? (Ichiyō 286). As indicated above, even Chōkichi’s attempt to humiliate her does not make a

distinct impact on Midori; it fails to wake her up to the inescapable reality in which she is immersed. However, the motive for Midori's drastic transformation at the end of the story is not persuasive or obvious, and this is true not only for the reader, but also for the other characters, who "[miss] her and [are] puzzled" (Ichiyō 286). Clearly, the sentence "she felt so awkward and unhappy" (Ichiyō 284) does not adequately explain Midori's sudden change, but it certainly represents a key element by which the reader can try to distinguish between the stubborn, tomboyish girl and the depressed, ladylike woman she becomes. Thus, her motives can be inferred, to some extent at least. Let me quote the full passage, in which Midori's loss of orientation is skillfully described, but the mystery of her transformation is still left unsolved:

There were just sad things, vague things. Feelings...She couldn't put them into words. They made her cheeks burn. Nothing she could point to—and yet lately everything discouraged her. So many thoughts; none of them would ever have occurred to the Midori of yesterday. This awkwardness all of a sudden! How was she to explain it? If they would just leave her alone...she'd be happy to spend night and day in a dark room. No one to talk to her, no one to stare. Even if she felt unhappy, at least she would be spared the embarrassment. If only she could go on playing house forever—with her dolls for companions, then she'd be happy again. Oh! She hated, hated, hated this growing up! Why did things have to change? What she would give to go back a year, ten months, seven months even (Ichiyō 285).

We need to ask what exactly Midori's "growing up" means in this context; it is this question that provides the core means of understanding this literary work. More specifically, it is a question concerning whether or not sexual maturity is to be seen as an inevitable sign of children's emotional growth, especially of girls' growth. In other words, is a person's transition to adulthood inseparable from physical events, such as the beginning of the menstrual function or the loss of one's virginity?

According to the "orthodox" view, Midori's identity as an immaculate child experiences a crisis with her first menstruation; in this sense, "she felt so awkward and unhappy" (Ichiyō 284) because her first menstruation (a physical transition) forces her into the adult sphere. Yabu Teiko, for example, defines Midori's growing up as represented by her first menstruation, referring to women's distinctive emotional characteristics during menstruation. Yabu's supposition is based on her (fixed) belief that no woman's menstruation can be discussed without the characteristic of temporary moodiness. Therefore, before she can enter the horizon of the meaning of the sentence, her preconception is that we can never neglect the fact of short-term moodiness as an obvious indication of menstruation. For Yabu, the mother's comment that Midori will "get over it in no time" (Ichiyō 284) and Midori's complaint that "[a]ll these questions give me a headache. They make me dizzy." (Ichiyō 285) are definite

signals that indicate Midori's menstruation. Of course, such a reductionist belief has the potential of getting caught in the tempting trap of patriarchal definitions, in which the concept of women's inferiority has cunningly and systematically constructed the image of the "mad woman." In this context, it is important to deal with this "scientific" image as a patriarchal strategy aimed at fixing hierarchical relationships. I will return to this argument later; let it suffice for the moment to point out the double-edged elements of so-called "scientific" truth.

When, after considering Yabu's argument, we read Sata Ineko's article, "*Takekurabe* kaishaku he no hitotsu no gimon" ("One Question on the Interpretation of *Child's Play*"), we fully recognize that interpretation is a complex and controversial phenomenon. For Sata, Midori's "growing up" is not indicated by the beginning of menstruation, but rather by her lost virginity. According to Sata's interpretation, Midori's dream world, in which she has been caught up in the superficial gorgeousness of the Yoshiwara quarter, suddenly ceases to exist when she is awakened to the harsh reality of being forced into prostitution. The emphasis of Sata's interpretation is obviously on clarifying the epistemological gap between the child's optimistic viewpoint and her later disillusioned perceptions. From this point of view, Sata asserts that Midori's "growing up" (or her drastic change in character) cannot (or should not) be described just in terms of the child's puzzlement over her first menstruation. Sata carries her argument further, saying that "*Takekurabe* (as a literary masterpiece) could be underestimated, if we define Midori's change as the result of her first menstruation" (196).¹

