

SHINOBU KAIHO-PRZYBYLSKA

International Writer Akutagawa Ryūnosuke: Between East and West

Introduction

There is no doubt that Akutagawa Ryūnosuke is one of the most remarkable writers in the Taishō period. With his broad knowledge and keen intellect, he pioneered the new tradition in Japanese *bundan* – literary world – by rejecting the writing of confessional self-revelation and preferring the fictional short story as his form. He did this even though naturalism was the dominant style of his time. His writing is unparalleled in the history of modern Japanese literature. Akutagawa's various works are representative of the Taishō period through to the early Shōwa period. Even though he had already attracted some attention as a writer before his death, Akutagawa's popularity is often connected with his suicide at age 35 and his peculiar short stories. He is adored and idolized by some, who considered him to be a real artist who unfortunately had to take his own life. By others, he is not so valued and his work is described as "literature for youth". In any case, Akutagawa is known as a tragic and almost legendary writer, and is often likened to Dazai Osamu. Even though more than 70 years have already passed since his suicide, it seems that he is still one of the most widely read authors and it is likely that his popularity will never fade.

Moreover, he was the first modern Japanese writer to attract wide attention abroad, in the United States, Russia and in many other countries, and most of his important works have been translated into a great variety of languages. If an international writer is defined as a writer who is widely read in the country of origin as well as having translations across the globe, then Akutagawa can indeed be called an international writer. According to *Japanese Literature in Foreign Languages 1945–1990*¹, his works have been translated into 29 different languages with 452 different editions of his works. This is a marvelous achievement, given the fact that the works of Kawabata Yasunari who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968, have been translated

¹ *Japanese Literature in Foreign Languages 1945–1990*, Compiled by The Japan P.E.N. Club, Published by Japan Book Publishers Association 1990.

into only 310 editions. Significantly, 160 works of Akutagawa have been translated into English, 107 into Russian, 68 into German, and languages such as French, Italian, Ukrainian, Polish, and many others.

The fact that the literature of Akutagawa is read not merely in Japan, but all over the world suggests that his works provide a universal charm regardless of the language used. This also raises questions including:

- 1 What is it about Akutagawa's stories that make his works so attractive regardless of the language in which it is read?
- 2 Is it the same charm in his literature that appeals to both the Japanese and overseas readers?
- 3 Is his image in Japan the same or different from the one found overseas?
- 4 What is the source of the universality of Akutagawa's literature?
- 5 Where does it come from?
- 6 How did he become an international writer?

To answer these questions, it is important to clarify the images of Akutagawa in Japan and overseas. This thesis targets Europe and the United States, examining the similarities and differences, by comparing the critiques of Akutagawa in Japan with those in the West. This leads further to the adaptability of Akutagawa's literature, that holds the same value through translations and manages to break the cultural barrier between East and West. It is his universality that is undoubtedly the essence of the literature of Akutagawa.

Akutagawa was a remarkably artful story-teller. His words were elaborately chosen providing precise descriptions. It has been said that "his intellect makes his works too cold as if he toyed with life using a pair of silver tweezers"², and it has lead to a prevalent image of coldness. Besides, it has been said that his works are only for youth and often underestimated. However, if he had been only a skillful writer for youth, his works should not have been translated and read in such a world-wide range. The source running deep inside of his literature must appeal to readers so strongly. The attractiveness emanating on his short plots is not only illustrated by his shocking suicide, but also by some other factors. The aim of this thesis is to reveal the essence of his charm that appeals to both the West and the East, and to seek the universality of his literature and its origins. It will make it clear how he became an international writer.

The death of Akutagawa

Akutagawa's popularity is often connected with his shocking suicide at age 35. Shortly before dawn on July 24, 1927, he took a fatal dose of barbiturates. His death created

² Kikuchi Kan, *Akutagawa no inshō (Ningen zuihitsu)*, "Bungei", vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 101.

unrest not only in *bundan*, Japanese literary world, but in the whole society. His death had a great impact, which made him a tragic writer and to be treated legendarily.

With respect to his death, it was found that there was not much of a difference between the East and the West regarding the cause of his death. However, with regards to how to interpret the purpose of his death, there was a great difference between the two groups and what it represented to each society as a whole.

Within Japan opinions are divided over whether his death was a negative or positive achievement. The negative group considers his death as a "defeat"; while, the affirmative group insists that Akutagawa was a martyr of the art, his suicide making it all the more accomplished. For the latter group especially, Akutagawa has in a sense been idolized and there is still evidence of the view that his death has made his literature all the more valuable.

"I cannot think that Akutagawa in the end escaped from reality by committing suicide. It seems to me that ... he tried to fulfill himself as an artist through his own death."³

"Akutagawa, as a person of supreme artistic policy, felt forlorn when he reflected on his own Tower of Babel that appeared to fall short of »Artistic Heaven«. In my opinion he died a martyr to his supreme artistic policy by committing suicide, just like his »...Man from the West« was crucified in order to realize his ideal."⁴

"I would like to regard his death ... as the death bearing the cross of pure literature and supreme artistic policy."⁵

In the West, however, only the negative view predominates. Even this view, which tries to interpret the sense of his death, including the question of whether or not it is a triumphant work of art, is rarely seen.

