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The Crucifix and the Lotus: Christian and Buddhist Motifs in the Artistry of Japanese American Author Hisaye Yamamoto

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ABSTRACT

Religious motifs have an integral role in several key short stories by the renowned twentieth-century Japanese American author and sometime religio-social activist Hisaye Yamamoto. For instance, the subtle interplay of Christian themes and the story's events leads Yamamoto's readers to an uneasy confrontation with the Christian problem of evil in her "Yoneko's Earthquake." A similar subtle dynamic brings the readers of Yamamoto's "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" to interrogate the viability of Buddhism in the face of American socio-political injustice.

Keywords: Japanese American Literature; Christianity, Buddhism, U.S. in World War II

The Asian diaspora to Anglophone North America has persevered during the past 150 years despite repeated attempts to suppress it, and it has resulted in a bumper crop of Asian American and Asian Canadian writers who are winning literary prizes, scaling bestseller lists, and even busting into Hollywood box offices. One has only to think of Asian Canadian works like Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* or Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* and of Asian American titles such as Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* or Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (which, according to a survey conducted by the Modern Language Association of America [MLA], became at one point "the most widely taught book by a living author in U.S. colleges and universities" [Chun,

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1991, p. 85]).

Deserving to be numbered in this company of authors is the Japanese American woman writer of short stories Hisaye Yamamoto, born in California in 1921 of immigrant parents. Yamamoto's literary production is not voluminous, but her readers admire the lapidarian quality of her work and the subtle irony with which she probes Japanese American life. Three anthologies of her selected writings have already appeared, and a film adaptation of two of her stories was also first broadcast on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in the U.S. in May 1991 (Lee, 2001, p. 259). Yamamoto's first anthology, entitled *Seventeen Syllables: Five Stories of Japanese American Life*, was published in Tokyo by Kirihara Shoten in 1985; her second, entitled *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*, was published in Latham, New York, by Kitchen Table the Women of Color Press in 1988; and her third, entitled "Seventeen Syllables" was published by Rutgers University Press in 1994 and is a critical anthology that includes two of Yamamoto's stories accompanied by two memoir pieces, an interview, and nine critical essays by various scholars. Emiko Omori's 1991 made-for-TV motion picture broadcast on PBS is entitled *Hot Summer Winds*, and it combines characters and situations from two of Yamamoto's most admired stories, "Seventeen Syllables" and "Yoneko's Earthquake."

Critical attention on Yamamoto so far has focused on her depiction of the relationship between the issei (or immigrant Japanese Americans) and the Nisei (or second-generation), especially on mother-daughter relationships (Cheung, 1994, pp. 8-9). Justly admired as "consummately women's stories" (Kim, 1982, p. 160), too little attention, however, has been paid to the religious element in Yamamoto's work, this despite the fact that several of her best pieces are imbued with religious motifs and that religion played a significant role in her life. Indeed, a discussion of the complex role of religion in Yamamoto's art and life is called for. As illustrations of the vital presence of religious motifs in her art, one may point to two stories: "Yoneko's Earthquake" which deals with Euro-American Christianity and "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" which deals with Japanese American Buddhism.²

² My page references to "Yoneko's Earthquake" (pp. 46-56) and "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" (pp. 20-33) are to Cheung's excellent 1988 edition of Yamamoto's *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (Latham, New York: Kitchen Table Women of Color Press). "Yoneko's Earthquake" was initially published in 1951 in *Furioso* 6(1): 15-16, and was included in the 1952 edition of *Best American Short Stories*; "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" was initially published in 1950 in the *Kenyon Review* 12 (1): 99-115.

The title “Yoneko’s Earthquake” is gently ironic, setting the tone of the whole story. For Yoneko is a ten-year-old Japanese American farm girl through whose point of view the events are seen, though not narrated—the narrative diction and irony being more mature than Yoneko’s could be. The possessive in the title begs the question whether a ten-year-old girl could possess an earthquake, or grasp its meaning or magnitude. And here we recognize that Yamamoto’s title echoes Voltaire’s earthquake, that of 1 November 1755 which shook Lisbon and rattled the deist faith of many an Enlightenment European philosophe. Thus Yamamoto archly opens her story with a sentence about Christian faith: “Yoneko became a free thinker on the night of March 10, 1933, only a few months after her first actual recognition of God” (46). But if the overt plot is about a child’s loss of religious faith, the muted plot (to use Gilbert and Gubar’s feminist term) is about her mother’s acceptance of Christian faith. The reader is left to contemplate the implications of both eventualities and to question religiosity at large.