Considering the perceptive significance of the act of interpretation, Sata points out that the one sentence, "she felt so awkward and unhappy," possesses the power of controlling all general interpretive principles in any critical analysis of Ichiyō's *Takekurabe*. Far more than being a mere detail, the sentence provides a number of different paradigms by which we are enabled to see that "Ichiyō's literature is (Japanese) modern literature" (Sata 196). Even though Sata is reluctant to explain all of the various conceptions of (Japanese) modern literature, she explores in some detail those issues of Japanese modernism that concern the relationship between mother and daughter. I will return to the literary issues involved in Japanese modernism later; let it suffice for the moment to point out Sata's preconceptions concerning how Ichiyō's literature can be described in terms of modernism. I will quote the scenes in which Midori's mother seems to pay no heed to Midori's puzzlement, melancholy and sadness:

Shōta became quite the grown-up. "Something the matter, is there?" "No, no." Her mother gave an odd smile. "She'll get over it in no time. She's just spoiled. I suppose she's been grumpy with her friends, too? I tell you, sometimes I've had it with that girl." Her mother turned to look at her, but Midori had gone into the other room (Ichiyō 284).

People were puzzled. Was the girl sick? "No, no. She'll be her old self again," her mother assured them. "She's just having a rest. One of her little vacations." The woman smiled. And yet there seemed to be more to it (Ichiyō 286).

It is precisely in this mother's indifferent attitude that Sata sees the modernity of Ichiyō's literature. The very vision of modernity, for Sata, is shaped by this relentless mother-figure, who "hasn't the slightest hesitation, aversion or regret in letting her own daughter fall a prey to a man's lust" (Sata 196). Sata is tempted to say that, if the matter of Midori's change is considered deeply, it becomes apparent that Ichiyō aims at showing the antithetical contrast between the child's pure perplexity and the mother's unconscious cruelty.

In this context, we need to ask whether there is any logical, rhetorical or poetic justification to make statements concerning interpretive truth or falsity. Should we "take the text to be the dominant force" (Schweickart 613) in formulating a "valid" judgment concerning its interpretation? The aim of reading, according to critics like E.D. Hirsch, Umberto Eco and Wolfgang Iser, is not to fall into a "norm-free" sphere, in which the ontological status of the text is rather undervalued as a useful interpretive medium. They claim that the disciplinary limits of interpretation inevitably affect its validity.² As long as a "text is a device conceived in order to produce its model reader" (Eco 64), the sentence "[w]hen she felt so awkward and unhappy" should be interpreted within the context of (general) textual paradigms set by the author, Ichiyō herself; or there must be, at least, several clear elements from which one interpretation can be more highly valued than another. Thus, we should also ask: Who is entitled to decide which is the best interpretation? Immersed in a world in which even the mutual comprehension of one wo/man by another seems too complicated to be attained, how can we "keep a dialectical link between *intentio operis* and *intentio lectoris*" (Eco 64)? Suppose we agree with the idea that "the author's intention must be the norm by which the validity of any 'interpretation' (explication of the verbal meaning of a passage) is measured" (Palmer 60); then the question becomes one of finding the best conceptual method to decide whether Ichiyō's "intention" refers to Midori's first menstruation, rather than to her lost virginity. In my opinion, the task of interpretation is clearly not a purely technical performance; what is needed is not to rank different (countless) interpretive performances hierarchically, but rather to realize that any interpretive orientation is inseparable from pragmatic intentions which correspond with the variety of multiple meanings that have been built up in the process of reading the text. In other words, what kinds of political, ideological and theoretical possibilities can we achieve in interpreting this controversial sentence in *Takekurabe*? If we agree with the idea that "the constraints imposed by the words on the page are 'trivial,' since their meaning can always be altered by (reader's) 'subjective action'" (Schweickart 613), it would be possible to analyze Midori's change of character as taking place beyond the limited subject-object

schema of “objective” interpretation.

