

The serpent and the nightingale in bewitched

Literature



13 October The Serpent and the Nightingale in “ Bewitched” A short story criticizes the weaknesses of shallow scholarly pursuit in Ueda Akinari’s short story, “ Bewitched.” The story concerns Toyo-o, who is depicted as weak in personality, because of his love for pure learning alone, without considering how to strengthen his physical and financial welfare. The tale further derides “ Chinese characters,” since the poor cannot read Chinese and finds the latter as a secret code for the rich and learned. This essay explores two motifs in the story and their significance. Two recurring motifs in the story are the serpent and the nightingale, which represent “ empty” scholarship in the midst of pragmatic communities, and where specifically, the serpent and the nightingale stand for the “ lecherous” and sagacious temptress that entices the weak-willed to foolhardiness and death. The serpent in “ Bewitched” appears as a lovely woman that has charmed Toyo-o, but this one is a fake beauty, like empty scholarship that has phony promises of self-development and happiness. The serpent has been described as “ old” and “ a lecherous monster” (Akinari 644) that attracts people to make foolhardy decisions. It is old, since many people believe in the beauty of learning traditional arts and knowledge, but this is more applicable for the upper class and learned people who know how to maximize its strengths. For the working and poor class, however, this knowledge is not handy to their lives, because it concentrates on the intellect only, without developing the physical and economic abilities of people. Toyo-o, despite his intelligence and physical attractiveness, is not regarded highly by his community; instead, he is seen as “ shiftless and irresponsible,” because he cannot sustain any livelihood for his own basic economic needs (Akinari 632). The story depicts that superficial knowledge is a like a serpent that entices weak-willed people.

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It enjoys killing the helpless or the weak through the use of its attractive human form. In this case, the helpless and weak is Toyo-o, who has become vulnerable to the guiles of a serpent, because he has over-emphasized his intellectual needs. The serpent is also wise; it embodies the temptress who is skilled in charming its targets. It knows how to trick people and even the old priest underscores that Toyo-o can only reject its powers if it develops a “manlier” disposition: “You must develop a more manly [sic], a more determined spirit, which you now lack, in order to repulse it” (Akinari 644). Toyo-o’s father is also not impressed with his son’s good looks and aptitude: “...once he came into possession of money, would soon be deceived and robbed of all he owned” (Akinari 632). These beliefs underline that intellectual strength is not enough. The serpent, as in the story of creation, boasts of giving knowledge about good and evil. This knowledge will not suffice to ensure happiness in this world. Intelligence must be supported with financial and physical abilities, or else, knowledge becomes an empty crate. The “learned” like Toyo-o will only be vulnerable to lies and fraud. The nightingale also represents the temptress and death, because superficial knowledge is not enough for people to survive in this world. Akinari represents Manago as a nightingale who “flits” from branch to branch (Akinari 635). This is because this devil keeps on attracting good-looking men and giving birth to disgusting offspring. Despite the true serpent form of the devil, as a nightingale, it can weave beautiful melodies. Numerous poets signify the nightingale as a female song. Manago reinforces this image with her “bewitchingly voluptuous” human form (Akinari 633). The “sweetness” of a nightingale’s song serves as honey to boneless men like Toyo-o. The story compares the nightingale to the sweetness of empty scholarship. The <https://assignbuster.com/the-serpent-and-the-nightingale-in-bewitched/>

learned might feel superior over the ignorant, but in reality, they are prone also to evil seductresses. The story also asserts that the nightingale is a symbol of death. Its song can turn into a sad melody, which exactly happens to Toyo-o, since he met the serpent devil. Toyo-o thinks that he has been inebriated with the wonderful toxic of Manago's love. In reality, he has entered a life of subsequent misfortunes. First, he is accused of stealing from a temple, which resulted to his 100-day imprisonment. Second, Manago continues to haunt him and manages to snatch the body of Toyo-o's new bride to be. This serpent constantly berates and harasses him, giving him no choice as a person. It has taken his free will away from him, which is ironic, because love and scholarship should be both liberating and empowering. Later on, it seems that only death can help Toyo-o escape his dire fate. He almost wanted to die, until an old priest helps him. This part of the plot demonstrates that knowledge can be lead to death, if people are not careful of what to do with it and they are not prepared of using it to their advantage. There is a difference between learning and applying that learning for survival and finding real happiness. Toyo-o does not know this difference, which is his life's greatest detriment. " Bewitched" uses the serpent and the nightingale to indicate that being learned is not sufficient to have a blissful life. Superficial knowledge can be as tempting and boastful as the serpent and the nightingale. These beings both effortlessly draw people like Toyo-o to mischief and almost to death through their beautiful forms and melodies. The short story reminds people to be mindful of knowledge pretending to be complete and beautiful, because it may only produce a life of hardship and torture. The tale asserts that true and lasting knowledge should also be practical and can be exploited to fit one's various needs; it should be able to

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help people ward off symbolic serpents and nightingales in real life, or else, it is a useless and dangerous form of knowledge. Work Cited Akinari, Ueda. Bewitched. Web. 12 Oct. 2011 .