
The Writer's Craft: An Analysis of Akutagawa

How is it that one's purpose or direction in life always seems to be predetermined? Nowhere is there a check point where it is appropriate to pick what one's hopes and aspirations are and magically expect them to happen. The only plausible explanation for this is that it simply will not happen. Society has cast a dark shadow in the sense that there is little hope for venturing outside one's expected bounds. This is one of the main themes in the story "The Writer's Craft." Horikawa Yasukichi experiences this first hand as he gets so caught up in the supposed societal bounds that it interrupts him accomplishing anything and puts his dream of being a critically acclaimed author to a screeching halt. No matter what he tries to do, the only success the Navy school teacher has when it comes to putting pen to paper is writing eulogies in a time of despair. The title that embeds him seems forever inescapable, hence causing Yasukichi to act in an outright manner, almost depressing to some degree. This frightening fact along with the way others perceive him goes back to show how tightly and how harshly a simple title can tarnish not only one's livelihood, but also one's will to live.

The seemingly endless list of preconceived notions concerning Yasukichi was the turning point in his demeanor as it was the first of many breaking points for him. It was these very titles that led to his own short-sightedness in terms of painting himself in a brutally harsh light: Navy school teacher. A Navy school teacher. A simple title that seems harmless, but put into context it is a death sentence for Yasukichi. In his mind he had dreams of soaring above the clouds and coming out on top in the literary world. Not surprisingly, that dream was to stay just that, a dream. A title like that is meant to stick together tighter than molasses on a steaming August afternoon: "True, he taught English, but that was not his real profession. Not in his mind, at least. His life's work, he felt, was the creation of literature" (165). The key phrase in this quote is "He felt," because at this point Yasukichi is not coping with reality as he has yet to accept the limits that society has awarded him. It begs the question of what a title truly entails. In this case, Yasukichi has been given a strict title, but the true problem evolves when he becomes consumed by that title. He has no ability to see beyond that and accepts the daunting reality that he is suppose to go about business within his limited realms. In the scarce opportunities he has been asked to write a piece, it has been to write eulogies. It almost seems ironic that the achievements he has in a literally sense are about death and that goes hand in hand with where his career of becoming an author is headed. With a different profession or credentials, Yasukichi may have had the success he had always hoped for, but the title he acclaimed would not allow that. It shows the power of a three worded title and how it can prevent him from reaching his dreams. A Navy school teacher.

One may have the will to make an attempt at escaping their supposed role, but people will do everything in their power to ensure that does not happen. This was the case with Yasukichi as he was opened to the world of critics. He was put into an incredibly difficult situation as he was at times praised for his work. This gave him a false sense of hope and once he attained that confidence level it was simply setting him up for a tougher plummet towards the bottom. When receiving instructions for Lieutenant Honda's eulogy, Captain Fujita ended by saying "Let your famous pen do the rest" (163). This is wrong for many reasons and especially because in no way is Yasukichi famous for his literary pieces. The only thing worth while that has come from the "famous pen" of Yasukichi are his previous two eulogies. By directly referring to the pen,

rather than Yasukichi, it indicates that there is nothing famous that he himself has actually created. He remains resentful at first for the reason that he believes he is above writing eulogies and should be focusing his attention on his short stories that come out every two months. With a little self convincing, he eventually brings himself to write the eulogy in less than no time. Something thrown together so mindlessly would have to be the sacrifice Yasukichi made in order to have the time to continue his creation of his latest short story. Upon the delivery of the eulogy at the funeral, he is awed that there was such an uprising of emotions from the family of Lieutenant Honda's family. For once he had accomplished the goal of any author, to bring out pure feelings from the audience. The idea behind this is that it would be nearly impossible to be unable to arise emotions from an audience at a place like a funeral. No half-hearted human being would ever criticize a eulogy with regards the the devastating circumstances. Following an even greater confidence boost than the one from the Captain, Yasukichi reads a devastating review of his latest short story from a well respected critic. This is crushing news, as the realization comes to him that even when things look to be going well, someone will ensure failure upon him: "His eulogies worked, his stories failed miserably: it was funny for everyone but Yasukichi himself. When would Fate be kind enough to ring down the curtain on this sad comedy?" (171). The quote itself describes perfectly how no matter what Yasukichi tries to accomplish, there is always a seemingly unmovable road block in the way. This acts as almost a final stand as Yasukichi is calling upon the same fate to rescue him that has supposedly been ruining his life. Failure is the only attainable status as a result.

