



The Essence of Loneliness: A Re-analysis of the “Cherry Forest” Image in *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest*

Liu Xiaoxia¹

¹ Sichuan University of Science & Engineering, Zigong 643000, China
1010508037@qq.com

Abstract. *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest* is an allegorical modern novel written by Sakaguchi Ango. Published in June 1947, it ranks among his representative works. The author takes the well-known “Cherry Forest” as the title and weaves this image throughout the entire text. As the plot advances to different stages, the depiction of the “Cherry Forest” in the novel presents hierarchical changes, and its narrative functions shift accordingly—these are crucial to interpreting the novel’s core theme of “loneliness”. Taking the image of the “Cherry Forest” in the novel as the thread, this paper examines the author’s reflections and explorations on the essence of “loneliness” from a dynamic perspective, and further discusses the modernistic value of this work.

Keywords: *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest*, Cherry Forest image, loneliness.

1 Introduction

The term “image” is generally paired with “interpretation,” as it involves the understanding of symbolic meanings. The reason this paper uses the term “Re-analysis” is mainly because the symbolic meaning of the “cherry forest” image differs greatly between the source language and target language cultures. Therefore, “Re-analysis” aims to express the interpretation of this image within the target language and cultural background.

As a dynamic and multi-dimensional cultural symbol, cherry blossoms embody the views on nature and aesthetics in Japanese culture. They not only carry traditional symbolic meanings but also keep enriching their connotations continuously. With the development of the times and the changes of social history, new cultural implications have been endowed to them. From the verse in *Man'yōshū* (mid-8th century) —“When cherry blossoms bloom on the hills, all eyes turn to them; To behold them with you fills my heart with enduring longing” — to that in *Kokin Wakashū* (early 10th century): “Cherry blossoms bloom everywhere, clustering in profusion on mountain slopes, like white clouds floating down”, these are all poems eulogizing cherry blossoms. When the cherry blossom season arrives, people gather in groups under the trees, feasting, singing and indulging themselves in the beautiful scenery unreservedly.¹

However, Shu Fanghong (2009) provides a different analysis and narrative of the evolution of the cherry blossom image during the period before and after World War II. From the Meiji era to the end of World War II, with the evolution of Japanese militarism, the cherry blossom, as the symbol of Japan's national flower, encompassed multiple ideological orientations and was artificially combined with Japan's modern state system to complete the construction of an "imperial metaphor."²

Qin Gang (2004) elaborates on the historical background of the era: in the vast majority of landscapes listed as famous cherry blossom viewing spots throughout Japan, the planting of cherry blossoms was almost entirely concentrated in the short 40-year period between the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 and the end of the Pacific War. Qin Gang points out that for a period after Japan's defeat in 1945, the cherry blossoms planted in parks and along roads throughout Japan were extensively cut down along with the domestic denunciation of militarism and the Emperor system.³

On the other hand, through his investigation of weeping cherry blossoms, Yanagida Kunio discovered that weeping cherries were often planted at cemeteries, sacred grounds, and Shinto/Buddhist sites, believing that cherry blossoms were related to beliefs about the spirits of the dead. He inferred this was because people believed that when gods descended from the sky to earth, they chose cherry trees as their perches. Additionally, Yanagida Kunio believed that in ancient times there existed an era when viewing cherry blossoms was conducted as a ritual, based on oral traditions that viewing cherry blossoms could pray for the souls of the dead to be spared from the sufferings of hell.⁴

In the novel, the author writes at the beginning: "Whenever the cherry blossoms bloom, people carry sake and eat rice dumplings while strolling under the cherry forest, intoxicated by the infinite spring scenery, praising it as a supreme sight on earth. In reality, this is a false illusion." He also emphasizes: "In ancient times, people only felt terror under the cherry forest; no one admired its beauty as a supreme sight." The author also uses a passage to describe how the absence of human shadows under the cherry forest is an extremely terrifying thing. "In Noh theater, a mother goes mad searching for her beloved child who was kidnapped by human traffickers. Later she enters the blooming cherry forest, chases the phantom of her child in the endless sea of flowers, and finally dies, sleeping forever beneath the flowers."⁵

Connected to *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest* published in June 1947, the author begins by criticizing, satirizing, and negating the annual spectacle of cherry blossom viewing, shaping it into an image of "terror." At the same time, he adapts the ending of the madwoman in the Noh play *Sakuragawa*.⁶ In terms of content, this not only paves the way for the development of the novel's plot but also foreshadows its conclusion. However, regarding the interpretation of the "cherry forest" image in this novel, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of "cherry blossoms" in the historical context of 1947 when the novel was published, which in turn allows for a deeper understanding of the historical context. At the same time, we should understand the "cherry blossom" itself as containing subversive, non-beautiful images.

