

Jishu Shi 史姫淑

Personal Influences in the Literary Works of Kenzaburo Oe

大江健三郎の「私」的体験とその文学世界

Part I Introduction to Kenzaburo Oe

- Childhood Life
- Postwar Society and the New Constitution
- As a Student Writer: Writing Experiences and Literary Debut
- Marriage, Politics and Violent Literary Experience
- Eldest Son Hikari's Birth and Hiroshima
- Literary Imagination Rooted in Personal Life: Father and Son's Relationship
- Ambiguity as a Japanese Characteristic
- Technical Writing and the Concept of the Peripheral
- Late Works and Nobel Prize

Part II Dante's Influences in *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*

- Foreword
- A Brief Summary and Commentary of *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*
- Big Brother Gii and Hermit Gii
- The Complicated Character of 'Gii': Introducing the Ideas of Constellation and Totality into Oe's Novels
- Death and Resurrection and 'My Tree'
- Conclusion

End Notes

Part I Introduction to Kenzaburo Oe

Childhood Life

Kenzaburo Oe was born in 1935 in Ose village (now Uchiko) in Ehime Prefecture in Shikoku, one of the four main islands that make up Japan.[1] This village is surrounded by forests and located in a deep wooded valley, and became an important resource for Oe's literary imagination. He's the third son of seven children and lived in a house of 10 people, including his parents and grandmother.

During that time, Japan had been embroiled in a war in Asia in the name of the Emperor. In 1941, when Oe was six years old, the war between Japan and America broke out and continued until 1945 and ended with Japan's unconditional surrender. So Oe grew up during wartime and the fanatic militaristic education he received at school and in society left Oe with some very traumatic experiences.

Prior to Japan's surrender, the Emperor was regarded as a living deity and the final authority in both the nation's culture and politics. At school young Oe was sometimes asked by his teacher "What will you do if the Emperor requires your death?" The teacher expected a prompt answer from students which had been drilled into them, "I will die, and I will die by doing Hara-kiri!" Every time he was asked this question Oe experienced a tremendous sense of horror but regardless of his fear he replied as he had been taught in a loud voice. [2] Every morning the students were taken to a *Hoanden*, or small shrine, to bow before a photo of the Emperor and Empress. Oe couldn't do it with sufficient seriousness and was consequently beaten frequently by the school principle. [3]

On August 15, 1945, the Emperor speaking in human voice via radio, informed the Japanese people of Japan's defeat. Young Oe was shocked and briefly ran away from the village to his private inlet at the local river. [4] As he had been educated in a militaristic society, he was ill equipped to deal with the news at his young age.

In 1944, at age 9, Oe lost his grandmother and father in succession the same year. His two older brothers had participated in military service so Oe was then only man in the house hold. His grandmother was a great oral storyteller in the traditions and history of the village and area of Shikoku. Her vivid, humorous, creative and

somewhat unconventional tales fascinated young Oe's mind, so he didn't read many books before age nine. [5] These traditional regional stories inspired Oe's imagination and gradually took form in his works. When his grandmother and father passed away, he suffered a speech impediment and a visual problem. And that summer, Oe's village was struck by a big flood.

Oe's favorite book was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, which his mother exchanged for rice in town. Another important book in Oe's child development was *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. Little Oe was entranced by the boy's adventures world and he read it over and over again until he could remember every word. [6]

Postwar Society and the New Constitution

After World War II, Japanese society faced enormous change. According to the new constitution, the Emperor remained the symbol of the State and of the unity of Japanese people. At that time, Japan was occupied by the allied force lead by General MacArthur until 1951. The new constitution was put into effect from May 1947 and in schools a new subject was created to study the constitution. Those studies had a big impact on young Oe who was a junior high freshman in 1947, and he welcomed democracy enthusiastically. [7] Article 9 of the Japanese constitution stipulates that Japan renounce war forever. This became a guiding lifelong principle for Oe. [8]

But in 1950, the Korean War (1950~1953) broke out and MacArthur sent a letter to Nobusuke Kishi the Japanese prime minister at that time. Because of the US-Soviet cold war, he ordered Kishi to expel communists from their positions in government and to organize a domestic Police Reserve, which is the predecessor of Japan's modern Self Defense Force. Even today Article 9 is still a controversial issue in Japan and in 2004 Oe helped found the Article 9 Association (The official site is: <http://www.9-jo.jp/>) to prevent Japan from ever going to war, and to protect the spirit of peace around the world. As an intellectual and writer Oe feels a strong sense of social responsibility with regards to this issue.