It is true (or maybe false) that an author does not write with the intention of confusing the reader or of refusing communication, but in order to show his/her desire for a harmonious mutual understanding. In other words, it can be assumed that the act of reading according to certain rules of syntax and logic is usually intended to explicate the core meaning of a text, in as much as the use of language is supposed to be communal. However, do we know enough to assert that the dialogic symmetry between subject and object has always contained universalizing assumptions of possessing the truth? An oversimplified and even distorted view of harmonious stability has provided a cover for the authoritarian fetishizing of power, and this has been used to exploit marginalized parties, such as people of the Orient, women and people of color. In order to transcend such hierarchically fixed criteria, the reader’s task throughout the process of reading should not be just to passively follow the words on the page, but instead to carefully create a new *lecture* through the free play of the signifier.³

When a Girl Becomes a Woman

I would like to deal for a moment with the semantic significance of considering Midori’s change to be the result of her first menstruation. A discussion of Midori’s first menstruation would not contribute much to the study of Ichiyō’s literature, if it were merely undertaken in the context of physical evidence. Stating, without going into detail, that Midori’s short-term moodiness should be read as a sign of menstruation is based on a certain preconceived understanding of women’s biological natures, and it consequently fails to focus on what is required, in order to understand *Takekurabe*. The reference to “Midori’s mother, who had gone to check the water in the bath” (Ichiyō 285), might also yield an unfocused mode of interpretation, if we did not go beyond the closed critical realm in which the core subject of discussion is whether during menstruation a girl takes a bath or not.⁴ Of course, questions concerning whether or not menstruation causes women’s temporary sullenness, or whether or not women in menstruation take baths, remain open to debate. However, even though these (“scientific”) inquiries cannot be neglected completely in the process of reading *Takekurabe*, their interpretive significance should arise from the fact that Midori’s dramatic change must function to supply the principles for an overall understanding of *Takekurabe*. In what ways, then, does Ichiyō conceive of Midori’s transformation to be the result of her first menstruation? Or, what ideological and political possibilities can Ichiyō present to assist the reader’s formulation of an appropriate concept of a woman’s first menstruation?

Following Simone de Beauvoir’s famous phrase, “one is not born a woman; one becomes one,” feminists believe that women have been reduced to being objects for men; they are not “naturally” but constructively (or artificially) the “second sex.” The

view that the structure of language and its interaction with social relations have constructed the clearly discernible distinction between men and women is fundamental, if we see such a distinction in terms of the discourses of various power structures. A gender-based interpretation tends to suggest that Midori's first menstruation should be considered as a socially defined sign, by which Midori is constructed as a "woman" (the Other). Midori "[feels] so awkward and unhappy" because, consciously or unconsciously, she realizes that menstruation forces her into the patriarchal trap, in which the implications of sexuality are fixed as they relate to the existing social context.

Here, I would like to focus on Lacan's psychoanalysis, in order to clarify the relationship between menstruation in terms of woman's biological nature and menstruation as a sign of social construction. In this context, Lacan's distinction between "penis" and "phallus" can be seen as providing a solid ground for the feminist theory of constructionism. For Lacan, in contrast to the "penis" as a biological organ, the "phallus" is seen as a constructed "signifier" in the "symbolic order." According to Lacan, in the "imaginary" there is no difference and no absence (or lack): only identity and presence exist. However, the structure of language, which opens up the "unconscious" and the realm of the "symbolic" as an orderly mechanism, constructs such social relations as the distinction between male and female. Midori "hate[s], hate[s], hate[s] this growing up" (Ichiyō 285) because her first menstruation gives rise to "the concept of difference between the sexes [which] ontologically constitutes women into different/others" (Witting 29). Thus, it may be suggested that Midori's change (after experiencing her first menstruation?) symbolizes a patriarchal construction which dominates or overwhelms "gendered" women in practical terms. *Takekurabe's* well-depicted dramatic tension thus indicates that women's biological natures are cunningly and systematically defined in accordance with patriarchal (social) norms, in order to stabilize a binary oppositional relationship between man as the initiative subject and woman as the passive object.

The issue of a woman's first menstruation is thus of such significance that it completely changes Midori's view of the world; far more than she realizes, her very vision of reality is shaped by (socially) constructed paradigms: "When she felt so awkward and unhappy, flattery only sounded like an insult. People turned to admire her and she thought they were jeering" (Ichiyō 284). What is suddenly changed is not others' ways of seeing and thinking, but both Midori's conception of herself and her view of the world. Nothing has changed except Midori's consciousness, which forces her imprisonment within a self-enclosed world.