Yoneko’s childish coming into Christianity is treated with indulgent irony as being superficial but innocent. She is converted by two factors: her peers and an apostle. The peer pressure comes from her church-going city cousins who know the rituals and the hymns, that are a mystery to Yoneko. Accompanying them to Sunday school, Yoneko feels like the mystified outsider longing to be an initiate, a Christian.

The apostle of Christianity is Marpo, the newly hired Filipino farm helper, who is young, Catholic, and by contrast to Yoneko’s dull father, an apparent Renaissance man. With gentle irony, Yamamoto presents Marpo through Yoneko’s naïve gaze: Marpo is an athlete (because he owns a Charles Atlas chest expander), and artist (because he traces pictures of Hollywood blondes and colors them), a musician (because he owns a violin and sings hymns and Irish songs), and a hi-tech wizard (because he assembles a crystal radio). In their theological discussions, Marpo and Yoneko do not speculate how many angels may dance on the head of a pin but about which star might be God’s favorite (movie star, that is).

An earthquake, possibly the Long Beach Earthquake of 10 March 1933 which wreaked havoc in southern California,³ destroys Yoneko’s Christian faith—such as it is. As the ground trembles, a thoroughly terrified Yoneko prays to God to stop it. But

³ See Los Angeles *Times*. “The Long Beach Earthquake of 1933.” Yamamoto would have remembered this event since she was born in 1921 in Redondo Beach, California, and would have been a pre-teen like her character Yoneko in 1933.

the temblors persist, whereupon Yoneko loses her faith. However facetiously, Yamamoto has made her protagonist and us confront the problem of evil. She has asked: If God is not all mighty and not all good, why should we worship Him? Or otherwise put, how can God let bad frightening things happen to good people? The adult reader, of course, smiles at this childish confrontation with evil.

But actually the events of Yamamoto's muted plot, which Yoneko does not see but which we adult readers do, present a more complex chain of divine cause and human effect.

The earthquake causes a power line to break. It bounces on the car of Mr. Hosoune, Yoneko's father. *Deus ex machina!* He becomes a semi-invalid and, we surmise, impotent. Soon after, Yoneko's mother, Mrs. Hosoune, gives Yoneko a cheap ring which she breathlessly tells Yoneko to keep secret from her father. Yoneko is naively pleased by the ring and the thought of her superior knowledge over her father. But the adult reader surmises that Mrs. Hosoune has commenced an affair with Marpo. Then some months later, Mr. Hosoune drives his whole family to the Japanese hospital in the city for his wife to undergo an outpatient procedure. On the way, he callously runs over a collie dog. He swears Yoneko and her younger brother Seigo to silence about their mother's clinic visit. Marpo vanishes from the farm without saying goodbye. Yoneko feels displeasure for her father and Marpo. Again the adult reader gathers that the dead dog is the objective correlative for Mrs. Hosoune's illicit conception, that her husband has made her undergo an abortion (illegal at the time),⁴ and that her affair with Marpo has come to light and to an end. Very subtly and in muted tones, Yamamoto has powerfully and painfully posed the problem of evil through the totally naïve viewpoint of a clueless ten-year-old. Why do such bad things happen to decent people of good will?