In 1951 at age 16, Oe transferred to a new high school in Matsuyama City when he was second year. At his first school he had been bullied by a group of upper class

students. This was an important event for Oe, because at the new school he met Juzo Itami (1933~1997) who went on to become a famous film director; and his younger sister Yukari Itami married Oe in 1960.

In September 1951, the San Francisco Peace Treaty released Japan from allied occupation and Japan resumed self-direction. That same year Japan also signed a Security Treaty with America stipulating that American military forces have the right to maintain military bases in Okinawa and other locations throughout Japan. Okinawa itself was occupied by America from 1945 and returned to mainland Japan in 1972. In this era, Japan's economy was stimulated by the Korean War (1950~1953) and eventually recovered from the devastation caused by World War II.

As a Student Writer: Writing Experiences and Literary Debut

Oe graduated from high school in 1953 at age 18, but he failed university entrance examinations so he commuted to Tokyo for cram school to prepare for college entrance exams. After several months of study, Oe retook the entrance exam and entered Tokyo University in 1954.

Throughout junior high school and high school Oe wrote poetry and essays, and was published in the student magazines at both schools. When Oe entered Tokyo University in 1954, he wrote a script for the student play every year. Eventually he made his literary debut in 1957.

When he was 22, Oe won the May Festival Prize in the Tokyo University student contest with a story titled *A Strange Job* (*Kimyo na Shigoto*, 1957). This short story received high praise from famous critics and Oe was introduced by a major newspaper, the Mainichi. With his success Oe received a writing offer from an art and literature journal.

The next year Oe's *The Catch* (*Shiiku*, 1958) won the Akutagawa Award and Oe established his position as a new talent in the literary world. He became acknowledged as the most imaginative writer to emerge among the young generation and was viewed as an opinion leader for young Japanese. At this time Oe's other translated works, were receiving positive attention outside of Japan. In particular, *Lavish are the Dead* (*Shisha no Ogori*, 1957) and *Nip the Buds, Shoot*

the Kids (Memushiri Kouchi, 1958) were well received.

As a student writer, Oe published plenty of works during his University years. His grueling writing schedule led Oe to a serious sleeping pill addiction and his graduation was ultimately delayed by a year until 1959. His chosen major was French Literature and he read all of Jean-Paul Sartre's original text in French. His BA thesis was about the imagination of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905~1980).

While at Tokyo University he met Professor Kazuo Watanabe (1901~1975) who is an expert in French Renaissance studies and a specialist on the study of Francois Rabelais (1494~1553). Oe had admired Watanabe since high school and ultimately Watanabe became Oe's lifelong mentor. For instance Watanabe's ideas about humanism and tolerance helped Oe to form his basic value systems. [9] And Watanabe's translation work of Rabelais what Mikhail Bakhtin (1895~1975) formulated as 'the image system of grotesque realism or the culture of popular laughter' strongly influenced Oe's writing method of novel. [10]

Marriage, Politics and Violent Literary Experience

In February 1960, Oe got married with Yukari Itami and he continued writing novels. This year the new Treaty of Mutual Corporation and Security was signed between Japan and America and caused a nationwide anti-treaty backlash in Japan. This historical event was not only a student movement but also a popular movement among regular Japanese citizens; and many intellectuals were involved, too. Oe was an avid participant in this movement, [11] which was heavily promoted by the Japan Socialist Party.

Oe visited China for almost five weeks from the end of the May 1960 as a member of a delegation of Japanese writers. In China, Oe met Mao Zedong and the other Chinese leaders. [12] Thus Oe wasn't in Tokyo during the second peak of the anti-treaty movement but Oe paid close attention to the news while in China. [13] Despite the efforts of other objectors, the Treaty of Mutual Corporation and Security was approved on June 19.

