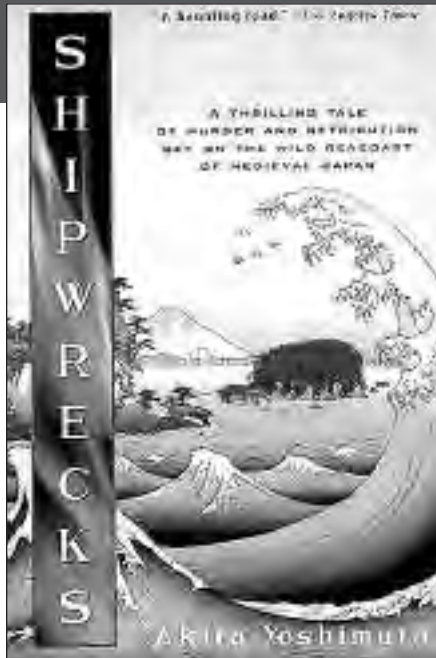


## Teaching Asian Fiction with the Psychograph:

# SHIPWRECKS

By Richard Booth



**P** *Psychology is remarkably absent from Asian Studies programs. The notable exception may be the periodic cross-cultural psychology presentations. However, as valuable as it is, the cross-cultural perspective is only one of numerous psychological approaches for teaching Asian Studies. The psychograph is another, and is particularly useful in the analysis of literature. I discuss this approach below, with respect to teaching the Japanese novel Shipwrecks.*<sup>1</sup>

*The psychograph is a psychological “picture” deriving from clinical insight and psychosocial analysis. One objective in using the psychograph to analyze Shipwrecks is to demonstrate that, unlike certain other literary critical approaches, it moves beyond the text itself into the realm of psychological interpretations of characters’ personality structures.*<sup>2</sup> *It often explores symbolic subtleties, and it frequently looks at metaphor, especially in terms of symptom-as-metaphor. An example of this is that a character’s persistent stomach problem may be a metaphor for the larger reality of a marital conflict.*<sup>3</sup>

... THE PSYCHOGRAPH CAN BE A USEFUL TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING EMBEDDED PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANINGS WITHIN ANOTHER CULTURE’S FICTIONAL TEXTS EVEN WHEN THERE IS LITTLE OPPORTUNITY FOR TEACHING THAT OTHER CULTURE IN DEPTH

Psychography is not a new technique, either in the interpretation of living persons’ lives (e.g., patients) or in literary history. Freud, for example, created his psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci’s personality from extant documents and from the artist’s works and sketches themselves.<sup>4</sup> Psychologist Erik Erikson utilized the technique extensively, constructing psychographs of Luther, Gandhi, Hitler, Freud, Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson, and others.<sup>5</sup> Analyst Erich Fromm’s work in the area of malignant aggression includes pathographies (i.e., psychographs focusing primarily on psychopathology) of some high-ranking figures in Hitler’s Nazi regime.<sup>6</sup> The psychograph can illuminate complex and sometimes elusive dynamics, including the pathogenesis of certain behaviors and subtle symptomatology. Motivation, framing biases, clinical syndromes, personality traits, emotional dynamics, behavioral repertoires, developmental anomalies, and coping strategies are a few of the possible emphases any given psychograph might assume. To analyze a work of fiction from a psychographic perspective is, in some respects, the functional literary equivalent of a psychological analysis of a patient.

Another objective in using the psychograph to analyze *Shipwrecks* is that, while simultaneously introducing students to non-Western literature, it generates discussion about the degree to which Western interpretations of human behavior, particularly psychopathology, are applicable to non-Western cultural traditions. In conjunction with this objective, I present specific “teaching points” throughout this essay, which help to frame poignant issues that will help students think critically about which aspects of the psychographic analysis can be reasonably applied to the culture in which the novel is set.

Still another objective is to demonstrate that the psychograph can be a useful tool for understanding embedded psychological meanings within another culture's fictional texts even when there is little opportunity for teaching that other culture in depth.