When the matter of perspective is considered deeply, it becomes apparent that Midori's "gaze" is the medium by which Midori invents herself as a woman. Even Midori's subjective "gaze" cannot prevent her from "seeing" (or imagining) others' "seeing" (or imagining) her as a woman (i.e. as Other). The contrast between Midori

as an innocent child and Midori as a woman emphasizes the way in which the structure of social relations constructs women's menstruation as a (visible) sign of inferiority, prior to the biological features of menstruation. For Midori, growing-up does not mean entering the realistic realm of adults from the fantastic world of children, but instead represents a shift into another (nightmarish?) dimension, in which she inevitably becomes re-mystified by the spells cast by a socially defined, universalizing value system.

Modern Japanese Consciousness as Represented in *Takekurabe*

A second direction in interpreting Midori's change is in relation to questions arising out of an understanding of Japanese modernity. In Sata Ineko's article, as we have seen, the interpretation of Midori's change in character is closely tied to matters of Japanese modernity in terms of its expression through a new writing style. Unfortunately, Sata's short article fails to provide adequate exegetic criteria, in order to clarify what modernity (or modernism) actually means or what sorts of subject matter and descriptive techniques in the practice of writing can be categorized as "modern." However, Sata believes that the intrinsic qualities of Japanese modern literature can be seen within the context of a more basic explanation or interpretation of human nature. It is thus precisely in Ichiyō's way of describing Midori's mother that Sata discerns the modernist perspective in Ichiyō's work. For Sata, the very vision of modernity is shaped by this relentless mother-figure, who "hasn't the slightest hesitation, aversion or regret at letting her own daughter fall a prey to a man's lust" (196). As Sata argues, given the (dynamic) definition(s) of modernism, we cannot (or should not) formulate its discursive aspects (or expressive dimensions) in any facile way; such a formulation would represent nothing but the primary operation of a form of subjective interpretation. However, the derivative aspect does not necessarily reflect the "norm-free" illusions of modernism. Then, what we need to ask is: how complexly, how deeply, can we conceive modernity in our understanding Ichiyō's *Takekurabe*.

In Japan, the term "modernism" historically contains a two-fold connotation. As indicated by Donald Keene, almost all the literary works written in Japan after the Meiji Restoration (1868), including realistic, naturalistic writings and "I-novels," can be broadly characterized as "modern." In other words, in the period after the abrogation of the national isolation policy, all Japanese literary works influenced by Western literary modes are modernistic writings, both because the subjects treated were "recognizably contemporary" and because the literary techniques employed "were previously unknown in Japan" (Keene 629). On the other hand, from the western literary perspective, modernism in Japan can be defined in terms of the reaction against naturalism and the "I-novel" which began at the beginning of the twentieth century.⁵ The genesis of the Japanese "I-novel" can be connected to the influence of

naturalism. In the early part of the twentieth century, French naturalistic authors such as Flaubert, Maupassant, and Zola were introduced in rapid succession to Japanese literary circles. Naturalism shared with the Japanese "I-novel" the empirical aim of depicting things as they are. The most significant and characteristic aspect of naturalism can be seen in its scientific approach to literature, focusing on two kinds of force, "heredity" and "environment." The western concept of naturalism generally carries the positive intention of ameliorating society through portraying human beings (and their behavior). If the connection between naturalism (and the Japanese "I-novel") and modernism is considered deeply, it becomes apparent that the keen observation of human beings and social processes is a product of early twentieth-century modernism, which questions "the certainties that had supported traditional modes of social organization, religion, and morality, and also traditional ways of conceiving the human self" (Abrams 119). More specifically, we can see modernity as containing a new ideological concept of the individual's "self" as pursuing his/her identity by reflecting upon his/her life experiences amid the social and ethical confusion of modern society. If the "I-novel," the representative literary form of (Japanese) modernism, is the "'end-product' of the Japanese writer's struggle for a modern identity" (Wolfe 101), a general account of modernism cannot be attempted without grasping the meaning of the way fictional characters in such works are placed in relation to the upheavals of modern society.