According to Howard Hibbett, for the Japanese, an innate "identification with others, especially with the victims of heroic defeat" has led to the heroic exaggeration of Akutagawa causing a treatment of his life and works from the viewpoint of his suicide.

"For the younger generation in particular, Akutagawa epitomizes the attraction of the dazzling failure. Like Dazai Osamu, among others, he offers what might be called a negative ideal: that of the sensitive, brilliant young man who suffers from the oppressions of his family, his class, and his times, who struggles to create art, but whose despair finally leads to suicide. He represents a well-established, widely admired attitude, one reinforced by strong cultural traditions. His appeal for Japanese readers is enhanced by a cultural emphasis on identification with others, especially with the victims of heroic defeat; and there was already available to Akutagawa himself an abundance of striking models for negative

³ Fukunaga Takehiko, *Kiken na geijutsu*, "Bungei", vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 60.

⁴ Satō Haruo, *Waga Ryūnosuke zō*, Yūshindō, 1959, p. 163.

⁵ Yamagishi Satoshi, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*, Sōgeisha, 1955, p. 175.

choices, not least of suicide, many of which have remained attractive to succeeding generations.”⁶

This suicide, along with its relationship to his literature, receives much esteemed regard in Japan, but in the West no such nobility can be found, rather, the opposite occurs creating the “negative ideal”. It would appear therefore that Akutagawa’s universality is not found in his suicide or any relationship between his death and his literature. The noble death of Yoshihide, a real artist in Akutagawa’s work “The Hell Screen” (*Jigoku-hen*), was achieved because he had already experienced “the transient, moving exaltation”, which is a key of Akutagawa’s supreme artistic policy. He had also renounced all the rest of his life as a remnant⁷ trying to be instead a martyr to the art. With regard to Akutagawa’s own suicide, and not the suicides of his works, it would appear to be not quite as noble. Akutagawa, at a deadlock in his writing and thought, was escaping from reality due to extreme stress and fatigue, whilst fearing insanity, a condition he appears to have inherited.

Clearly, for the Japanese his suicide is a charm of significant importance inextricably linked to his literature. However, it is a “negative ideal” from the viewpoint of the West. Thus, his international appeal cannot be found in his suicide or his ideas about life and death.

Religious overtones

Secondly, another noted aspect of Akutagawa’s works is his religious overtones. When he was young Akutagawa felt in love with Yoshida Yayoi and intended to marry her. However, his adopted home firmly opposed his will, which made him give it up and feel a deep sense of failure. At that time he read the Bible many times and paid a frequent visits to a church. He wrote over ten works based on the motif of Christianity such as “Christ in Nanking” (*Nankin no Kirisuto*), “The Martyr” (*Hōkyōnin no Shi*), “St. Christopher’s Life” (*Kirishitohoro Shōninden*), “Hideyoshi and God” (*Hideyoshi to Kami to*), “Smile of Gods” (*Kamigami no Bishō*), “Ogin”, “Oshino”, “Tobacco and the Devil” (*Tabako to Akuma*), “Ogata Ryosai’s Memorandum” (*Ogata Ryōsai Oboegaki*), “The Black Madonna” (*Kokui Seibo*), “The Man from the West” (*Seihō no Hito*), “The Man from the West II” (*Zoku Seihō no Hito*). They are called *kirishitan-mono* (those that carry Christian themes especially related to the Jesuit missionaries in seventeenth-century in Japan). In Japan, a number of critics have raised the relationship between Akutagawa and Christianity as significant.

“Akutagawa may not have believed in God, but he knew that he had the fear of God. Given the works including »Christ in Nanking« (*Nankin no Kirisuto*), »The Martyr« (*Hōkyō-*

⁶ Howard S. Hibbett, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and the Negative Ideal* in: *Personality in Japanese History*. Introduced and edited by Albert M. Craig and Donald H. Shively, University of California Press, 1970, p. 427.

⁷ Miyoshi Yukio, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke ron*, Chikuma Shobō, 1976.

nin no Shi), »Ogin«, »Oshino«, and »Tu Tze-chun« (*To Shishun*), it seems that he was not unconcerned about God.”⁸

“(In his »kirishitan-mono«,) it was depicted that men doubt God rather than believe in him, thus encouraging readers to engage in religious reflection.”⁹

“»It was not just an attraction of atmosphere. Akutagawa smelled the strong will of men trying to exceed his reality within the atmosphere« and »the relationship between Akutagawa and Christianity or spirit of Europe was rather essential«.”¹⁰

“Akutagawa Ryūnosuke wrote in »A Note forwarded to a Certain Old Friend« (*Aru Kyūyū e Okuru Shuki*) that »I would like to make myself God.« This could be interpreted as he wants himself to be situated on top of any possibility of humankind. ... For better or worse, he opened the window of possibility for humankind.”¹¹

It is summarized that the existence of “something”, probably some sort of deity, can be felt throughout his works. It is clear that he actually tried hard to “climb a ladder”, to reach a higher level of existence, even if he did not attain salvation. The emphasis, however, is usually not on whether or not he was a real Christian, but that he was a writer open to religion.

In the West, the number of *kirishitan-mono* works translated is noticeably less than that of the *ōcho-mono* works (stories dealing with the pre-feudal period of Imperial rule).