Moreover, in Kajii Motojirō's contemporary work *Under the Cherry Trees* (『桜の樹の下には』), he writes at the beginning: Under the cherry trees are piles of corpses! This is worth believing. Why? Because it is hard to believe that cherry blossoms could

bloom so beautifully. Because I don’t believe in that kind of beauty, these past two or three days I have felt uneasy. But now I finally understand. That under the cherry trees are piles of corpses is worth believing.⁷ From the connotation of the text, Kajii Motojirō’s writing and feeling that “under the cherry trees are buried corpses” forms an intertextual relationship with the concrete image of the “cherry forest” in *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest*, reflecting the common cognitive understanding of the “cherry blossom” and “cherry forest” images among groups of post-war Japanese intellectuals.

In addition, Sakaguchi Ango also depicts the “cherry forest” in his work *Dew’s Answer*: “My younger sister is exquisitely beautiful. As I gaze at her, I feel as though I am left alone under the blooming cherry forest that stretches for miles around. Buried in the petals, chased by the wind, I trudge on in agony.”⁸ As a writer who lived through World War II, Ango once witnessed the horrific sight of corpses strewn across the blooming cherry forest, and the experience of being alone in the “cherry forest” in his writing is imbued with a spiritual undercurrent of profound loneliness and suffering. Published in 1945, this text provides a textual foreshadowing for the construction of the “cherry forest” imagery in *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest*. Based on a systematic sorting of the physical imagery of “cherry blossom” and the “cherry forest” as well as their historical contexts, this paper intends to explore the novel’s thematic focus on the individual’s perception and experience of “loneliness” as an essential human condition against a specific historical backdrop, by conducting an in-depth analysis of the multiple connotations and symbolic implications of the cherry forest imagery in *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest*.

2 From Primitive Loneliness to “Human World” Loneliness

To better grasp the image of the “cherry forest,” this paper has made the following statistics regarding the vocabulary used in the novel’s content:

Table 1. Statistics of “Sakura” Imagery in *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest*⁹

Vocabulary	Frequency
桜の森 (Sakura no mori/Cherry forest)	19
桜の花 (Sakura no hana/Cherry blossoms)	12
桜の木 (Sakura no ki/Cherry trees)	4
桜の林 (Sakura no hayashi/Cherry forest)	1
桜 (Sakura/Cherry)	36 (total)

Furthermore, from the content it can be seen that the novel has 214 paragraphs in total. There are five sections that concentrate on direct or indirect descriptions of the “cherry forest,” running through the entire novel. These five sections’ descriptions of the “cherry forest” are basically not depictions of its physical entity, but rather mostly use stories related to the “cherry forest,” the mountain bandit’s psychological activities, and

other methods to describe or indirectly depict the “cherry forest.” Below is a classification and examination of the content regarding the “cherry forest” in each section.

2.1 Primitive Loneliness: The Cherry Forest in the Mountain Bandit’s Eyes

Part One: The first four paragraphs at the beginning of the novel show that before kidnapping the eighth woman, the “mountain bandit’s” fear of the cherry forest represents primitive loneliness.

*When the cherry blossoms bloom, people always carry wine, taste dumplings, stroll and linger under the trees, intoxicated by such supreme scenery, their hearts overflowing with the romance and joy of spring days. However, this is merely a false appearance. Why call it false? Because under the cherry forest during the viewing season, it has always been a place where crowds gather, people vomit from drunkenness, and even fight. This has been the scene since the Edo period. Thinking back to ancient times, people not only did not regard the cherry forest as supreme scenery, but rather were filled with dread toward this forest of flowers.*¹⁰

When the text returns to the male protagonist, even the brutal, robber and murderous “mountain bandit” feels terror and distraction under the cherry forest, becoming mentally deranged. The first part’s portrayal of the cherry forest renders an image of the cherry forest as false, terrifying, silent, cold, and maddening through three scenes: the ending of the madwoman in Noh theater, the story of two people passing through the cherry forest at Suzuka Ridge, and the mountain bandit’s terror of the cherry forest.

2.2 “Human World” Loneliness: The Cherry Forest in the Man’s Eyes

Part Two: Paragraphs 49-52 of the novel show that after being “dominated” by the woman to kill his six wives, the scene the man remembers under the cherry forest represents a new loneliness.