Is the divine plan to save the soul of Mrs. Hosoune? Another tragedy occurs when Yoneko's five-year-old brother, Seigo, dies of a sudden illness (probably a meningitis that afflicts rural California children and which the local people call "Valley Fever"). And now indeed, Mrs. Hosoune turns deeply religious and attends church devotedly. Apparently she is able to perceive the fearful symmetry of a divine plan. In

⁴ As King-Kok Cheung has pointed out, "The father's unblinking crushing of the collie evinces his fury at the liaison between Marpo and Mrs. Hosoune and his indifference to the life about to be quashed at the hospital. . . . Yoneko's unspoken pity for the animal reflects her mother's untold grief, for the collie's fate foreshadows that of her unborn child" (1993, p. 44).

the closing dialogue of the story, she urges her religious epiphany on Yoneko: “*Never kill a person, Yoneko, because if you do, God will take from you someone you love*” (56). The pattern of events have persuaded Mrs. Hosoune that God is indeed all powerful over life and unto death, all knowing into our most secret actions, all judging, and, alas, all unforgiving, exacting an eye for an eye, a living child for an unborn foetus. Hers is a God of awful symmetry.

Yoneko’s naïve reply to her mother is flippantly atheistic, “*Oh, that . . . I don’t believe in that, I don’t believe in God*” (56). Some readers will almost be relieved to hear her say this, even though she hardly appreciates the gravity of her words. For the alternative to her naïve flippancy would be her mothers’ bitterly exacting version of Christian faith, something that many readers would find too demanding, too fearfully symmetrical. Yamamoto thus leaves her readers engaged with a profound and disturbing religious dilemma in this story. In her story’s brief compass she has managed to raise deeply troubling questions about fundamental articles of religious faith.

Where “Yoneko’s Earthquake” interrogates Euro-American Christianity, “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” engages with Japanese American Buddhism. The story’s title, “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara,” might lead us to expect a hagiography; and in an oblique sense it is that, but Yamamoto complicates her material by again ironically selecting a naïve narrator, a Japanese American teenager, named Kiku, whose narrative is rendered unreliable because it depends on hearsay relayed by another air-headed teenager. The setting of this story is a concentration camp in the Arizona desert, one of those created during World War II explicitly for relocating Japanese Americans and ethnic Japanese sent by collaborating countries such as Panama, Brazil, Peru, and others.⁵ Miss Sasagawara, a 39-year-old ballerina, and her father, a recently widowed Buddhist priest, are new arrivals. To her new neighbors, Miss Sasagawara seems eccentrically private. She is reported to have chased away a neighbor offering to help clean her barracks quarters. She does not eat in the mess hall with everyone else but takes out her food. And she only uses the communal showers after midnight. Oddest of all, when an inexperienced doctor (really an intern) at the camp hospital fails to diagnose her excruciating abdominal pain, she refuses the ambulance and insists on walking the mile back to her barracks. After another hospital incident, she is sent to

⁵ For a comprehensive account of this event in American history, see Wendy Ng’s *Japanese American Internment during World War II*.

Phoenix for several months of psychiatric treatment. She returns apparently able to function in a more normal behavioral mode. She even sets up a ballet school for the camp children. However, after a dismal performance by her pupils at the Christmas concert, Miss Sasagawara seems to revert to her former disturbing ways. She is reported to be gawking at the horseplay of her neighbor boys with “a beatific expression” and “*one finger in her mouth as she gazed in the manner of a shy child confronted with a marvel*” (31); she is said to have gone into the cubicle of one of her neighbor boys and tidied up his room while he slept. The community of incarcerated Japanese Americans, therefore, consider Miss Sasagawara’s behavior abnormal. This time she is sent to a sanitarium in California, for good.

The lack of authorial or authoritative comment on Miss Sasagawara’s abnormality (or is it psychosis? or rebellion?) is deafening. One clue to the author’s view is the descriptor in the story’s title, “legend,” a term implying that Miss Sasagawara is of heroic stature. The naïve narrator and her unreliable sources build up tensions of ambiguity in the reader who longs to know more about the causes underlying Miss Sasagawara’s behavior. Is Miss Sasagawara pathologically anti-social for not showering with other women? Or could Yamamoto, as early as in 1950, be making a covert criticism of the American government for having stripped away the right to privacy (among other rights) of these people? Could Yamamoto also be criticizing the Japanese Americans who have so compliantly accepted the co-opting of such rights as normal? When Miss Sasagawara is rapt in watching the neighborhood boys at play, is Yamamoto making a comment about how intensely Miss Sasagawara’s incarceration has deprived her of her professional love of choreography and movement? When Miss Sasagawara resists using the open public toilet, might she, who as a ballerina has made her body into a work of art, be resisting the wrongful government-imposed conditions to reduce her body into its mere corporeal functions? When Miss Sasagawara compulsively tidies up the room of her neighbor’s son, might not Yamamoto be making a comment about what government is doing to this 39-year-old woman’s aspirations toward motherhood? Ironically, these questions do not occur to the Japanese American community who are so like her in their life-disrupted situation but are so unlike her in that they are eminently well adjusted to their unjust incarceration. More ironical even, these questions do not occur to the human being closest to her, her father the Buddhist priest.