The number of translations and languages translated in the works of Akutagawa¹²

Title	The number of translations	The number of languages translated
<i>Rashōmon</i>	33	22
<i>In a Grove</i>	21	16
<i>Kappa</i>	21	14
<i>The Hell Screen</i>	21	9
<i>The Spider's Thread</i>	19	11
<i>Kesa and Morito</i>	15	9
<i>The Nose</i>	15	9
<i>Tangerines</i>	15	8
<i>The Handkerchief</i>	11	8
<i>Otomi's Virginity</i>	9	7
<i>The Hand Car</i>	9	5

⁸ Nakazato Tsuneko, *Ryūnosuke Shikan*, “Bungei”, vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 57.

⁹ Ibid., p. 57.

¹⁰ Fukuda Tsuneari, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke ron*, “Bungei”, vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 19.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 19.

¹² *Japanese Literature in Foreign Languages 1945–1998*, Compiled by The Japan P.E.N. Club, Published by Japan Book Publishers Association, 1998.

The number of translations and languages translated in the works of Akutagawa's *kirishitan-mono*

Title	The number of translations	The number of languages translated
<i>Christ in Nanking</i>	4	4
<i>The Martyr</i>	4	4
<i>The Man from the West</i>	4	3
<i>Smile of Gods</i>	1	1
<i>The Man from the West II</i>	1	1

Critical reviews on the relationship between Akutagawa and Christianity are rarely found and the few that do exist are negative.

“In the so-called kirishitan stories Akutagawa's concern was neither to defend nor to reject Christian faith and that he merely used Christian material for the framework of his stories just as he did with historical material.”¹³

(Akutagawa) “appreciated Christianity only from the aspect of poetry.”¹⁴

During Akutagawa's last moments, as he drifted into sleep, he read the Bible, and it seems clear from these late works that in his desperation he had turned to Christianity for solace, attempting to understand the contemporary relevance of the person of Christ.

(However) It is difficult to evaluate “The Man from the West.” It and its sequel reveal not only careful reading in the New Testament but an acquaintance with the Old Testament and evidence of much pondering over what he had read. Ultimately, however, Akutagawa found insufficient comfort in Christianity.¹⁵

From this viewpoint then, Christianity was merely a cultural overlay for his writings without any deep personal faith in it.

Admittedly, in a work from the latter part of his life, “The Man from the West” (*Seihō no Hito*), it would appear that his interest in Christianity went deeper than before. In his work “The Martyr” (*Hōkyōnin no Shi*), however, Lorenzo died as a martyr, but Akutagawa did not emphasize it as a religious act or due to a deep faith in Christianity. Instead, the emphasis was on his own ideas about the actual art form itself and the life required to achieve a supreme artistic policy which achieves a transient, moving exaltation.

¹³ Yamanouchi Hisaaki, *The search for authenticity in modern Japanese literature*, Cambridge University Press, 1978, p. 95.

¹⁴ Valdo Viglielmo, *Akutagawa no bungaku*, in: *Akutagawa Bungaku-Kaigai no hyōka*, Edited by Yoshida Seiichi, Takeda Katsuhiko, Tsuruta Kinya, Waseda University Press, 1972, p. 65.

¹⁵ Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West – Japanese Literature of the Modern Era*, FICTION, New York 1984, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 585–586.

“The eyes of all followed theirs to two soft, pure breasts, which stood out among the rags on the chest of the angel, now lying silently at the gate of Santa Lucia, bathed in the light of the fire red as the blood of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion. Now on Lorenzo’s sorely burned face, its natural gentleness and beauty could no longer be concealed. It may have been only a moment – it seemed like an eternity – before the entire assembly realized that Lorenzo was not a boy but a girl. Yes, Lorenzo was a girl! Lorenzo was a girl! Behold!”¹⁶ (“The Martyr”).

It seems clear from the last scene of “The Martyr” that Akutagawa put an emphasis rather on the beauty of Lorenzo’s body in light of the fire red as the blood of Jesus Christ at his crucifixion.

For the West, there was not enough religion in his works beyond that of a superficial allusion to Christianity. Therefore, his religious overtones simply do not provide the universal appeal; there must be some other aspect to his works that is universal.

Style and description

More notably, the universal appeal of Akutagawa’s works can be found in his style and description.

Both views from the East and the West found his description perfectly artful, brief, precise and rousing in imagery. Alongside this was a poetic lyricism embedded deep within his extremely elaborate and minute descriptions.

“Ryūnosuke has a unique skill to complete a story with excellent construction with minutely artful and sharp metallic sentences.”¹⁷

“Akutagawa’s description is refined and well ordered. ... Whilst using everyday language he was able to create characteristic and beautiful sentences. This coincides with my definition of a real masterpiece.”¹⁸

“He possessed a rich talent for art and brought to perfection a precise skill.”¹⁹

“If I were to use a single word to define Akutagawa’s art, it would be »style«.”²⁰

“Akutagawa’s description includes poetic and sensibility of rhythm.”²¹

¹⁶ *Rashomon and Other Stories* translated by Kojima Takashi, New York 1952, Liveright, pp. 85–86.

¹⁷ Uno Kōji, —*Taishō 10 nendo no—Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*, “Bungei”, vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 102.

