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Culture and Ethical Relation in Kenzaburo Oe's *Prize Stock*

by Heather A. Duncan

(English 2226)

The Assignment: Oe's "Prize Stock" raises a number of difficult questions about ethical relation: that is, the ways that human beings form loving, humane, or ethical relationships despite differences. It also raises questions of what we might consider the opposite of ethical relation: the ways that human beings dehumanize, demonize, exploit, and in various ways "Other" those we perceive to be unlike us. In a literary analysis of 3-4 pages, discuss the specific ways that these opposing possibilities are portrayed. What conclusions about ethical relation and Othering does "Prize Stock" ultimately suggest?

One of the most fundamental aspects of human nature is the need to connect and relate with other people. We satisfy our hunger for a sense of belonging and identity by either creating our own social groups or seeking membership in communities that share our values, and more often than not, our physical characteristics. We also do the opposite—oppress and abuse those who we perceive as 'other' for our own benefit. Kenzaburo Oe's "Prize Stock" investigates the ethical ambiguities that arise whenever two cultures are forced to interact. He presents us with conflicting and confusing viewpoints, perspectives that blur the line between morality and immorality. Ultimately "Prize Stock" provides us with a rather grim picture of humanity, one that offers little hope for peaceful and meaningful relation between different cultures.

At the beginning of the story, the black soldier who literally collides with the small Japanese village is unquestionably an enemy. However, he is not treated like an enemy soldier deserving of the villagers' awe, fear, and perhaps hatred. Rather he is treated like a wild animal that has wandered into town: dangerous, but more of a nuisance than a real threat. The protagonist of Oe's story, Frog, proclaims happily, "I hugged myself with both arms, I wanted to throw off my clothes and shout—we were going to rear the black soldier, like an animal!" (127). Oe's choice of the word "rear" is peculiar and significant in this context. After all, we never speak of 'rearing' prisoners of war. Besides the obvious implication that the black soldier is not a human being, it also implies a certain amount of care and affection on the part of the villagers. 'Rear' is a double-sided coin; it brings into question whether it is more ethical to kill or torture an enemy, or to take him in and treat him like a pet dog. The first option recognizes the soldier's humanity, while the second does not.

The question of which actions embrace another's humanity and what actions do also applies to the bizarre sexual situations that arise in "Prize Stock". Harelip's behavior towards the little girls at the spring may be child's play, but something more sinister lurks below the surface. In one such scene, Harelip demonstrates his dominance over the girls to the black soldier. "Harelip caught one of the girls and began his lewd ritual...Harelip, bright red and laughing, raised a shout each time he slapped the girl's spray-wet, shining buttocks with his open palm. We roared with laughter, and the girl cried" (Oe 152). It is certainly not unreasonable to call Harelip's behavior sexual abuse. Frog also makes disturbingly misogynist comments. "Dreamily I pictured myself absorbed in the odd game to which Harelip seemed abnormally attached. But whenever the girls among the children returning naked from the spring smiled timidly at me...an unstable color like mashed peaches peeking from the folds of their meager, exposed vaginas, I rained pebbles and abuse on them and made them cringe" (Oe 123). The entire story is rife with bizarre and grotesque views of human sexuality. The notion of sexually aware and abusive children is disturbing enough in itself, but the

portrayal of the black soldier's sexuality is even more alarming. The boys, who are fascinated by his large penis, invite him to have sex with a goat, and he actually makes an attempt to penetrate the animal: "The black soldier labored mightily, his black, rugged penis glistening in the sun, but it simply would not work the way it did with a billy-goat" (Oe 153). Why the black soldier attempts to commit such an inhuman act is unclear. Does the soldier act of his own free will, or has the behavior of the villagers turned him into a sort of human animal? If the former is the case, then perhaps the villagers' treatment of the soldier is justified. If the latter is true, then the village has systematically corrupted and debased a fellow human being to the point that he is no longer capable of normal sexual interaction.

The characters in "Prize Stock" not only dehumanize each other, but they are also extremely exploitative. Oe suggests to us that dehumanization and 'othering' are the means through which we rationalize our exploitation of other people. By turning the black soldier into an animal, the children of the village are able to justify their treatment of him. To them he is a plaything; despite the fact that the children appear to have some positive interaction with him, he is merely being exploited for their entertainment, like a circus animal. Oe's use of imagery when describing the summer of the black soldier is powerfully indicative of this fact. "To us it seemed that the summer that bared those tough, resplendent muscles, the summer that unexpectedly geysered like an oil well, spewing happiness and drenching us in black, heavy oil, would continue forever" (Oe 153). Muscles and oil are not images typically associated with summer. Muscles symbolize the power struggle that occurs, and is continually occurring, in any given society. Instinct tells every human being to look out for his or her own interests, to use a kind of metaphorical muscle power to exploit and dominate, which is exactly what both the children and the black soldier do during that summer. This principle applies to both individuals and collective entities. In addition, the image of heavy black oil can be associated with corruption. Frog is introduced to and unwittingly takes part in the cruel, abusive world of adults, and by the end of the story has gained insight into that world. "The black soldier had transformed into the enemy, and my side was clamoring beyond the trap door. Anger, and humiliation, and the irritating sadness of betrayal raced through my body like flames, scorching me" (Oe 157). The moment Frog is taken captive by the soldier, he begins to understand that one of the ways in which human beings define their existence is through the abuse of others, that someone who appears to be a friend one day may suddenly become the enemy if circumstances make that role beneficial.

Oe's message is ultimately that everyone is in it for themselves. People don't speak up about injustices, like the children's treatment of the black soldier, until those injustices affect them or members of their community. Oe implies that even though we may collectively experience the same things, the vast majority of people are still unable to relate to the experiences of others. For example, all societies in history have fought in at least one war at some point in time and understand the horror and devastation they cause. But as long as wars are happening somewhere else, far away, it causes most people mild distress at most. However, when a society is suddenly confronted with a conflict or an act of violence, people are enraged and afraid. But the fact is that suffering exists in nearly every part of the world each and every day; innocent blood is shed, lives are ruined, genocide is attempted.

Throughout history human beings have consistently failed to relate to each other's cultures and see similarities rather than differences. Frog's statement that it is not his arm that smells but "...the nigger's smell" (Oe 165) is testament to this bleak reality. Despite all that he has been through, he still fails to take responsibility for the part he played in the denial of the soldier's humanity. No heroes emerge at the conclusion of "Prize Stock", and none of the characters experience any valuable revelations. Frog's epiphany that he is no longer a child is not a realization that humans consistently act unjustly, but rather a grim acceptance of the status quo.

Works Cited

Oe, Kenzaburo. "Prize Stock". *Teach Us To Outgrow Our Madness*. Trans. John Nathan. New York: Grove Press, 1977. (191-220).