Although Ichiyō's name is most often associated with the modern project of (controversial) feminine writing, her reputation as a modern female writer is far from accommodating her writing to the (modernist) genre of the Japanese "I-novel." The "I-novel" (or autobiographical or confessional novel) cannot usually be discussed without biographical research on the author, because the "I-novel" is a literary term for works in which the author writes of his/her own experiences and everyday life with as little fictionalization as possible. As indicated by Keene, the distinctive synthesis of artistic and literary principles created by the Japanese "I-novelists" has involved "self-assertion."⁶ He argues that, as "the name of the genre indicates, the creation of an individual, the 'I' of the story, was an important task of the 'I' novelist" (513). If we narrow the semantic dimension of (Japanese) modernism down to a consideration of the Japanese "I-novel," which "hardly goes beyond portraying the 'I'" (Keene 517), it is difficult to categorize Ichiyō as a modernist writer. In terms of the process of artistic plot development, Ichiyō's literature does not correspond to this aspect of the "I-novel." However, in terms of existential self-inquiry, Ichiyō's literature is clearly closely associated with the poetics of modernism. At this point, I wish to discuss why interpreting Midori's change as the sign of her lost virginity makes us conceive of *Takekurabe* as a work of modernist fiction.

The form of literary modernism, as has been suggested, takes as its goal the fullest possible description of human nature. One of the preconceptions of modernism

is that the observation of human beings should involve “a deliberate and radical break with some of the traditional bases” (Abrams 119) of human psychology. In light of the overall epistemological purpose of modern writing in relation to the detailed description of human nature, Ichiyō’s efforts to suggest sensitive, unfathomable human nature can be seen in her descriptions of her child-characters, Nobuyuki, Shōtarō, Sangorō and Midori. In her skillful and delicate portrayal of these child-characters, we see the distinctively modern pursuit of self-identity. As I indicated above, Ichiyō vividly dramatizes these children’s ambivalent mental processes and the spiritual struggles caused by their inability to belong completely to either the sweet and pure illusion of childhood or the materialistic reality of adulthood. As his father’s successor, Nobuyuki is destined to be a priest, but his sensitivity cannot stand up to his father’s vulgar life. Although parentless, Shōtarō defends his notorious grandmother, but he is reluctant to help in her money-lending business. The fact that Sangorō is forced to act like a clown because of his family’s financial problems indicates the existence of a fixed hierarchy even in the children’s community. The contrast between the childish Midori and Midori as a mature lady highlights her awakening to the inescapable realities of her life. On the other hand, Ichiyō’s adult-characters’ vision of reality is rigidly fixed, far more than they realize themselves.

Ichiyō indicates that one of the essential qualities of being an adult (or immersion into the Symbolic Order) is the possession of a sufficiently stable conception of reality, without doubting universalized social rules. Self-affirmation is, then, perhaps the most basic act of adult thinking; indeed, acting as an adult may itself be said to be a constant process of generalizing social paradigms. Nobuyuki’s priest-father is “nothing if not practical” (Ichiyō 275), but he is far from having any doubt about his equation of the religious mind with business ambitions. Despite Nobuyuki’s expressions of concern about the reputation of the temple, the “reverend priest would hear nothing of it” saying “[k]nock it off. You don’t know what you’re talking about” (Ichiyō 274). Sangorō’s father, who is called “[g]roveling Tetsu” because his “head [is] always lowered before his betters” (Ichiyō 276), also realizes his inferior status in the economically determined hierarchical system and accepts it unquestioningly; he is blind to his son’s sensitivities. We may say that, as an adult, Midori’s mother “hasn’t the slightest hesitation, aversion or regret at letting her own daughter fall a prey to a man’s lust” (Sata 196); her self-affirmation as an adult never allows her to question her decision regarding her two daughters’ futures as prostitutes. If the matter of modernism is considered deeply within the context of the keen observation of human nature, such contrasts between the uncertain nature of the child and the adult’s conclusive process of thinking can be conceived of as a product of modernism. More specifically, when Ichiyō explores existential issues in some detail, the modernist pursuit of self-identity is certainly highlighted by this very child/adult dichotomy. Thus, a consideration of the mother’s determination to sell her daughter’s virginity is

