

BOOK REVIEWS

Still Life and Other Stories

By Junzō Shōno
Translated by Wayne P. Lammers

BERKELEY: STONE BRIDGE PRESS, 1992
264 PAGES

In 1996, the Smithsonian exhibited a selection of landscape kimonos by Ichiku Kubota. While contemplating the thirty or so kimonos depicting a seaside mountainscape through the four seasons, I realized the layers upon layers embedded in the work. The realization came gradually, after nearly two hours of standing at a distance, turning very slowly to see the panorama, then finally “seeing,” not with eyes but in a kind of Zen perspective. The realization is not sudden, but stunning, emotional, and evocative.

Likewise, reading and re-reading the short fiction of Junzō Shōno, the same Zen perspective is achieved, and in the same process. One by one, layers of meaning are revealed, slowly and evocatively. Shōno’s fiction will strike the American audience, upon a first reading, as so much postmodernist existential angst; the reader who stops at that point is the same as those patrons who hurried through the Smithsonian in the spring of 1996, proclaiming “how nice” and “how Oriental” and seeing nothing beyond shape and color.

Shōno’s settings are clearly Japanese, but as layers reveal themselves, the Japaneseness of the whole work recedes and becomes only backdrop; the foreground becomes occupied by wholly real, believable humans in natural contexts.

In “Evenings at the Pool,” Shōno shows us a suburban family, apparently typical, with housewife-mother and *sarariiman*-father, enjoying the middle-class life with two boys and a dog. Yet the unease of the story grows upon the reader, until the haunting feeling shared with the wife over the husband’s errors becomes unbearable. You weep along with her at his revelations.

A similar transfer of emotion occurs in “A Dance,” yet the reader is caught in a strange struggle for feelings on either side; again, a domestic tug-of-war between husband and wife. This story layers meanings, emotions, understandings, and anxieties in a balance between the protagonist and antagonist, and the reader closes the story not quite sure which, husband or wife, is the protagonist. In our day of recognition of feminism, one wants to be sympathetic toward the wife, and yet, such sympathy is hard-won. Perhaps Shōno plays with us and with our emotions, just as feelings overwhelmed us in the kimono exhibit; Kubota perhaps knew exactly how to draw us inside the “tapestry where threads seem to cross randomly.” But there is, fundamentally, nothing random in these works; read aloud with

China
Japan
Vietnam

CET offers intensive study abroad programs in
Beijing, Harbin, Nanjing, Kyoto,
Hanoi & Ho Chi Minh City.

CET Asia programs include:

- Small, intensive language classes
- Individual tutorials
- Internships
- Live with a Chinese or Vietnamese roommate
- Live with a Japanese host family
- Vietnamese Studies courses
- Study trips

Spring semester application deadline:

November 1, 2000

Contact CET for details.



1000 16th Street NW, Suite 351
Washington, DC 20036-5705
(800) 225-4261
Email: cet@academic-travel.com
www.cetacademicprograms.com

an American senior high school Japanese class, the reactions of students demonstrated a very clear and non-random understanding of the universality of human emotional range and content.

Shōno's settings are clearly Japanese, but as layers reveal themselves, the Japaneseness of the whole work recedes and becomes only backdrop; the foreground becomes occupied by wholly real, believable humans in natural contexts. To illustrate, it is only necessary to read contemporary short fiction from Rabindranath Tagore ("My Lord, the Baby," translated from the Hindustani by C. F. Andrews) from the Indian anthology or Rumi ("The Soul of Goodness in Things Evil," translated from the Arabic by Reynold A. Nicholson) or one of my favorites, Biago Diop ("The Wages of Good," translated from French by Robert Baldrick) from Africa, and another Asian context, Lao She ("The Last Train," translated from the Chinese by Yuan Chia-hua and Robert Payne) to differentiate the contextuality. By this, I mean only to demonstrate the quality of the Shōno fiction, and to say that it captures the heart of the reader, whether American or Japanese. It slowly reveals itself as universal, rather than narrowly nationalistic.

But, there is a warning due the reader: re-read Shōno, perhaps at least twice, before dismissing him as just another apologist for the "economic animal" crafted from the postwar Japanese culture. The layers of meaning, like Peter Engel expresses of origami, delight us in "endowing patterns with meaning, finding faces in the clouds and figures in the trees." Engel goes on to say something that has become for me epiphanic, which I have shared across a range of experiences including those catalogued here: "to fold a piece of paper into an object is to transform a mute, geometric shape into a recognizable figure . . . (that) we imbue with order and meaning . . . by slow, awkward steps."

Shōno has likewise pulled us gently along, to see chaos and then, little by little, order and pattern, meaning and depth, transforming ourselves in the process.

There are three possibilities for the use of Shōno's work in a high school classroom, depending upon the setting. By setting, instructors must carefully examine the audience, the scope and sequence of the class and its environment, and the intended outcomes. I have had success with these works in sophomore classes and above, although I have had to carefully assess the levels of preparation of students.

First, this work is clearly postmodern, and fits with and compares well with any literature course. I have made comparisons with Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Dreiser as well as Gabriel Garcia-Marquez and Tomas Rivera. While the early-twentieth-century American writers are not strictly postmodernists, a comparative discussion using their works is a nice foundation. Shōno's work is probably the best example (in translation) of postmodernist fiction, and stands up well to any European or American writer.

*Shōno has likewise pulled us gently along,
to see chaos and then, little by little,
order and pattern, meaning and depth,
transforming ourselves
in the process.*

Second, Shōno does not write on specifically Japanese themes, although they are worked into the fabric of the fiction. The proper names, certain circumstances, foods, and events depict Japanese lifestyles, but could also easily be Western in appearance with little effort. The works lend themselves well to comparative or multicultural discussions in order to provide students a more rounded understanding of the themes of multiculturalism.

Third, for the Japanese language classroom, I have concentrated on the relationships and the underlying intrinsic Japanese cultural values, especially flowing from Buddhist and Shinto themes. These offer the possibility of further discussions with students on broader topics regarding how language is loaded with cultural themes, as is especially true in the Japanese language. One cannot successfully understand how and why Japanese language "works" without at least a cursory knowledge of the cultural foundations of the language. ■

WORKS CITED

- Diop, Biago. "The Wages of Good," translated from the French by Robert Baldick, in James E. Miller, Jr., Robert O'Neal, and Helen M. McDonnell, eds., *Black African Voices*. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970.
- Engel, Peter. *Origami from Angelfish to Zen*. New York: Dover Publications, 1989.
- Rumi. "The Soul of Goodness in Things Evil," translated from the Arabic by Reynold A. Nicholson, in James E. Miller, Jr., Robert O'Neal, and Helen M. McDonnell, eds., *Literature of the Eastern World*. Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1970.
- Lao, She. "The Last Train," translated from the Chinese by Yuan Chia-hua and Robert Payne, in Miller, O'Neal, and McDonnell, *Literature of the Eastern World*, 1970.
- Shōno, Junzō. *Still Life and Other Stories*, translated from the Japanese by Wayne P. Lammers. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1992.
- Tagore, Rabindranath. "My Lord the Baby," translated from the Hindustani by C. F. Andrews, in Miller, O'Neal, and McDonnell, *Literature of the Eastern World*, 1970.

PAUL W. LANDERMAN, formerly a banker and investment analyst, teaches Japanese at Thomas Jefferson High School/Silva Magnet High School in El Paso, Texas. He holds a B.A. in Political Science from Brigham Young University, a B.A. in Education from Idaho State University, and an M.Ed. in Educational Administration from the University of Texas at El Paso. He is currently a doctoral student in Educational Administration at the University of Texas in El Paso.