Some literature has been informed by particularly poignant psychological thinking, and psychological analysis has sometimes been utilized to understand the deeper dynamics of characters, behaviors, and plot structures. In fact, the relationship between psychology and literature is a venerable and seasoned one. One need only read *Oedipus Rex* to understand the intractable anguish and the internalized rage of a son who comes to know that he has killed his father and married his mother, and the self-destructive reparation that follows. Or, *Hamlet*, which depicts the haunting tale of a prepossessed son whose clear and overwhelming obsession is to avenge the murder of his father.

Modern literature, too, has frequently donned an unmistakable psychological quality. For example, Hesse's *Demian* penetratingly portrays the power of good and evil as it weaves its way through a wealth of Freudian and Jungian constructs. The depression, denial, and suicide in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*; the projective identification and the mad pursuit of a whale in Melville's *Moby Dick*; and the deep emotional blocking, repression, and substitution of food in Joyce Carol Oates's *Wonderland* are but a few of the powerful products of literature's relationship with psychology. That said, psychography engages an uncertain path when it attempts to unravel the dynamics of a literary work, like *Shipwrecks*, that was conceived in a cultural tradition different from the one that birthed its psychological strategies. Western characters and Western plots, like those mentioned above, emerge from the same general context in which they are being evaluated. *Shipwrecks* does not.



### CAVEATS AND SENSITIVITIES IN TEACHING ASIAN FICTION

To teach a non-Western novel from a Western psychological perspective merits considerable reflection. At base, the problem is how to teach the work, since one teaches what one knows and the contextual biases of ethnocentric socialization are not always fully conscious.

I agree with those who argue that, in some Western circles, it has become fashionable to denigrate Western civilization while romanticizing or idealizing Asian cultures, even though both exist separately and together as part of a larger dialectic. Both constitute experiments in human adaptation and survival. At its extreme, the denigration-romanticization/idealization motif trivializes the fundamental interdependence of both. Further, the teacher engaged in this process embraces a type of reverse ethnocentrism, for reasons peculiar to his or her personality structure and needs. Narcissism theory and research<sup>7</sup> tell us that elevation and denigration split the "all good" (i.e., the non-Western) from the "all bad" (i.e., the Western) in artificial ways. In order to teach the "different," one must first "be in" oneself and one's own. However much one may know "about" or prefer the other, one is not "of" the other. So, just how does one teach a non-Western literary work, while preserving its integrity and simultaneously recognizing that the interpretive tools one is using derive from a different ideological path from the work one is teaching? This is the heart of the matter.

This difficult question inevitably leads us to a second issue, the etic-emic dichotomy. The etic approach argues that people, regardless of culture, are fundamentally alike, and that human processes are, overall, consistent wherever we go. Alternatively, the emic approach favors a more relativist perspective, interpreting human behavior more as a function of particularistic cultural socialization than of universalist principles. This dichotomy remains an area of dispute, but many perceive both similarities and differences between and among cultures, that is, a *both-and* relationship.

Sigmund Freud, 1929.

Source: *Sigmund Freud: His Life in Pictures and Words*. Edited by Ernst Freud, Lucie Freud and Ilse Grubrich-Simits.

Paperback edition published by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1998.

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STUDENTS MIGHT BENEFIT FROM DISCUSSING WHETHER JUNG'S NOTION OF INDIVIDUATION OR ERIKSON'S CONCEPT OF IDENTITY FORMATION ARE APPROPRIATE CONCEPTUAL TOOLS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE JAPANESE CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL.

Psychiatrist Takeo Doi, trained both in Japan and the United States, argues that symptoms present similarly across cultures.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the reasons for symptoms may vary as a function of socialization. Moreover, cultures may recognize, label, and treat conditions variously. For example, in cultures like Japan, first person singular pronoun, "I," is quite unlikely to be used and the construct "self" is likely to be understood primarily *in relation to* a group rather than as referential to a separate individual.<sup>9</sup> In fact, Buddhist psychology suggests (the characters in the novel are Japanese Buddhists) that there is no such thing as an individual.<sup>10</sup> These differences in embeddedness should be recognized before one concludes that a certain Japanese person, for instance, has "weak ego boundaries" or an "underdeveloped sense of self." These symptoms may be present, but they should not be decontextualized, just as the solitary hero is probably best understood in Western context. In conjunction with this understanding, students might benefit from discussing whether Jung's notion of individuation or Erikson's concept of identity formation are appropriate conceptual tools for understanding the Japanese characters in the novel.<sup>11</sup>