necessary to our process of reading *Takekurabe* as a modernist literary work. If Midori's change in character were the result of her first menstruation, we could still say that the mother's indifferent attitude remains within the fixed scope of realistic observation. It is only in terms of the impact of the mother's self-affirmation in selling her daughter's virginity that we can see the conceptual contrast between the sensitive nature of children and the self-determination of adults. If modernism derives much of its dynamism from the detailed portrayal of human nature, considering Midori's change as the sign of her lost virginity carries more connotations of modernism than do other possible interpretations.

The "Absent" Speaks: Hermeneutics of the "Absent"

So far, I have focused on the hermeneutic understanding of the sentence under discussion, in accordance with the factors involved in its deciphering process. A literary work furnishes a context for its own understanding; a fundamental problem of interpretation is the multiple ways in which an individual's personal orientation can be accommodated to that of the work. This leads to another question: Does not Ichiyō purposely leave the mystery of Midori's sudden change unresolved? Does not the "absence" of a conclusive answer in this case provide, in a sense, what we see as one of the innovative themes of modernism? Could not this "absence" itself be conceived of as the "presence" of a certain artistic power? Now, putting aside the act of interpreting the sentence (or the act of giving meaning(s) to the sentence), I would like to give some indication of the significance of this "absence." While it is primarily in the symmetrical contrast between sensitive children and self-affirmative adults that we see Ichiyō's modernist technique of conceiving the human self, the power of "absence" can also be seen as one of the most significant facets of modernism. In general,

[b]y violating the accepted conventions and proprieties, not only of art but of social discourse, they [the modernists] set out to create ever-new artistic forms and styles and to introduce hitherto neglected, and sometimes forbidden, subject matters (Abrams 120).

Those modernists who disliked the closed nature of literary orthodoxies endowed their fictions with an artistically rebellious spirit, underscoring the necessity to transform the constructed *topos*. To make a broad generalization, we could say that pre-modern works of literature usually cannot escape complicity with the generalized ethical injunctions, didactic dogmas, and systematic regulations of their time.⁷ I realize that this kind of reductive statement may, to some extent, run the risk of neglecting polysemous narrative characteristics. However, if the formulation of social conventions is considered deeply, it becomes apparent that pre-modern narrative "[b]egins with a disruption in the established social order; its plot consists of subsequent attempts to restore that order; and when this resolution occurs, the story

is over” (Sweeney 4). It is significant to note that any conventional ethical estimation of the characters’ actions is cautiously avoided in Ichiyō’s *Takekurabe*.

Far from being a dramatized narrator, who “is more often provided with numerous physical, mental, and/or moral attributes” (Prince 24), the narrator in *Takekurabe* consistently avoids playing the role of a commonsense philosopher or moralist, and never forces the reader to judge the characters’ actions in terms of standardized ethical doctrines. Even though the contrast depicted between the sensitive children (Nobuyuki, Shōtarō, Sangorō and Midori) and the self-affirmative adults (Nobuyuki’s father, Sangorō’s father and Midori’s mother) carries slightly negative connotations with regard to the growing-up process, the narrator is never completely judgmental and avoids offering support to either side. In other words, as defined in modernist terms, fiction is supposed to transcend society’s notions of virtue and vice, and provide the reader with greater latitude for interpretation. These principles also apply to Ichiyō’s *Takekurabe*. It is not only in the non-dramatized quality of the narration, but also in the “absence” of truth (the exact reason for Midori’s change) that we discern the archetypal features of modernist narrative space in *Takekurabe*. As I indicated earlier, the present study attempts to discover some persuasive foundation from which to explore the interpretive decision which the reader necessarily makes between Midori’s first menstruation and her lost virginity as motives for her subsequent behavior. It is this very passionate debate that Ichiyō aims at provoking in *Takekurabe*. Ichiyō regards the “absence” of truth primarily as a vehicle for her rebellion against preconceived principles of writing. As can be seen in much other modernist fiction, this “absence” of truth highlights the fact that a work of literature is not a complete object which we can take for granted, but rather a “medium” by which we attempt to encompass epistemological and ontological questions regarding self-identity and the constructed self. Broadly speaking, the reader’s decision between Midori’s first menstruation and her lost virginity is not really the point at issue; instead, it is the “absence” of truth itself that we must understand through conceptualization and analysis. By intentionally blurring the actual cause of Midori’s character change, Ichiyō underscores the “unwritten” parts of the text and consequently provides the reader with a modernist space, in which he/she can fill in the blanks in content in a self-reflexive manner. In as much as the reader does possess the power to carry out such a subjective “gap-filling” task, her/his reconstruction of the story through compensating for its “unwritten” parts must be considered as a product of the modernist aesthetic which affirms the notion that human nature can be perceived differently by different people. For instance, *Takekurabe* potentially suggests that, from the adults’ perspective, there is nothing wrong with being (socially) constructed as a mature adult, while, for the children, there is something absolutely wrong with doing so. However, the text itself remains far from taking any practical responsibility for judging which side is right, because the text only establishes the preliminary stage