*Why so similar? he wondered. (Omitted) The blooming cherry forest! It was so similar to passing through the cherry forest. He couldn’t say exactly where, what, or what taste was so similar, but certainly, something was exactly the same. He had always been like this, only able to vaguely perceive things to this extent, and even if he couldn’t investigate further, he didn’t mind at all.*¹¹

And this description of the cherry forest is also achieved through the man’s psychological description and imagination, not a depiction of the physical image of the cherry forest.

The man has his soul sucked away by the woman’s heavenly beauty, listens to the woman’s orders to kill his six wives; listens to the woman’s orders to keep the lame woman as a servant. From the moment the man carried the woman on his back, he seemed to already be in a position of being dominated, unable to resist. But here, when the cherry forest and the woman establish a connection, regarding the matter of going to the cherry forest this year, the man has deeply imprinted in his heart a thought: that he must not let the woman know his thoughts. From this point, it seems we can see a little consideration and a little weak resistance from the man toward the woman. He has begun a new loneliness, he just doesn’t know it yet.

Part Three: Paragraphs 80-109 of the novel show that before going to the capital, the conversation between the man and woman about the cherry forest and the man’s attempt to go to the cherry forest alone represent his exploration of loneliness. In this

section, the cherry forest directly appears as the subject of conversation between the man and woman, while there is also a concrete description of the man entering the cherry forest once again.

*The man decided to go to the capital. (Omitted) In another two or three days, the cherry blossoms in the forest would be in full bloom. He had made up his mind that this year he would definitely sit quietly in the forest of blooming cherry blossoms.*¹²

*Looking out, blooming cherry blossoms were everywhere. The moment he stepped into the forest, he remembered the woman’s bitter smile. (Omitted) Under the flowers, a bone-chilling cold wind blew from all directions (Omitted). In the forest, the wind was shrill and the cranes cried; he shouted loudly and ran desperately. What emptiness this was!*¹³

To satisfy the woman, the man resolves to journey to the capital, feeling he has nothing to hold him back. The only thing he cannot bear to leave behind is the cherry forest. Why this cherry forest, then? Is it for the sake of reflection? Yet the man has never cared for contemplation. Instead, the blooming cherry forest acts as a symbolic entity that guides him toward an understanding of certain essential truths. Tormented by his own fears, he is seized by dread and unease each time he sets foot in the cherry forest. Thus, before his trip to the capital, he resolves to visit the grove, yet he cannot fathom the exact reason for doing so, nor is he aware that the grove is the one guiding him. Here, the blooming cherry forest is not a physical entity in the literal sense; rather, it has been endowed with anthropomorphic qualities by the man. It is a metaphorical cherry forest that lays bare the essential nature of “himself,” the “human world,” and even the “world.” Since the man is still in the process of seeking these essential truths, dread and unease linger within him. Meanwhile, the woman is like an obstacle he must experience on his own path toward obtaining essence.

Table 2. The Cherry Forest in Dialogue Between Man and Woman¹⁴

Woman	Man
That’s really strange. Not with whom, what kind of promise?	The cherry blossoms are about to bloom.
Could it be a promise with the cherry blossoms?	The cherry blossoms are about to bloom; I must see them before I leave.
Why?	I must go see the cherry forest.
I’m asking you why you must see them?	Just because the flowers are about to bloom.
Because the flowers are about to bloom, why?	Because under the flowers there is cold wind everywhere.
Under the flowers?	Standing under the flowers, you can’t see the end.
Under the flowers?	
Then take me to under the flowers too.	No, that won’t do.

So it really has to be alone. (The woman
smiled bitterly)

The man and woman's first direct conversation about the cherry forest shows that the woman does not respect the man's thoughts; she is merely curious, but not truly wanting to know or care about what the man is actually thinking. And the man also directly refuses the woman's request for the first time, not taking her to under the flowers. To this, the woman responds with a "bitter smile." However, the woman's bitter smile is deeply imprinted in his mind; whenever he thinks of it, he feels as if sharp blades are scraping his head, and this feeling he cannot cut away with a sword. This indicates the woman's lack of understanding and the man's "loneliness." From the woman's final words "So it really has to be alone," we can see that the man must go alone to bear and traverse the path toward understanding essence. He is destined to be "lonely."

Finally, the moment the man steps into the cherry forest alone, he remembers the bitter smile the woman gave him. Because of this bitter smile, his mind begins to confuse. In the end, it concludes in a "form of failure": feeling empty, struggling to escape, panting for breath, exhausted. Once again, the man has fled the cherry forest. That is, he has fled from the loneliness he explored.