The emotional hardships that follow those on a vision quest will eventually lead to some sort of demise. Yasukichi experienced this in the sense that his will to continue on slowly diminished. From the beginning of the text, the reader is thrust into a somewhat depressing scene. The thought of death is immediately brought up and Yasukichi's response is even more troublesome as he merely dismisses it and is more concerned about how is now forced to write another eulogy. As he contemplates what to do, he realizes he has no inner drive to write something meaningful and claims he slips into a state of melancholy. Writing about the death of man he hardly knew is a somewhat numbing task. Simply the thought of death is enough to send someone into a spiraling frenzy, but it was different for Yasukichi. He lost the passion that he once spoke of for literature. The simple distraction of an unwanted task was enough to change his course as his mental state began to change. When mentioning the eulogy and lack of thought that went into it the text quotes "It contained nothing of which he need to feel ashamed. Such sensitivities had been scraped away from him long ago, like the surface of an old razor strop" (169). The thought of having such a normal emotion taken away from Yasukichi's head is frightening to say the least. Nothing good can come from having simple human feelings ground away over time for the only reason of struggle. This idea goes back to the fact that his only success has come from writing eulogies. This entails the concept of hardship and the darkest of realities. As Yasukichi writes his eulogies, he is speaking from within himself and how as his emotions have been scraped away, he can relate to the death like occurrences. Yasukichi continuously failed to cope with his short comings time after time. This ate at him and by the end it was just too much for one person to handle. "Yasukichi discovered that the sun was too far down for him to see his own stream" (171). This quotes goes farther than a simple sun set, but should be interpreted as the metaphorical sun going down from Yasukichi's life. He had failed one too many times and the sad reality in which he found himself was unbearable. While it may just start out as a simple thought of doubt in the back of one's head, it can lead to an utterly bitter end.

Living the dream or sayings like it are so frequently used in today's world. The only problem

with that is the sad notion that the odds that one can actually live the dream are minimal at best. Yasukichi wanted nothing more than to become a force in the literary world. Simply to touch the hearts of his readers would mean more to him than life itself. As he tried time and time again to achieve this goal, the only accomplishment that came about were his eulogies which meant less than nothing to him. This became even more of a discouraging fact as he only experienced any success in an area he had no interest being involved in. The next step is to look at the reasons behind that and that leads to the conclusion that society is simply not fit to let just anyone reach their goals. Yasukichi was labeled with the title of a Navy school teacher and there was no way he could become anything more or less than that. The invisible chains keeping him back endured all attempts at escape. This led Yasukichi to new territory as he struggled with his mental strength and the relentless attacks of criticism. "All unknowing, he had tramped with muddy feet into the sacred recesses of the human heart" (170). The realization for Yasukichi hits him harder and faster than ever before as it is clear how he had made devastating news with the death of Lieutenant Honda, that much more difficult to cope with following his eulogy. Each and every written word has the power to break one's soul and little thought ever goes into that. The hope at the beginning of the text slowly faded with each event as it became more and more clear that society itself will never change and there are truly no exceptions.

As much as Yasukichi hoped to be, reality eventually struck and it struck harder than ever before. The reader watched as his every hope and dream was crushed in a tragic end. One can hope for change, but "The Writer's Craft" is just another example that the societal bounds will never be a good thing as they continue to tarnish hopes and dreams.