In order to standardize clinical diagnosis, The World Health Organization has developed a classification system of mental disorders in its "International Classification of Diseases."<sup>12</sup> When considering this code, however, we should not ignore those syndromes that may be uniquely culture-bound.<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that these issues are not easily resolved, but resolution must occur and subtle biases must surface to avert a teacher's theoretical and personal inclinations influencing literary interpretation unwittingly.

### SHIPWRECKS (O-FUNE-SAMA): A PSYCHOGRAPHIC OVERVIEW

*Shipwrecks* is a 1982 Japanese novel written by Akira Yoshimura and translated in 1996. I have taught segments of it in my Personality Theories course. On its face, it is easily read and understood. Its style is straightforward and its sequences clear. The novel's imagery is sometimes very powerful, even visceral, but not extremely complex. Yoshimura presents salient ethical dilemmas and psychological dynamics that cry out for reflection and debate from numerous theoretical perspectives.

The author creates a timeless world in which only the cycle of birth and death and the predictable movements of natural phenomena tell the passing of time. Death is a prominent theme. Daunting heaviness, anguish, and toil fill his pages. Seventeen homes constitute the stark village in which the novel is set, a village locked between the mountains and the sea. One road, infrequently traveled, stretches to the world beyond this intricately interdependent collection of human souls. The villagers survive only by the good graces of Nature and the benevolence of the gods. People and Nature comprise *interbeing* through an inescapable cycle of mutual regard and strife. Since it is important that students understand this type of reciprocal determinism between people and the environment in which they survive, the issue of the power of Nature versus the power of human groups could be raised here. In addition, issues of helplessness and desperation in the face of Nature's stark demands can help Western students understand some of the differences between what they face in daily life and what others may have to contend with.

Though fundamentally Buddhist, ancestor prayer and magical attributions to external deities are common. The villagers' sociopolitical structure mirrors their cosmic understandings: the governance style is a "benevolent" authoritarianism with distributive equity, in which obedience is an ennobling virtue. The personal sense of self-efficacy is absent and independent thought is unwaveringly discouraged. Order is highly valued, and survival is the intransigent obsession. Fear of starvation is never a stranger. The sea gives up its sometimes elusive quarry and the rocky earth reluctantly sprouts a bit of grain. This is the stuff of which survival is made. This, and "O-fune-sama."

The central character, Isaku, is a prepubescent boy whose father sold himself into indentured servitude for three years to ensure the family's survival. The boy is embedded in a world in which child death is common and old age viewed as a drain on the young. His manhood is defined by his ability to fish well. He makes no independent contribution to his identity formation. Men fish. Women tend the crops and prepare the food. The distribution of labor is rigid and gender-driven. Roles are deeply internalized.

Isaku is a parentified child; he is forced to become an adult long before his time. He is the eldest child of four, and remembers his father's parting words to his mother, whose responsibilities he now shares, not to let the children die. But, due to uncontrollable conditions, he is helpless to prevent the deaths of two siblings and, as a result, feels deep remorse and unremitting sadness. He distances from this anguish, however, by projecting it onto his father, thinking thoughts like his father (not he) will be heartbroken upon his return. This is an anxiety-forestalling strategy.<sup>14</sup> In the face of Isaku's assuming the paternal role within the family due to his father's leaving the home, students can be referred to the parental abandonment literature and asked to discuss whether our Western research findings in this area might apply differently to a young boy in Isaku's situation or not.<sup>15</sup>