3 Facing and Returning to Loneliness

Part Four: Paragraphs 164-165 of the novel, after becoming weary of the woman's bottomless desires and games, when determined to return to the mountains, the cherry forest he remembers represents "him" resolving to contact and feel loneliness. This description of the cherry forest is actually the man seeing a cherry tree in the capital and remembering the cherry forest at Suzuka Ridge. This is the cherry forest in the man's memory, the man's nostalgia and the memory that first awakened him.

At that time, the man still didn't understand. In this condition, one morning he discovered himself lying under a cherry tree, which made him think of the cherry forest. This was the first time the man thought of the cherry forest after coming to the capital. Thus, the man made a decision: return to the mountains! At this point, "he was like someone waking from a nightmare. He felt saved." Because he himself was awakening, was on the path toward understanding essence.

Confusion, to sobriety, and the psychological experience of returning to loneliness. And these three psychological changes within this extremely short timeline happen to reflect the protagonist's life changes over the extremely long timeline from his appearance as a "mountain bandit" to his final return to the mountains as a "man."

*The secret under the blooming cherry forest is now known to no one. Perhaps, that is "loneliness." The man needs no longer fear loneliness, because he himself is loneliness.*¹⁵

The man is on the road back to the mountains from the capital, carrying the woman on his back. The man is immersed in memories of the day he seized the woman; he was also carrying her on his back like this, and he felt happy, and today's happiness makes him feel even more fulfilled. While the man is happy and blessed, he has not forgotten

the cherry forest. Before long, however, he ventures deep into the forest where the cherry blossoms are in full bloom; all is silent around him, and he suddenly realizes that the woman is a ghost. Amidst a bitter, howling wind and a sea of blossoms, he slays her in a daze. For the first time in his life, he bursts into loud sobs. When he regains his senses, he sits in the very heart of the blooming cherry forest, and the dread and unease that have plagued him on all other days are gone without a trace. He has no home to return to. He has returned to loneliness, returned to the state of being alone when he first came to the mountains. But the man at this moment is no longer the mountain bandit who was always afraid of the cherry forest. Because he has understood that the essence of “himself,” the “human world,” and even the “world” is loneliness. He himself is loneliness, and therefore he no longer fears loneliness.

And discovering that the essence of “himself,” the human world, and even the world—is “loneliness.” He was lonely from beginning to end; it’s just that after walking through this journey and returning to loneliness, he is no longer afraid and uneasy, but rather sober beyond sadness and emptiness. At this point, the man has understood that the meaning of the cherry forest is to guide him toward loneliness, and perhaps the essence of the cherry forest is loneliness.

4 The Essence of Loneliness

Regarding the theme of “loneliness,” Sakaguchi Ango has already made related elaborations in his works. First, in the 1941 publication *The Homeland of Literature*, the author uses five instances of “loneliness,” including: “absolute loneliness,” “loneliness of existence,” and “dark loneliness.” In this critique, Ango clearly expresses his literary view. He believes that absolute loneliness, unsaveable loneliness, is the homeland of literature and humanity. Without a consciousness of homeland, without awareness of homeland, literature cannot be produced.¹⁶

Second, in the 1942 publication *Personal Views on Japanese Culture*, the author uses the word “loneliness” in 14 places. These instances of “loneliness” are scattered throughout sections from “Regarding the Japanese Style” to “Regarding Vulgarly,” “Regarding the Home.”¹⁷ It can be said that in Sakaguchi Ango’s view, Japanese culture is filled with “loneliness.” People are unfree because of loneliness, yet literature is born from this. This echoes the viewpoint in *The Homeland of Literature*.

Finally, in the April 1946 publication *On Degeneration*, in response to the nihilistic and decadent state of post-war Japanese society at the time, he issued the urgent call: “Survive, degenerate,” pointing out that only by degenerating can people survive. People must choose the correct path to degenerate, and only through thorough degeneration can they discover and save themselves.¹⁸

The author’s urgent call in this critique can be seen as a reflection of the protagonist mountain bandit’s journey in *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest*. Only by experiencing a series of explorations, pursuits, and returns to loneliness can he achieve spiritual, self-redemption, and understand the essence of loneliness as the essence of the self, the human world, and even the world.

The above three critiques were all published before *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest*. From this, it can be inferred that *Under the Blooming Cherry Forest* is a work containing the author's series of thoughts on literature, Japanese culture, and even life and the essence of the world. The theme of "loneliness" is embodied and complemented on this foundation.

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