¹⁸ Satō Haruo, *Waga Ryūnosuke zō*, Yūshindō, 1959, p. 148.

¹⁹ Eguchi Kan, *Shojo tanpenshū ‘Rashōmon’ ni tsuite*, “Bungei”, vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 99.

²⁰ Fukunaga Takehiko, *Kiken na geijutu*, “Bungei”, vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 59.

²¹ Ibid.

“If you read his works carefully, you are likely to feel that all his works are poetic. This would appeal to your, the reader’s, emotion with his form full of repetition, suggestion and his characteristic rhythm.”²²

Not merely the views from the East, but from the West also found his description excellent.

“Akutagawa’s extremely elaborate and minute description is as if »cannon holder tried to measure the range and shot a shell without even 1cm error«.”²³

“All are brief and incisive, yet with a wealth of overtone which enlarges their meanings beyond specific people and places.”²⁴

“*Rashomon*, it is very different from American or even Western literature. It is simple in style and expression, yet rich in imagery and descriptiveness.”²⁵

“What we find interesting and go into raptures about his works are, mainly the clear structure of his prose which arouses our imagination. It not only arouses, but creates a clear, concrete scene and image – he is genius.”²⁶

“Like Natsume Sōseki and Mori Ōgai, whom he admired, Akutagawa used his language delicately, precisely, and with a richness enhanced by a knowledge of several literatures. ... He remarked once that words must yield more than the bare dictionary meanings; he had a poet’s feeling for their shapes and flavors, as well as their ambiguities, and he combined them with such freshness and economy that his phrasing never lacks distinction.”²⁷

Even through the medium of translation, his works have still keep their high artistic value and been appreciated all over the world.

Exoticism – Japanese delicacy

In addition to his style and technique, Akutagawa possesses an essence of something *fundamentally* Japanese which attracts both groups equally. This essence

²² Hiraoka Toshio, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke kenkyū no tameni*, “Kokubungaku Kaishaku to kanshō”, vol. 58, no. 11, Shibundō 1993 p. 17.

²³ Jaime Fernandez, Takeda Katsuhiko, *The study and translation of Akutagawa’s works in the West* in: *Akutagawa Bungaku-Kaigai no hyōka*, Edited by Yoshida Seiichi, Takeda Katsuhiko, Tsuruta Kinya, Waseda University Press, 1972, p. 299.

²⁴ Robert Halsband, *Fresh Tales from Japan*, “Saturday review”, vol. 36, New York: “Saturday Review”, 7 July, 1953.

²⁵ Sean Pickard, *My Very First Taste of Japanese Literature*, Toshio Hiraoka *Remarks on Akutagawa’s Works* – “The *Rashomon*” – “Bungei gengo kenkyū, bungei hen” vol. 16, Tsukuba university, 1988.

²⁶ William Sibly, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke ron*, in: *Akutagawa Bungaku-Kaigai no hyōka*, Edited by Yoshida Seiichi, Takeda Katsuhiko, Tsuruta Kinya, Waseda University Press, 1972, p. 92.

²⁷ Howard Hibbett, *Rashomon and Other Stories* Tr. by Kojima Takashi, Liveright, 1952, p. 12.

would appear, at first sight, to be quite different in Japan to what it is in the West. For instance, according to Glenn Shaw²⁸ and John McVittie²⁹, it means “grotesque”, or something “weird and uncanny”. This can be felt throughout Akutagawa’s works as he borrows queer stories from classical literature. It could also allude to “the smell of *ume* (Japanese plums)”, the sorrowful sound of “the flute by an aristocrat depicted on a *byōbu* (Japanese folding screen)”, or the theme of “*sokuten kyoshi* (self-detachment in pursuit of heaven)”, as these elements are present in almost all of his works.³⁰ The analysis seemed to be a reflection of the Japanese culture as a whole rather than any reference to individual pieces of work.

However, the elements of Japanese tradition that Glenn Shaw and John McVittie saw in Akutagawa’s works are inherently noted by Japanese readers as a matter of course. For example, it is well known that “Absorbed in Letters” (*Gesaku Zammai*) has the atmosphere of Edo (old Tokyo) and that “The Lady Roku-no-miya” (*Roku-no-miya no Himegimi*) has the smell of the magnificent Heian period. For the Japanese, however, the essence of something fundamentally Japanese centers not so much on the superficial elements but on the profound feelings that are hidden deep within his works. This has been termed a “Japanese delicacy” by Fukuda Tsuneari, which means a “boy-like purity with a sigh of resignation” felt between the well elaborated lines of Akutagawa’s works.

“My recommendation is to read *Kamigami no Bishō* »Smile of Gods« first. I have already argued the Japanese delicacy in Akutagawa’s *kirishitan-mono*. It is the best example in order to gain an understanding of Japanese delicacy. Whilst unnecessary for me to explain it here, but the author himself does it with a sigh. There is no problem in saying that the author felt nostalgia rather than an antipathy towards the climate of Japan which absorbs a person’s strong will – the spirit which continuously tries, exceeds something forever – as an obscure mist.”³¹

“That is the reason why Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s novels are popular. Admittedly his theme is always treated intelligently, but it is generally the writer’s emotion that strikes readers, not his theme. This is what I term Japanese delicacy. »Shōgun« is a good example. ... I would recommend all readers to pay attention to the last scene of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s works. ... In summary, his true feelings allow his affection to escape from his persona, as can be seen in the last scene of his works, showing his coy boy-like purity. The moment I read the last scene, I feel that the Japanese delicacy dominates over his intellectual theme or motif.”³²

²⁸ Glenn W. Shaw, *Tales Grotesque and Curious*, Hokuseidō, 1930.