Only after the War and after the narrator, Kiku, becomes a college student does there come a moment resembling satori for our hitherto naïve narrator. In her library, Kiku stumbles across a published poem by Miss Sasagawara that re-focuses the story squarely on religious issues raising disturbing questions about Buddhism⁶ and the Japanese American community. The poem describes a man, recognizably Reverend Sasagawara, “whose lifelong aim had been to achieve Nirvana” (32). However, he was “handicap[ped]” by the responsibilities of caring for a family. But one day “circumstances” [i.e., his wife’s death and his community’s internment] liberated him from such responsibilities. “He had felt free for the first time” though others might have considered it “imprisonment.”

It became possible for him to extinguish within himself all unworthy desire and consequently all evil, to concentrate on that serene, eight-fold path of highest understanding, highest mindedness, highest speech, highest action, highest livelihood, highest recollectedness, highest endeavor, and highest meditation. (33)

This man, then, ostensibly becomes a “saint” (33) in terms of the Buddhist four noble truths and the eightfold path towards enlightenment. He has become an *arhant* (or *arahant*) and attained nirvana.⁷

However, Miss Sasagawara’s poem then questions whether this enlightenment may not have been achieved at the cost of blindness to the “human passions” of this saint’s fellow human beings, blind even to one suffering “in anguished silence, within the selfsame room” as his? If compassion must be sacrificed for enlightenment, the poem finally asks, might not the saint’s devotion actually be a sort of “madness” (33)? For indeed, the Buddhist saintliness of Reverend Sasagawara posits a solipsism that denies the realities of others. And in that sense, to deny the objectivity of reality is to be mad. Pointedly, Yamamoto’s story is NOT entitled “The Legend of Reverend Sasagawara.”

In a political sense, America could be said to have gone mad, too, for putting 120,000 guiltless Japanese Americans into concentration camps,⁸ an action based on a

⁶ While incarcerated in the Poston, Arizona, relocation camp during World War II, Yamamoto wrote for a Buddhist magazine (MacDonald and Newman 21).

⁷ See, for instance, the discussion of “the character of the Arhant” in the chapter “The Perfections of the Saint” in Keith, pp. 212-214; and the nature of the “*arahant*” in the chapter “Nirvana” in Kalupahana, pp. 69-88.

⁸ See, for instance, studies such as Michi Weglyn’s *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America’s Concentration Camps* or Roger Daniels’ *Concentration Camps: North America*.

solipsistic construct of Japanese Americans. (Of course, Yamamoto could not overtly state this in 1950;⁹ it was not until forty-five years after World War II that the U.S. Congress apologized to these wrongfully incarcerated Japanese Americans and made financial redress for that madness [Ng 109, 163].)