In his early works, Oe loved to use an image of 'imprisonment' or 'closed situation' [14] which is thought to be an element derived from Sartre's existentialism. The

protagonist is usually an anti-hero figure trapped in a situation of ‘imprisonment.’ This is representative of the closed social condition in post-war Japan. And one common image in his works is American characters and Japanese prostitutes. This is a metaphor for Oe’s perceived relationship between Japan and America and a clear indication that Japan was thought to be in the more submissive position. [15]

In October 1960, the leader of the Socialist Party was stabbed to death by a young right-wing boy while delivering a speech on TV. This sensational crime brought shocked the populace. The boy was captured and later committed suicide in the name of the Emperor while awaiting trial in jail.

Inspired by this young right-wing extremist, the following year Oe published the short novels *Seventeen* (*Sebuntiin*, 1961) and its sequel, *Seiji Shonen Shisu* (*A Political Youth’s Death*, 1961). And because those novels were based on true events, Oe received intense threats from right-wing associations. In March, his publisher released a public apology without Oe’s consent. Since its original magazine debut, *A Political Youth’s Death* (1961) to this date remains unpublished in mainstream circulation. These events touch on freedom of speech issues and also point to the fact that the Emperor is still a very delicate topic in post-war Japan.

In November 1970, Yukio Mishima (1925~1970), a famous Japanese writer committed suicide by Hara-kiri after calling for a coup d’état in the Ichigaya camp of Japan’s Self Defense Force based in Tokyo. In October 1971, Oe published a short novel *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away* (*Mizukara Waga Namida o Nuguitamau Hi*, 1972), which was written as a critical response of Mishima’s fanatical suicide. [16] These works indicate Oe’s deep feelings about the issue of the Emperor in Japan.

Eldest Son Hikari’s Birth and Hiroshima

In 1963, Oe’s personal life came to a turning point when his eldest son Hikari (‘hikari’ means ‘light’ in Japanese) was born brain-damaged at birth. That summer, as a 28 year old father, Oe visited Hiroshima, which as we all know, was the first place to be hit by a nuclear bomb.

Oe participated in an anti-atomic bomb movement and was deeply moved by those

atomic victims who suffered personal catastrophe from radiation poisoning. He admired how victims and their doctors alike faced this tragedy with dignity and sincerity. The impact of those experiences was documented in *Hiroshima Notes* (*Hiroshima Noto*, 1964). Oe's time in Hiroshima forced him to reexamine what it means to be an authentic human being, [17] and this was one of the experiences that compelled him to reexamine the existence of his son and their life and relationship together. [18]

The dilemmas and challenges associated with having a brain damaged child are fictionalized respectively in the short story *Aghwee the Sky Monster* (*Sora no Kaibutsu Aguii*, 1964) and the novel *A Personal Matter* (*Kojinteki na Taiken*, 1964), which is considered one of Oe's major works.

Literary Imagination Rooted in Personal life: Father and Son's Relationship

After his son's birth, Oe's literary works became more deeply rooted in individual matters and Hikari appeared in many novels in a variety of forms. Hikari couldn't speak a word almost till 5, and only showed interest in bird's chirping. His first words were "Those are water rails," which is the name of a bird. [19]

Today Hikari is very fond of listening to classical music and despite his disability, has grown up to become a talented composer. While growing up Hikari found it easier to express himself via music instead of word. Oe's novels, like as *Rouse up O Young Men of the New Age!* (*Atarashii Hito yo Mezame yo*, 1983) and *A Quiet Life* (*Shizuka na Seikatsu*, 1990) are fiction but closely resemble Oe's real life and Hikari's role at the center of the family, and his ability to bond family together. *A Healing Family* (1995) is a good essay reference to help readers to understand more about Oe's family and the author himself.

