

# Research on Personalities of Characters in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's Early Works

## Rashomon, The Nose and Steal Taken as Examples

Fengjuan Wu

School of Foreign Languages  
Jilin Business and Technology College  
Changchun, China

**Abstract**—Ryunosuke Akutagawa is a well-known Japanese writer of short novels in modern times and an outstanding representative of new-thought school. In his early works such as *Rashomon*, *The Nose and Steal*, vivid and lively characters were created through delicate and refined psychological description, and in-depth description on cruel social reality, fight between good and evil in human nature and egoistic mentality was conducted. Many symbolic mirror images are artistic reflections of the world filled with ungratefulness, indifference, selfishness and egoism. Through description on personalities of characters in these works, a rational cognition of a world filled with ungratefulness, indifference, selfishness and egoism is described in a profound way, which reflects the writer's opinion about people and affairs and his unique philosophy of human nature.

**Keywords**—Personalities of Characters; Good and Evil; Egoism

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the history of Japanese literature, Ryunosuke Akutagawa reached a peak. Akutagawa is an important representative of the history of Japanese literature. Compared with other literati, he was unique and extremely calm and thus was very impressive. As an important representative in the history of Japanese literature, Ryunosuke created a large number of great well-received works during his short life, among which some were included in Modern Japanese and some were adapted into films. Ryunosuke Literary Award is named after Ryunosuke. In Japan, Ryunosuke Literary Award is equivalent to Maodun Literary Prize in China. It is thus clear that Ryunosuke has a large influence in the history of Japanese literature. However, as a great regret, Ryunosuke Akutagawa only spent over 10 years in creating more than 140 pieces of novel and a large number of essays and poems due to the fact that he committed suicide when he was only 35 years old.

Ryunosuke was smart and good at thinking even during

---

This paper serves as a phased research result of Social Science Research Project of the Education Department of Jilin Province in 2015 during the 12<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan.

Name of Project: Research on Personalities of Characters and Their Relevance in Early Works of Ryunosuke Akutagawa. Number of Project: Ji Jiao Ke Wen He Zi 2015 No. 393

his childhood. And he had special feelings and expressions about his hard life in his childhood, which was directly related to his life experience. Born on March 1, 1892, he was the eldest son in his family. Unfortunately, when he was only 9 months old, his mother began to suffer serious mental disorder and his father, Toshizō Nihara, couldn't take care of his young son and thus sent him to his maternal grandmother's home. His maternal grandmother had the surname of Ryunosuke, so he was named Ryunosuke Akutagawa. His mother died when he was only 11 years old, which cast a big shadow over him. During his adulthood, literature became a medium for his thinking, through which he found psychological comfort and a carrier for thinking. If we explore his career in literature, we may find that his early works are more thought-provoking. Most of these works are historical novels under the background of Heian Period during the 11th and 12th century. Many stories in such novels were the results of reprocessing and re-creation of some old stories, based on which he tried to find a carrier for his mental struggle in order to place his thoughts about human nature. By giving life to these old stories, he enlivened history. By including his thoughts about human nature in his own life, he not only created many vivid artistic figures but also provided a mirror reflection of social reality at that time, among which *Rashomon*, *The Nose and Steal* are especially considered as classic works.

In this paper, *Rashomon*, *The Nose and Steal* are taken as examples to conduct a research on literary figures in Ryunosuke Akutagawa's early works. Through personalities of characters and description on psychology of protagonists, he described a world filled with ungratefulness, selfishness and egoism.