Parentified children typically experience a nagging emptiness accompanied by self-blame. Frequently, a premature, overdeveloped sense of responsibility leads to an irrational need for perfection and a deep, patterned style of caretaking, much like the "savior" archetype. Receiving love in adulthood may be difficult, since parentified children, having experienced emotional abandonment, are more accustomed to giving than receiving. Parentification may engender a sense of helplessness or surrender to the necessities of responsible behavior and to a concomitant lack of awareness of one's own internal needs and legitimate desires, in addition to attachment deficits. The Buddhist and Socratic dictum to know oneself is threatened by self-estrangement, leading to loneliness and possible eventual rage.<sup>16</sup>

Isaku's world is a silent world, with only periodic exceptions. In light of the extreme silence in Isaku's village, students might find it helpful to compare and contrast his reality against the persistent noise found in Western society, and discuss the positive as well as the negative dimensions of silence. Isaku's brooding, emotionally desiccated mother offers little solace. At times, she hits Isaku in the face so hard that he becomes temporarily deaf from the blow. He suppresses reaction, creating a powerfully inhibited, over-controlled response repertoire. She is self-involved, undercommitted to emotional connectedness, and shows little affection toward her children. She goes through the motions of performing "motherly tasks." She appears clinically depressed, perhaps even schizoid, with massive rage, most of which she internalizes. When parents are emotionally unpredictable or unavailable to their children, the young strategize methods of negotiating the parental affect. They attend to the parental mood state instead of their own, failing to learn the importance of their own feeling states. Emotional abandonment may include narcissistic self-deprecation alternating with a powerful sense of self-sufficiency emanating from fulfilling parental expectations. Further, these dynamics tend to create a tense vigilance in children, which can result in a serious threat to their developing sense of trust.<sup>17</sup>

Isaku intuitively recognizes his tenuous attachment to his mother. Whenever he thinks about his family responsibilities, his siblings come to mind, never his mother. He rarely seeks her approval, is not affectionate with her, and finds her unapproachable. She values his performance, not his essence. Of some comfort is his limited idealization of his absent father, to whom he wishes to appear competent, manly, and responsible upon the father's return. Isaku never plays; his life is work. Socializing among the working young is not encouraged, so he has no opportunity to learn the nuances of cooperative play, conflict resolution, and deep friendship. Although Western psychology considers mastery of these skills imperative for children, is it possible that, for Isaku, they are not necessary, given that his life is so tightly structured by the particular normative expectations of his culture? In other words, if people do not play, if interpersonal conflict is minimized by authoritarian leadership, and if one's only meaningful relationship is with one's family, are these skills important?

Isaku readily feels shame, in part because his mother uses shaming as a control mechanism. He never discusses his feelings, nor is he able to process the maternal emotional abandonment.<sup>18</sup> No one appears close to anyone else except within the formal parameters of courtship, marriage, and functional "friendship" bonds. In large part, linkages are a result of necessity, not emotion. Interestingly, Isaku does not blame his mother for her uncompromising coldness; rather, he rationalizes her behavior in terms of her missing his father. This is a common defense and, for Isaku, less anxiety-producing than to face the harrowing possibility that his mother does not love him.



... STUDENTS WILL BENEFIT FROM CONSIDERING WHETHER THE O-FUNE-SAMA RITUAL IS TRULY A SURVIVAL REQUISITE, FOR WHICH NO ADEQUATE SUBSTITUTE CAN BE FOUND, OR A RATIONALIZATION FOR PILLAGING AND KILLING WITHOUT ACTUAL JUSTIFICATION.

Most conversation surrounds the infrequent occurrences of “O-fune-sama,” a gift from the gods, “shipwrecks.” In the autumn, designated men hover over cauldrons in the night, making salt on a hill high above the sea. The nocturnal salt-making is a partial deceit, since the fires fueling the cauldrons are primarily intended to lure endangered ships toward the rocky shore. If the deceit is successful, rocks tear open the ships’ underbellies and the ocean swallows the evidence. Before submersion, the villagers steal the cargo and kill the surviving sailors. This is “O-fune-sama.” Shipwrecks.