While living with a handicapped child, Oe came to search for his own spiritual condition and also about Hikari's. From his early forties Oe begin to reread William Blake (1757~1827), Dante (1265~1321), W. B. Yeats (1865~1939), books about gnosis, and so on. He contemplated the meaning of existence and coexistence with his handicapped son. [20]

Oe doesn't have a belief in organized religion, but several of the themes that repeat

throughout his body of work have religious overtones. Examples include the end of the world in the nuclear age, ‘abnormal birth’, sin and atonement, irrational violence, the madness of human beings, and the environment. Oe uses literary expression to deal with the spiritual condition of human beings and our soul’s salvation at the hands of a transcendental deity. Oe loves to define his attitude as a ‘prayer from one who has no beliefs’. [21]

Oe frequently draws upon the image of the hero’s head that had been wounded by violence or by an unexpected accident. Our brains control our thoughts and control how we express ourselves to others in general. This image of the ‘brain-wounded person’ is subject to various interpretations, but one theory is that it is indicative of the writer’s relationship with Hikari. He’s a writer who lives in a world of words, but his family can’t communicate with Hikari by means of word very well.

Hikari’s words are precious and have really important meaning to Oe and his other family members. A father’s satisfaction that comes from his son’s rare spoken words is expressed very obviously in his short story, *Teach us to Outgrow Our Madness* (*Chichi yo, Anata wa Doko e Iku noka?*, 1968).

In *Kozui wa Waga Tamashii ni Oyobi* (*The Flood are Come in Onto My Soul*, 1973), Oe created Jin, an innocent, mentally handicapped child who can distinguish between different bird’s chirping. And in *The Pinch Runner Memorandum* (*Pinchi Ranna Chosho*, 1976) Mori who is a mentally handicapped young boy is transformed into a 28 year old young man, and his father an ex-engineer at a nuclear power-plant is transformed into an 18 year old. This conversion let them feel the will of the universe and Mori plays an active role in the effort to resist to a supporter of the Imperial Family and the manager of nuclear power plant.

Hikari’s growth as a person can be seen in *Rouse up O Young Men of the New Age!* (*Atarashii Hito yo Mezame yo*, 1983). He is portrayed as a grown-up ‘new man’ Hikari who is 20 years old and an independent young man (In Japan, the passage of adulthood is at age 20). And just like Hikari in real life, the character in the novel became a composer and expresses himself with music and brings healing and comfort to the family. Just as Oe was able to find expression through his art, Hikari becomes a composer and the bond of creativity draws the two closer together.

Ambiguity as a Japanese Characteristic

Oe travelled extensively throughout Japan and other parts of the world. In 1961, after the events of *Seventeen*, he traveled through many countries in Eastern and Western Europe and the Soviet Union. His last stop was in Paris and here Oe met Jean-Paul Sartre, who participated in an OAS demonstration at the Place de la Bastille. During the trip, Oe realized there is a big gap between Europe and Japan. At the same time he identified Japanese as “the second Western Europeans” and identified ‘ambiguity’ as one of the defining characteristics of Japanese. [22]

This ‘ambiguity,’ in Oe’s opinion goes back to the modernization of Japan in the Meiji era, which is something that he discussed in his Nobel Prize speech in 1994.[23] In 1967, Oe published *The Silent Cry* (*Man'en gannen no Futtoboru*, 1967) which is regarded as his major literary fruit. This novel explores the Japanese ‘identity’ by examining 100 years of Japanese character and the ‘ambiguity’ he felt on a personal and national level.

Before writing this novel, Oe first visited Okinawa which was ruled by America in the spring of 1965 and then he visited many times thereafter for different reasons. Oe’s deep connection with Okinawa gave him a new view of the potential of a ‘peripheral’ cultural. He transplanted this concept to the village in the deep wooded valley in Shikoku where he was born and began reevaluate the histories, myths and stories he grew up on as a child. His journey inspired Oe to fictionalize his village as a topographical place in his literary world and the first instance is *The Silent Cry* (1967), which is a turning point for his middle body of works. [24]

From the summer of 1965 Oe participated in a symposium at Harvard University. After the symposium he traveled around America until winter and contemplated the complicated relationship shared between America and Japan. His travel experiences are reflected in *Okinawa Noto* (*Okinawa Notes*, 1969~1970) and in the series of essay *Aru Amerika Ryokosha no Yume* (*America, the Dream from a Traveler*, 1966).