### II. THE SELFISH AND EGOISTIC SERVANT AND OLD WOMAN IN RASHOMON

Created in 1915, *Rashomon* serves as a representative work of Ryunosuke. Back then, Sino-Japanese War and Russo-Japanese War were just over. Although Japan was the winner in these wars, cruelty of war inspired Ryunosuke's thinking about human nature. Should human beings always act in this way? When he was very depressed, the First World War broke out. In order to raise fund for military

expenditure, the ruling circles transferred the burden to workers, farmers and poor people and suppressed those rebels in a bloody way. As for these things, rulers had the reason of protecting national interest, based on which they could kill and bully people and make the country fall into injustice and turmoil. Facing such social reality, Ryunosuke felt the excruciating pain and had suspicion and concern over the society. In creating the literary work, he put the story under the background of the last years of Heian Period and chose Rashomon as the specific place. Due to social turmoil, destitution of people and severe misery, the once magnificent and prosperous Rashomon became a place for dumping dead bodies, which was terrifying and horrifying for people. Just like falling sesame seeds, crowds of crows flew to the place in order to eat dead bodies. At this moment, a living person appeared at Rashomon and he was a protagonist in the novel, namely the servant. However, he was no longer a servant because he has just been fired. With no place to go and no way out, he arrived at the mass grave located at Rashomon. He had only two choices, starving to death at Rashomon or becoming a robber. He couldn't decide which way to go and hesitated. The dark rainy day made the servant feel more depressed, and there was a fight between good and evil in his heart. Historical background in the work was dark and the stage should be dark inevitably, based on which the basic conflict in the novel was highlighted at this moment.

How to solve this conflict? The second figure arranged by Ryunosuke at this moment, namely a short, thin and weak old woman with white hair, appeared. In the pile of dead bodies, she was pulling long hair out of the dead body of a woman with one hand while holding a pine torch with the other hand. For the purpose of surviving, the old woman pulled hair out of dead bodies and sold them, which also served as the reason for her subsistence. There was no difference between this reason and the reason for national interest. You could kill people willfully for national interest. Why shouldn't I pull hair out of dead bodies in order to keep myself alive? We had the same reason, same logic and same thought. Could it be considered as human nature?

In Ryunosuke's work, what is the servant's attitude towards the old woman with white hair? At first sight, he felt that her behavior of pulling hair out of dead bodies was weird and creepy and then abhorred such behavior strongly, about which his goodness and her evil had a fight in his heart. He challenged the old woman for her behavior and asked for a reason. She said: It is wrong to pull the hair from the dead. But these dead people also did this kind of business when they were alive. This woman used to cut snakes into 4 sections, dried up and sold it as fish when she was alive. She would have continued to do this if she was not dead from disease. The fish she sold tasted very fresh, the soldier liked these fish a lot. It was bad for her to do that job, but there was no choice. Just like me, if I did not do this, I will starve to death. There is no way ah! She knows, maybe she'll forgive me.. Such word awoke the servant and made him realize his situation. If he didn't rob something here, he would die. Therefore, the fight between good and evil no longer existed in his heart. The good would be beaten or transformed into evil. So the old woman was robbed of

her clothes by the servant, for which he had a sufficient reason, namely that if I didn't rob you, I would starve to death. Accepting such reality, he recognized the self-evident truth and faith about the society, based on which his evil was integrated with other evils and there would be no hesitation or struggle. This result pierced readers' hearts in a serious way. The evil human nature was thus enlarged to the extreme.

The leading figure of the story is a long-term employed servant. He had received certain education as a servant in a rich family. But he has been fired and must consider how to survive. In the turbulent society, he must choose, either starve to death, or be a robber. But in the heart of the servant, he couldn't have decided to be a gangster at once, because of the education he had received from his family. He has been living in a good world. But now he was fired, and had to enter another world. When he climbed the walls to see the outside world, the evil part gradually exaggerated. The servant was always struggling.

In creating this story, Ryunosuke used such a sophisticated technique of writing that all narrations were exceptionally calm and seemed like an unbiased witness. It seems that he had no surprise, anger or excitement about such tragedy in the world and was totally composed. Such rational and cold attitude makes his work become more credible and infectious. Just like a master telling jokes with a poker face, he seemed confused about the situation that the audience couldn't help laughing and could accomplish the task with ease. For example, he gave a very vivid and impressive expression about Rashomon with only one sentence. He wrote: Below the broad gate tower, the servant is the only human being, besides which only a cricket was staying on a tall and large column with paint on it peeling off. He brought the gate to his readers immediately through this sentence and set a grey tone for the novel. Such context was deepened with narration. He is worried about the big acne on his right cheek while staring at the falling rain. The servant wears a washed-out dark blue gown and sits on a stone step. Such penetrating and impressive sentences and expressions appear frequently in the novel, which have a penetrating influence on readers and arouse a strong empathy.