²⁹ John McVittie, *A sprig of cherry – an introduction to this book ‘Japanese Short Stories’* Tr. by Kojima Takashi, New York, Liveright, 1961.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 16–27.

³¹ Fukuda Tsuneari, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke ron*, “Bungei”, vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 20.

³² Ibid., p. 21.

Indeed, Akutagawa could not resist the “climate of Japan which absorbs a person’s strong will as an obscure mist”³³ letting his true feelings escape from his persona with a sigh of resignation. Such true feelings occasionally revealed his coy “boy-like purity”. This concept of “Japanese delicacy” can be found in *kirishitan-mono*, or “The General” (*Shōgun*), “The Hand Car” (*Torokko*) and “The Garden” (*Niwa*). Usually he created pessimistic works with irony and derision, by using extraordinary, precise, brief, and clear sentences. It has been said that “his intellect makes his works too cold as if he toyed with life using a pair of silver tweezers.”³⁴ This has led to a prevalent image of coldness. However, in Japan the unexpected show of tenderness, revealed through the expression of his true feelings, is considered to be something fundamentally Japanese.

At this stage it seems that what something fundamentally Japanese means in Japan, and what it means in the West is quite different and that there is no common appeal in Akutagawa’s worth. However, whilst the expression itself is different, it turns out that the essence of the term “Japanese delicacy” can also be found in the West. This is an important point.

As noted before, both views from the East and the West found his description notable and his sentences to be “brief, precise and rousing in imagery, with a poetic lyricism that lies deep within his works”. This poetic lyricism refers not only to the rhythm that flows throughout his works, or to a “form which is full of suggestions and afterglow.”³⁵, but also to a faint sentimentalism, abandonment, nostalgia, and tenderness which can be found in works such as “A Fool’s Life” (*Aru Ahō no Isshō*). Indeed, his poetic sensitivity has enabled him to create prose with a poetic feel exemplified in the work “A Fool’s Life”. This description of “sentimentalism, abandonment, nostalgia and tenderness” is very similar to the image ascribed to the term “Japanese delicacy”. Indeed, Akutagawa could not resist the “climate of Japan which absorbs a person’s strong will as an obscure mist”³⁶ letting his true feelings escape from his persona with a sigh of resignation. These true feelings “occasionally show his coy boy-like purity”³⁷ reflecting an underlying sentimentalism, nostalgia, “sighing with resignation” and tenderness throughout his works. In other words, a poetic lyricism that links with “Japanese delicacy”.

This poetic lyricism is often referred to in the West as well. Howard Hibbett argued that Akutagawa “had a poet’s feeling for their shapes and flavors, as well as their ambiguities.”³⁸ Although some “superficial critics called Akutagawa precious, or decadent,”³⁹

³³ Ibid., p. 20.

³⁴ Kikuchi Kan, *Akutagawa no inshō (Ningen zuihitsu)*, “Bungei”, vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 101.

³⁵ Hiraoka Toshio, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke kenkyū no tameni*, in: “Kokubungaku Kaishaku to kanshō”, vol. 58, no. 11, Shibundō, 1993 p. 17.

³⁶ Fukuda Tsuneari, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke ron*, “Bungei”, vol. 11, no. 15, Kawade Shobō, 1954, p. 20.

³⁷ Ibid, p. 21.

³⁸ Howard Hibbett, “Introduction” – “Rashomon and Other Stories” Translated by Kojima Takashi, Liveright, 1952, p. 12.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 11.

Hibbett argued that this tendency came from the fact that they did not understand that "the nuances of Akutagawa's prose are what conveys the essence of his thought."⁴⁰

"Superficial critics called Akutagawa precarious, or decadent, or dismissed him as a fatiguingly clever dilettante. Unprepared for the strength of his later satires, they supposed him to care only for the superb texture of his prose. Translation protects us from the seductions of this style, yet encourages a similar error, since the nuances of Akutagawa's prose are what conveys the essence of his thought."⁴¹

Hibbett's point is that the essence of his literature will never be grasped if you only focus on the superficial skill of his prose. There needs to be a regard for the boy-like purity and tenderness which peeps forth between the elaborate lines and innocent sentimentalism that flows deep underground as pure as a spring water stream. After all, the phrase "the nuances of Akutagawa's prose" by Hibbett and the term "Japanese delicacy" provide different labels in different countries but they describe the same qualities of his works. Apparently the term "Japanese delicacy" was only understood in Japan, but its meaning has in fact been successfully conveyed to the West in "the nuances of Akutagawa's prose".