The ancestors devised the ritual long before Isaku was born. The unequivocal goal is to seduce troubled ships into an apparently welcoming village, where the fires are to be interpreted as lights in the homes of potentially welcoming helpers. The secret of O-fune-sama is carefully guarded, even from other villages, which would be severely punitive if they knew. Hence, on the one hand, O-fune-sama is a gift from the gods; on the other, a shameful, secret act deserving of powerful negative sanctions. Without O-fune-sama’s gifts of grain and other goods, the people believe they will starve. For them, the ritual is an adaptive strategy in the service of survival. At this point, students will benefit from considering whether the O-fune-sama ritual is truly a survival requisite, for which no adequate substitute can be found, or a rationalization for pillaging and killing without actual justification.

Secrets constitute a curious dynamic. Lovers and friends may share secrets as important self-disclosures, but secrets about deceptive routing, looting, and murder reveal a destructive life-lie<sup>19</sup> that justifies misleading and destroying innocents to preserve one’s own familiar reality rather than generating alternatives. Rationalization, denial, justification, and narcissism (i.e., “We have the right to do this because our survival depends on it. We need not create alternatives. We are entitled.”) constitute primary defenses here. Ironically, the beginning of the village’s demise derives from the same conduit through which their gifts are bestowed: O-fune-sama.

Unexpectedly, a ship floats in toward the shore one night. Twenty dead bodies, dressed in red and covered with pockmarks and scars, lie about the ship. Cautiously, the villagers gaze at the unusual sight. Unlike the typical O-fune-sama, this ship carries virtually no cargo and has not been lured to shore. Questions abound: Is this a real O-fune-sama? Is this a gift from the gods? What is this unusual phenomenon? Should we keep the beautiful clothes? The women and children can use them for celebrations. Speculation about the bodily markings preoccupy the people. The chief believes this is not a real O-fune-sama but, isolated from the larger society, the people know nothing about the markings and the red clothing. They follow the elder’s order to strip the bodies, wash the clothes, and distribute them equitably. But, unremitting and irrevocable tragedy has struck. The elder’s decision, based on his notion that the clothing will be safe after washing, is wrong. Smallpox is not so easily disposed of.

Terrible fever and spotting attack all but a minority of the villagers. Finally, an old man, having seen “the pox” long ago, arrives, and suggests the only possible cure: pray and wear something red. In the end, Isaku’s remaining sister dies, his mother’s face is severely scarred, and his brother is blinded by the pustules on his pupils. Many others are similarly ravaged or killed, including the chief. When fevers diminish, the afflicted are banished into the mountains, a certain death, in order to save the uninfected. The elder commits suicide. The village is all but annihilated.

In the end, Isaku has lost everyone because of a decision made in ignorance by the elder. He is now more emotionally and physically alone than ever. Only a fraction of the village is saved from the “gift” of the final O-fune-sama.

A short time following the sick villagers’ banishment to the mountains, Isaku resumes his fishing. He gazes toward the shore, where he sees a man whom he recognizes as his father. Given the Buddhist notion of the “cycle of birth and death,” students can discuss whether a mythological “resurrection theme” is presented here. In other words, does life transform itself, following the loss of everything, into a type of “new life” that follows upon the death process? Is hope always present, regardless of how much pain one must experience in life?

## CONCLUSION

Due to spatial limitations, I have discussed but a few of the psychodynamics in Yoshimura's novel. I have included several discussion points that may serve as catalysts for student debate about some important questions regarding the nature of life and death, as well as similarities and differences between cultures and how those are managed. *Shipwrecks* affords a plethora of additional issues that students can address as they unravel the deeper meanings and implications of the work, including issues of stratification, social isolation, family systems, and poverty, as well as whether the labels in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – IV*<sup>20</sup> can be reasonably applied to a culture different from the one in which the nomenclature was constructed. While I have used primarily a neoanalytic perspective for my brief analysis of *Shipwrecks*, a number of other psychological approaches might be utilized instead of, or in combination with it. For example, one might adopt a developmental, social psychological, or an alternative clinical-personality theories approach rather than a fundamentally neoanalytic one. Whatever approach, or combination of approaches, one selects, the psychograph can be an extremely useful tool for teaching Asian fiction. ■

## NOTES

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