### III. THE SELFISH, HYPOCRITICAL AND PATHETIC MONK NEIGONG IN THE NOSE

Among novels created by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, in addition to *Rashomon*, *The Nose* should be considered a classic work for brilliant description about mental struggle. Compared to *Rashomon*, psychological description in *The Nose* is more refined and delicate, for which profoundness and artistic technique are more ingenious. Japanese literary master Natsume Soseki gave a very positive evaluation on Ryunosuke Akutagawa: If you can create another ten works like this, you will be a characteristic writer not only in Japan but also in the literary circles in the world. Another great writer Yuzo Yamamoto said: *The Nose* is so brilliant that it should be included in textbooks specified by the country.

*The Nose* tells a story about the psychological experience of a monk suffering from nasal disorder. Ryunosuke put this story under a background of the remote ancient times and

created a protagonist, namely a monk. At the beginning of the article, the author pointed out that the monk is always suffering from his nose for the past fifty years. In a short sentence, the author had introduced us the psychological activities. The background of the story is a temple. The monk pretends to not care. There are two main reasons that he suffered from his nose: firstly, the long nose is really inconvenient in daily life. The most typical example is that when he is eating, a person has to sit opposite, and lifted his nose with wood, to prevent it from falling into his own bowl. Secondly, the long nose is really ugly, which damaged his self-esteem seriously.

Normally, a monk should desire for reaching the pure land in the west and shouldn't be bothered by such trifles or have constant mental fights over such things. However, the protagonist goes the other way deliberately. During his life experience from being an acolyte playing pranks to being an eminent monk employed by the royal family, he has been worrying about his weird nose and conducting innumerable psychological fights. As for his nose, he acted as if he cared nothing about it but became very nervous when other people talked about his nose unintentionally. He was worried about the situation that other people talked about his nose. However, because of nervousness, he made far-fetched connections between irrelevant things and his nose. Caring too much about his nose, he peeked at other people's noses everyday and even touched their noses unconsciously. His nose made him feel depressed, due to which he couldn't get rid of self-abasement and became increasingly unconfident. However, after knowing about a treatment method for making his nose normal, he pretended to care nothing about his nose and refused to try such a prescription immediately. Instead, he wanted his apprentices to persuade him to try the prescription earnestly and repeatedly, in which his pretending reached the extreme. After his nose became normal, he supposed to feel nothing about other people's discussions. However, he felt that people were laughing at him and thus regretted treatment on his nose and wanted to restore the old situation. Ryunosuke gave a very vivid description of the poor, pitiful, ridiculous and pathetic psychological state of the monk and reflected selfish, hypocritical, affected and ugly human nature in a sufficient way. This novel may be considered as a classic work describing mental fights created by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, which is superior to *Rashomon* in many aspects.

From the above discussion, we can see that no matter how the nose changed, either from the long or short, or from short to long, the monk is trying to maintain his fragile self-esteem. But he always seems to be in pain. What is the reason? The crux of the problem lies in the fact that there is no real self in the Buddhist wisdom, and a correct self-evaluation system is not formed. All his happiness is dominated by the attitude of others. The foolish person who rigidly adheres to the face of other people and the weak and hypocritical people who are influenced by the public opinion are everywhere. Pride and vanity have made him too nervous, and he has all the attention of others. He tried every means to be the same as others, at least able to achieve spiritual balance. But ultimately this goal can not be

achieved. In fact, this kind of person has low self-esteem and their mind is quite weak. From which we can see the weakness of the self-esteem and the nature of his vanity.