The universality of Akutagawa

Therefore it is summarized that at first glance, the allusion to Christianity, his religiosity, and the relationship between Akutagawa and his premature death due to his shocking suicide, are the drawcards that provide the strong appeal for readers of his literature. Especially in Japan, quite remarkably, these factors are considered to be one of the most important aspects that make up the image of "Akutagawa". In the West, however, his religiosity and the relationship between Akutagawa and his death are not considered to be as important as they are in Japan. This means that his universal literary worth cannot be found in his religiosity, or in the relationship between him and his death because they do not have universal appeal, even across the cultural gap between the East and the West. Rather, his universality is found instead in his "style and description" and "exoticism", that something fundamentally Japanese, which may be referred to as a "Japanese delicacy". It is exactly the same view point, in both the East and the West, that describes his prominent descriptive techniques and style together with a unique poetic lyricism. This excellence of style and description has not been diminished through translation, and his preciseness is enhanced by the essence of something fundamentally Japanese or a very poetic lyricism that is accorded that status of "Japanese delicacy". Accordingly, the appeal magnetizing a great number of readers to the literature of

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴¹ Hibbett, op. cit., p. 11-12.

Akutagawa cannot be found either in the religiosity spread throughout his works based on the motif of Christianity, nor in his premature "heroic" death, but rather in his "style and description" and "Japanese delicacy".

A joint understanding of the East and the West in Akutagawa

This is where the universality of Akutagawa can be found, leading us to two further questions: What is the source of these two points of universality and where does it come from? I believe the source can be explained in "a joint understanding of the East and the West" in Akutagawa; his ability to hold simultaneously elements from both worlds within himself.

The western influence can be explained as follows. It was said that Akutagawa was a person who pursued knowledge. He "never tried to improve his knowledge of life by watching people in the street. Rather, he tried to read about men's lives in order to watch people in the street."⁴² It is well known that he read everything he could get his hands on and was fascinated with western literature.

"It was on the first floor of a book shop. He (at the age of twenty) climbed a Western style ladder hung on the book-shelf and was looking for new books. Maupassant, Baudelaire, Strindberg, Ibsen, Shaw, Tolstoy... He kept on reading intently the letters on the backs of the books. They were not so much books as the fin de siècle itself: Nietzsche, Verlaine, the Goncourts, Dostoyevski, Hauptmann, Flaubert..."⁴³

Consequently, names of western authors appear often in Akutagawa's works. For example, Tolstoy appears 145 times, Goethe appears 103 times and Poe appears 94 times.⁴⁴ This provides evidence that Akutagawa was an ardent admirer of the "West", further strengthened by the fact that he studied English literature at Tokyo Imperial University. Nakamura Shin'ichiō regarded Akutagawa as "one of the few writers who were conscious of the way that orthodox western literature centered its framework, not on the writer's private life, but on the writer's conception. Furthermore he is a one of the few writers who has succeeded in this style of literature."⁴⁵ This style of "orthodox

⁴² Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "The Early Life of Daidoji Shinsuke" (*Daidōji Shinsuke no hansei*) *The Complete works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*, vol. 7, Iwanami Shoten, 1955, p. 42.

⁴³ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "A Fool's Life" (*Aru Ahō no Isshō*) *The Complete of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*, vol. 8, Iwanami Shoten 1955, pp. 117-118, Tr. by Yamanouchi Hisaaki "The search for authenticity in modern Japanese literature", (Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 104.

⁴⁴ Kiuchi Yachiyo, Takabayashi Kazuko, Ōta Saburō, *The Relationship Between Akutagawa Ryūnosuke and the Western Writers*, in: 'Hikaku Bungaku' vol. 1, The Association of Japan Comparative Literature, 1958. (Tolstoy→145 times, Goethe→103 times, Poe→94 times, Strindberg→74 times, Ibsen→67 times, Turgenev→67 times, France→60 times, Shaw→58 times, Wilde→54 times).

⁴⁵ Nakamura Shin'ichiō, *Nakamura Shin'ichiō Hyōron Zenshū*, vol. 1, Kawade Shobō Shinsha 1972, p. 163.

western literature” meant that Akutagawa did not write about his own private life so to speak; “I novels” – the plotless, confessional, self-revelation – which was the predominant mainstream form of the Japanese literary world of those days.

As is generally known, it was considered at that time that a novel should reveal the real life of a writer and that the real art of the prose should exist in the self-revelation of the author or even in the ethics of the writer. It was the age of attaching too much importance to self-revelation.

According to Itō Sei⁴⁶, the reason why self-revelation was possible for Japanese writers at that time was that, unlike Europe, they did not need to be connected with society. In Europe the common tendency was for writers to have some connection with society, making it impossible for them to reveal everything about themselves. They considered themselves as members of society foremost before they thought of themselves as writers.

However in Japan, a very characteristic literary world called *bundan* had already existed. Writers were able to disconnect with society to reveal their own private life by making their debut in the style of *bundan*.

Natsume Sōseki and Mori Ōgai, who wrote novels that connected with society, were treated differently from *bundan* writers. Without any doubt, Akutagawa belonged to this group of authors. He could not abandon his family, and took opposing attitudes towards society in spite of being able to relate to it.

“Many people think in this way: Content is more important than form. It sounds true, but it is not. The contents of a work should inevitably be structured within a form. If you think that you should create content more than anything else and then add a form later, you are ignorant in knowing how to write a story.”