in the process of interpretation, providing suggestive and sometimes essential information before it ever begins to demand that the reader participate in the narrative process.

Thus, when discussing the role of "absence" of *Takekurabe*, we encounter difficulties because our personal presuppositions are never the same; they reflect different epistemological realities. However, this difference among possible interpretations, the work's "absence" itself, can often be very fruitful; it can suggest the new understanding of human cognition under different historical, social and ideological conditions that was enabled by the advent of modernism. The existence of "absence" in *Takekurabe* implies that objectivity is a myth; the omniscient author is an illusion. Ichiyō reinforces the idea that, not only do we need to concern ourselves with the relevance of logical theories in our interpretations, but we also need to become actively engaged in decoding (or questioning) ideologies and cultural codes. "Absence" thus creates a communicative area in which the text anticipates the reader's collaboration in confronting such generalized and frequently oppressive concepts.

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- 1 Quotations from Sata Ineko's article are all in my translation, unless otherwise indicated
- 2 Even though these three critics, Hirsch, Eco and Iser, believe in the power of the text to some extent at least, the critical stances of these critics seem to be too distanced to be compatible. For instance, while Hirsch's theoretical view claims one valid interpretive process, Eco's and Iser's critical works generally argue for the validity of multiple interpretations.
- 3 This is precisely what Derrida calls *differance*. By means of the close-reading approach, *differance* in any writing gradually appears. When Derrida sees a text as the "end of the book and the beginning of writing," *lecture*, as the starting point for new writing, is *deferred* and *differed*, and eventually ends up as part of a process of open-ended play.
- 4 Supporting Sata Ineko's idea, some scholars point out that Midori's mother's act of

checking the water in the bath actually connotes Midori's lost virginity. This idea focuses on the preconception, based on material evidence, that women in menstruation are not supposed to take a bath. On the other hand, Yabu Teiko argues against this supposition; she claims that it is absolutely possible for us to think that Midori's mother checks the water in the bath, not for Midori, but for other family members. See Yabu's "Hibō no sei no monogatari-Higuchi Ichiyō's *Takekurabe*" for more details.

- 5 Modernist movements defined as anti-naturalist or anti-"I-novel" in Japan are represented by the *Shinkankaku ha* (New Sensationalist School) and the *Shinshinrigaku ha* (New Psychologist School).
- 6 For the Japanese "I-novelists," artistic creation takes precedence over personal existence. Therefore, they often feel obligated to lead decadent or deviant lives, in order to respond to the demand of the reader and the critic for more sensational revelations.
- 7 For example, these paradigms are closely related to the Aristotelian rules of narrative development—the need for a beginning, middle and end. As Wallace Martin notes: "The Literary term from narrative structure is of course 'plot,' and most of what the critical tradition tells us about it is derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*. We know that a plot is formed from a combination of temporal succession and causality" (81). In such Aristotelian narrative, the reader must fill in the blanks in the narrative content, or follow (socially) appropriate directions suggested by a didactic narrator or other conservative characters, in order to find his/her way to an ultimate closure.