In *Rashomon*, dramatic psychological conflicts of characters are highlighted. In *The Nose*, there are refined and delicate presentations of inner activities of characters. These two pieces of works were created by Ryunosuke at the early stage of his career. In comparison, *Steal*, another full-length novel created by Ryunosuke at the early stage of his career, is more unique than *Rashomon* and *The Nose* in the aspect of describing inner psychological conflicts.

#### IV. UNGRATEFUL AND EGOISTIC BROTHERS AND SARGENT IN STEAL

*Steal* tells a story about emotional entanglement involving two brothers and a female robber named Sargent. The female robber was born an illegitimate child and then became a robber, who was very enchanting. Taro and Jiro were brothers and became robbers because they both fell in love with the female robber. Then the two brothers fell out and fought with each other. Due to the trap set by her, they fell into dangerous situations successively. Finally, they killed her together.

With ups and downs in the story, *Steal* describes psychological turmoil of several protagonists. Thanks to his great ability to describe psychological state, Ryunosuke Akutagawa gave a very vivid description about psychological changes of each protagonist. He described connections and changes of emotions for each character, which made translators of this piece of work face a lot of difficulties in translating it into Chinese and finding corresponding words for those different Japanese words with similar meanings. It is better to read the Japanese version of *Steal*. If conditions permit, several revised versions of *Steal* should be read and compared, through which Ryunosuke's hard work in writing this novel can be understood. This novel tells a story about emotional entanglement. In the process of reading, readers can't help having psychological conflicts with progression of the story. Such artistic influence reflects the writer's ability. However, Ryunosuke never felt satisfied with this novel, for which *Steal* was never included in any collection of his works. Moreover, he had been revising this piece of work during his whole life. In other words, Ryunosuke had great expectations for this novel and kept revising it in order to reach an ideal level. Unfortunately, we will never read the completed work due to the death of its author.

#### V. CONCLUSION

The early works of Akutagawa Ryunosuke, has always been permeated with the same theme of nihilism and egoism, the character developed from the comic development to the extreme tragic step by step. On the other hand, the development of the characters suggest that the deepening understandings of Akutagawa Ryunosuke on human nature and the meaning of life.

In conclusion, Ryunosuke's novels created at the early stage of his career are characterized by ingenious design, interesting plot and dramatic story and have in-depth and strong revelation, vivid and lively characters as well as delicate and refined psychological description, which reflect high-level creative art and exquisite writing technique in a sufficient way. These aspects are of practical significance for understanding Ryunosuke Akutagawa's novels, which reflect charm of his literary works and are worth of in-depth thinking and learning by us.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Ken Akiyama, Yukio Miyoshi. *New Edition of History of Japanese Literature* [M]. Tokyo: Bun-eido Publishing Co., Ltd., 2000.
- [2] Ye Weiqu. *History of Literary Ideological Trend in Japan* [M]. Beijing: The Economic Daily Press, 1997.
- [3] Shinto Junko. *Biography of Ryunosuke Akutagawa* [M]. Tokyo: Baxing Publishing House, 1978.
- [4] Ryunosuke Akutagawa. *Complete Works of Ryunosuke Akutagawa* [M]. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1976.
- [5] *Rashomon: Collection of Short & Medium-length Novels of Ryunosuke Akutagawa* [M]. Nanjing: Translated by Lou Shiyi, et al., Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2006.
- [6] Endo Geigy, Ikegaki Takeshiro. *Annotated History of Japanese Literature* [M]. Kyoto: Central Publishing House, 1998.
- [7] Edited by Taniyama Shigeru, Ino Kenji, et al. *Newly Revised Overview of Japanese Language* [M]. Kyoto: Kyoto Shobo Co., Ltd., 1998.
- [8] *Ryunosuke Akutagawa III* [M]. Series of Books of Research Data about Japanese Literature. Tokyo: Youjingtang Publishing House, 1981.
- [9] Morimoto Shuw. *Ryunosuke Akutagawa* [M]. Tokyo: Yingfeng Publishing House, 1974.
- [10] Translated by Qu Wei. *Rashomon* [J]. *The Knowledge of Japanese*, 1999, (2).