“Skilful content does not constitute a form, but a form will enable content.”⁴⁷

As a result Akutagawa made his descriptions elaborate and was zealous about creating perfect works. It is easy to imagine that at that time writers of *bundan* did not treat Akutagawa well because he did not write self-revelation. He did not yield, at least at the early period of his life as a writer, to *bundan* and wrote instead fictional stories. In this regard, it should be noted that his attitude is similar to the one found in Europe.

According to Gustave Flaubert⁴⁸, who upheld that creating a work of literature was a conscious act to be continually improved upon, the perfect work should have within itself its own life form without any trace of the writer’s presence. In other words, the work should be independent of the writer.⁴⁹ This is exactly what Akutagawa was aiming for.

⁴⁶ Itō Sei, *Shōsetsu no hōhō*, Chikuma Shobō 1988.

⁴⁷ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, “The Art and Others” ‘The Complete works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’ vol. 7, Iwanami Shoten 1955, p. 23.

⁴⁸ Gustave Flaubert 1821–1880.

⁴⁹ Itō Sei, *Shōsetsu no hōhō*, in chapter 11 “The Way in the West”, Chikuma Shobō, 1988.

He rejected the plotless, confessional, self-revelation that was the mainstream *bundan* form of his day and at his early period as a writer he wrote fictional stories which had nothing to do with his private life. These works were independent of his own story, exemplified in such pieces as "Rashōmon" and "The Nose" (*Hana*). Although such fictional stories were very unique during the *bundan* era, this did not stop him from experimenting with the western fictional compositional style. His stories were created from the viewpoint of a third person, enabling him to remove himself from the writing. This was not typical of the *bundan* writers of that time.

Nakamura Shin'ichirō argued that "the pivotal point of classical aesthetics is to be a conscious act"⁵⁰. It can be seen from the following statements how much Akutagawa was influenced by the western writers of his time and how he tried to search for the best way to write consciously.

"The artist's creative activities are a conscious act, however much of a genius he may be."

"Every artist should improve his art all the more."

"Therefore all novelists, as Goethe, must work hard to improve their writing."⁵¹

Akutagawa cared about the development of his stories and he diligently prepared for the unexpected endings which always surprised his readers. This was done in order to be as conscious and artful as his western contemporaries. The result was brief, precise descriptions embedded in a poetic rhythm that aroused the imagination. His excellent skill as a story-teller and his various conscious and deliberate descriptions are exemplified in works such as "Rashōmon", "The Martyr" (*Hōkyō-nin no Shi*), and "The Hell Screen" (*Jigoku-hen*).

It can be seen then that Akutagawa was keen on western literature and had rejected the plotless, confessional, self-revelation which was the mainstream *bundan* form of his time. He was also able to engage elements from the West namely, "the conscious way of the orthodox western literature which centered its framework not on the writer's private life, but on the writer's conception."

On the other hand, it is also clear that he had at the same time an element of the East in him. He was brought up in Honjo, the old part of Tokyo, where the atmosphere of the Edo period still remained, providing a special "Eastern" uniqueness. Here, "the old dignity which was in the stage of transition from feudal age to modern age" could be strongly felt. With his adoptive father, they used to walk around the remains of an Edo mansion of a feudal lord, and through a field called "Otakezō" to a waterway with an old bridge that leads to the river Ōkawa. As well, the Akutagawa family boasted some sixteen generations of family service with the Tokugawa shōguns. Consequently, Akutagawa was constantly surrounded by a traditional Japanese environment greatly

⁵⁰ Nakamura Shin'ichiō, *Nakamura Shin'ichiō Hyōron Zenshū*, vol. 1, Kawade Shobō Shinsha 1972, p. 184.

⁵¹ Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "The Art and Others" 'The Complete works of Akutagawa Ryūnosuke' vol. 7, Iwanami Shoten 1955, p. 23.

impacted by the Edo period. Growing up in such an environment, and being familiar with Japanese and Chinese classics from his own reading, Akutagawa was able to embed elements of Japanese tradition throughout his works more than any other writer of his era. “This was caused by his life and education with an adoptive family, together with his twenty-year span in the environs of Honjo.”⁵² He was therefore able to incorporate the core essence of many things Japanese deep inside his works. In fact “of all the writers who were fascinated with western literature, none could identify with the emotions of the writers of the Edo period as well as Akutagawa could.”⁵³

Thus Akutagawa was able to incorporate nuances of the East into his writing. His innate understanding of the eastern way of life from his own upbringing, along with his choice of topics from eastern classical stories like “Tales of Long Ago” (*Konjaku Monogatari*) enabled him to enhance his literature with a Japanese uniqueness.

In summary, Akutagawa, did not conform to “I novels”, the plotless, confessional, self-revelation of the mainstream *bundan* writers, but rather wrote fictional stories like, “Rashōmon” and “The Nose”. Such stories were independent of his own private life, were based on themes from eastern classical stories such as “Tales of Long Ago” and contained elements of both the East and the West during the early periods of his writing. These stories were created in the western style, not writing in the first person, as a reflection of the author’s own personal story (*I novels*), as was typical of the time in Japan. His extensive reading of western works during adolescence, and his own familiarity with the Japan of old, enabled him to have in his writings a unique grasp of both the East and the West.

Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon*

From the above it can now be seen why Akutagawa became an “international writer”. The western structure facilitated the translation process and enabled earlier translations of his works to be widely understood and therefore accepted and read all over the world. Compared to “I novels” typical of Japanese writing at that time, they were easy to understand and more attractive to translate due to their shortness. Moreover they contained an enticing insight into the exotic culture of the Japanese.