In a psycho-social sense, the Japanese American community went mad too when they accepted their deprivation of civil rights as normal and just carried on with their dismal talent shows and backbiting neighborhood gossip in concentration camp barracks—this, too, Yamamoto could not write overtly about in 1950 when the Japanese American attitude towards their camp experience was to hush it up. In so far as the Buddhism of the Japanese Americans encouraged their attitude, Yamamoto is accusing it of encouraging this madness. The Buddhist teachings are tacitly juxtaposed against the promise of America, the eight-fold path clashes with Jeffersonian principles. Where Buddhism teaches the expectation of suffering, the American dream has promised the pursuit of happiness. Whereas the expectation of suffering leads to the acceptance of being in a concentration camp, the expectation of being American must be to resist the abrogation of inalienable individual rights and to insist upon the just application of law. For Yamamoto, then, Miss Sasagawara is the truly American hero in this community. She is unable to accept her incarceration, unable to live normally in her state of wrongful imprisonment. Her own community deems her crazy; official America puts her into a sanitarium. But Yamamoto recognized her for being the martyr that she is, a martyr whose life is fit matter for a “legend.” For Yamamoto, the ostensible saint, Reverend Sasagawara, is a disappointment. His saintliness only serves to illustrate the failure of Buddhism in this context and in the view of Yamamoto. For Reverend Sasagawara to be a true saint, Yamamoto implies, he ought not to have entered into Nirvana; rather he should have remained in the material world as a bodhisattva¹⁰ to minister to the anguish of his daughter.

Confronted with stories such as “Yoneko’s Earthquake” and “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara,” readers may well conclude that Yamamoto was deeply critical and skeptical about the validity of religion, be it Buddhism or Christianity. However, at the

⁹ As King-Kok Cheung has observed, the “*indirect* political allusions in ‘The Legend’ . . . mirror the wartime hysteria and paranoia of the white majority [and] also reflects . . . the plight of her own ethnic group” (1991-92, 118, emphasis mine).

¹⁰ As has often been described, “A *bodhisattva*, according to the Mahayana definition, is one who has postponed the attainment of nirvana in order to continue in *samsara* [i.e., existence] in the hope of helping all beings to cross over the flood of existence” (Kalupahana, p. 124).

time that these stories were published, Yamamoto was also reading the periodical the Catholic Worker and acquiring an interest in its founder Dorothy Day and her theology of progressive social activism, pacifism, and back-to-the-land Catholicism which she practiced in her religious community on Staten Island, New York. After corresponding with Dorothy Day and meeting her when Day visited Los Angeles, Yamamoto wrote that “*Dorothy Day was the most important person in the world and, if legends were true, one of the few living saints*” (1957, p. 9).¹¹ By this time, Yamamoto’s stories were being regularly listed in Martha Foley’s Best American Short Stories and attracted the attention of no less a critic than Yvor Winters of Stanford University. He corresponded with her, and she was offered a Writing Fellowship at Stanford.¹² Yamamoto refused the offer and instead joined the Dorothy Day religious community and worked in the Peter Maurin Farm on Staten Island (1994, 67). At a crucial time in her literary career, therefore, Yamamoto made a choice to live and work in a religious community rather than to practice the craft of fiction in academe.

It is amply evident, then, that religion, be it Buddhist or Christian, has mattered profoundly both in Yamamoto’s art and to her life. Deeply engaged by religious faith, she also reserves the ability to think critically and write challengingly about it.¹³ To religion, Yamamoto brings a spirituality that is more than reverence: it is also interrogative, iconoclastic, and, therefore, exciting. So, although in a recent interview, Yamamoto calls herself a Christian, she also describes herself as a “Christian anarchist” (85). Yamamoto readers, therefore, should beware, for there are theological explosive devices buried in her subtext.

¹¹Yamamoto’s 1957 appellation of Dorothy Day as a saint is uncannily prescient, for in 2012, the Catholic bishops of America unanimously voted to recommend the canonization of Dorothy Day (<http://www.catholicworker.org/dorothyday/servant-of-god.html>). It is also noteworthy that when Pope Francis made his historic speech to a joint session of the U.S. Congress on 24 September 2015, he invoked the examples set by four Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton (<http://time.com/4048176/pope-francis-us-visit-congress-transcript>). In Dorothy Day (1897-1980), Pope Francis saw a beacon of Christian social activism: “In these times when social concerns are so important, I cannot fail to mention the Servant of God Dorothy Day, who founded the Catholic Worker Movement. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints.”

¹² Matthew Elliot has provided a detailed analysis of the correspondence between Yamamoto and Yvor Winters.

¹³ For another instance, in her memoir piece “The High-Heeled Shoes,” Yamamoto adopts a feminist stance to criticize Gandhi, whom she describes as “one of the men suspected of sainthood” (1988, 5).

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