In addition, the film *Rashomon* directed by Kurosawa Akira further prompted the boom of the translation of Akutagawa’s works.

On September 10, 1951, Kurosawa Akira’s *Rashomon* was awarded the Grand Prix at the twelfth international film festival in Venice. The original story was taken from Akutagawa’s “In a Grove” (*Yabu no Naka*), but the screen writer Hashimoto Shinobu mixed in elements of “Rashōmon” to make it more interesting. The first story (In a Grove) was a little too short for a full length feature. After that, Kurosawa himself added some

⁵² Yoshida Seiichi, *Akutagawa Ryūnosuke*, Sanseidō 1948, p. 17.

⁵³ Ibid.

of his own ideas to further improve it and then it was released. The film became the first ever Japanese motion picture to win an international first place. Yodogawa Nagaharu, a film critic, endorsed the accolade by stating that "*Rashomon* made Japanese films known to the world. This achievement is deserving of great praise."⁵⁴ This was a surprising result since the film had had a negative reception in its own home country. However, on December 26 of the same year, it was released in New York, and then finally on March 21 of the following year it was awarded the Academy's special prize for best foreign film.

"Japanese pictures, as all film experts knew, were just a bunch of rubber chrysanthemums. So the judges sat down yawning. They got up dazed. ... In technique, the picture was traumatically original; in spirit it was big, strong, male. It was obviously the work of a genius, and that genius was Akira Kurosawa, the earliest herald of the new era in cinema."⁵⁵

"The recent success in this country of the Japanese film »*Rashomon*« probably explains why there has been published »*Rashomon and Other Stories*« by Ryunosuke Akutagawa."⁵⁶

"His famed *Rashomon* was made into unforgettable movie and later a Broadway play."⁵⁷

The boom of Akutagawa's translated works occurred between 1958 and 1961, some five years or so after *Rashomon* won the prize. In fact, the translation of his works spurred an additional 93 translations between 1953 and 1960 (after the award). This was a significant improvement on the 7 years prior to the award (between 1945 and 1952). Taking into consideration the impact of the war, such results indicate the significant influence the Kurosawa film played. An analysis of Akutagawa's translated works shows that the film's namesake "*Rashōmon*" has 33 translations in 22 different languages. The original "*In a Grove*" has 21 translations in 16 different languages. Both of these works take first and second place respectively for the greatest number of translations of a particular work of Akutagawa.

The fact that the number of translations increased considerably after *Rashomon* was awarded the Grand Prix in Venice, and won the Academy special prize, and that the two works it is based on "*Rashōmon*" and "*In a Grove*" make up the majority of all his translations is not coincidental.

It shows that one of the reasons Akutagawa became so well known overseas is also due to the impact of Kurosawa's *Rashomon* film. A great many of the translations are indebted to its success. Without Kurosawa, it is doubtful whether the works of Akutagawa would have been translated to the extent they are now. He was best known

⁵⁴ Yodogawa Nagaharu, "*Rashōmon*" in: *The Complete works of Kurosawa Akira*, The Special Edition of Kinema Shumpō, Kinema Shumpō Sha, 1988, p. 215.

⁵⁵ Peter Drag, "Shadow of the Bomb" 'Time the weekly magazine' vol. 82, Chicago, 111: Time-Life International, 20 September, 1963.

⁵⁶ Robert Halsband, "Fresh tales from Japan" 'Saturday review' vol. 36 New York: Saturday Review, 7 March, 1953.

⁵⁷ "Time the weekly news magazine", vol. 79 Chicago, 111: Time-Life International, 5 Jan. 1962.

for being the author of *Rashomon* and was noted as being one of the most popular Japanese writers in the West, according to articles in the *Time* and *The Saturday Review*.

Conclusion

If an "international writer" is defined as a writer who is widely read in the country of origin as well as having translations across the globe, then Akutagawa can indeed be called an "international writer". The number of translations of Akutagawa's works outnumbers those of Kawabata Yasunari, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1968 with more than one hundred works. Akutagawa's works have also been translated into a great variety of languages such as English, Russian, German, Ukrainian, Polish, and Finnish. Not only have the popular works been translated but also many of his smaller, unpopular works have also been chosen for translation. There even exists in Russia a complete set of Akutagawa's works. Given the fact that there are also numerous translated works in Ukraine, it is clear that Akutagawa is popular not only in Western, but also Eastern Europe.

In conclusion, the essential reason why Akutagawa was able to become an "international writer" is that he possessed within himself a "joint understanding of both the East and the West". This enabled him to write fictional stories in a western manner, with sophisticated style and descriptions. In addition, he could also simultaneously embed within his works a taste of something uniquely Japanese namely the "Japanese delicacy". Neither his religiosity (with Christian overtones) nor his premature "heroic" death was sufficiently attractive enough to appeal to such large numbers of readers from all over the world. Instead the universality of Akutagawa's literature is found in his "style and description" which retains its distinctive quality even after translation. Last, but certainly not least, is the "Japanese delicacy" which flows intricately throughout his writings. These are the elements that have attracted and charmed readers from all over the world.