Technical Writing and the Concept of the Peripheral

In May 1975, Oe’s lifelong tutor Kazuo Watanabe passed away. That same year, he

was introduced to *Bunka to Ryogisei (Culture and Duality, 1975)*, a notable work from Japanese Anthropologist Yamaguchi Masao a professor at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies at that time. Oe was really inspired by Masao's ideas and 'peripheral' became an important word for him. [25] Since then, he began to study different concepts and in 1978 he published a treatise *Shosetsu no Hoho (A Method of Novel, 1978)*. This book is strongly influenced by the concepts of Structuralism, Russian Formalism, and Grotesque Realism and so on. And the first experiment of these theories appears in the novel *Dojidai Gemu (Contemporary Game, 1979)*.

Before this novel, in 1976, he stayed in Mexico City for a few months as a visiting professor at the College of Mexico. Mexico is on the periphery of European and North American cultures. His time there stimulated Oe and let him recognize more deeply the potential of the literary device found in 'peripheral'. [26] Those experiences and inspiration in Mexico are reflected in *Dojidai Gemu (Contemporary Game, 1979)*. In this novel Oe used the myths and histories of his native village in Shikoku to make a counter-culture to challenge the central one which is Tokyo based culture of the Emperor. [27]

Oe received varied feedback when *Contemporary Game* was published. And from the end of 1985 Oe took a year to reconstruct the myths and history of his village. These are found in *M/T to Mori no Hushigi (The Chronicles of M/T and the Hushigi in the Forest, 1986)*. Oe created a Hushigi who is the god-guardian of forest and the primitive archetype of human life and death. The story is a first-person narrative and the story telling is very different compared with Oe's prior work *Contemporary Game*, and is more accessible to readers.

Late Works and Nobel Prize

In 1987 at age 52, Oe wrote *Natsukashii Toshi e no Tegami (Letters to these Years of Nostalgia, 1987)*. This is a biographical novel and Oe recollects and summarizes his work and life with the character 'Big Brother Gii' and Dante as his guide, mentor and 'patron' (Oe's own term).

In January 1988, Oe published a reference titled *Saigo no Shosetsu (The Last Novel, 1988)*. He announced that he was publishing his last novels in the form of a trilogy, *Moeagaru Midori no Ki (Flaming Green Tree, 1993, 1994, 1995)*. Fortunately, he

continued writing and after this trilogy he continued to publish many novels.

Oe's later works include *Somersault* (*Chugaeri*, 1999) which was inspired by the subway terror delivered by the cult Aum Shinrikyo in 1995. In December 1997 Oe's mother passed away at age 95. And two weeks later, Oe's brother in law Juzo Itami committed suicide. Oe's brother-in-law was a famous film director with whom Oe had been friends since high school. Juzo figured deeply in Oe's works subsequent to his death, including *Chengiringu* (*Changeling*, 2000), *Ureigao no Doji* (*The young face with sorrow*, 2002), *Sayonara, Watashi no Hon yo!* (*Farewell, My Books!*, 2005). More recent works also allude to this incident including *Rotashi Anaberu Li Soke tachitsu Mimakaritsu* (*The beautiful Annabel Lee was Chilled and Killed*, 2007).

In 1994, Oe's works were recognized internationally and he became the second Nobel laureate in Japan. Oe also received a domestic cultural honor after he was informed of his Nobel Prize win. But Oe refused to accept the honor. His reluctance may be because of the Imperial overtones attached to the award. By declining a high national honor Oe once again became a controversial figure.

Oe is now 73 years old and he has three children including Hikari. He lives in Tokyo with his wife and Hikari and is still active about his writing, and continues his constant exploration of the paradox of human beings.

Part II Dante's Influences in *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*

Foreword

Part of this paper's focus is on *Natsukashii Toshi e no Tegami* (*Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*, 1987) to explore the role of Dante's *La Divina Commedia* in this novel; and at the same time to introduce Oe's writing style and techniques.

Accordingly, I will draw upon quotes from Dante's body of work which Oe used in this novel and show how they relate to Oe's writings. We will also look at some of Oe's personal influences and see how they manifest in his literary works.

A Brief Summary and Commentary of *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*

Letters to these Years of Nostalgia was published in 1987, and is known as '*Gli anni*

della nostalgia' in Italian. This work is a biographical novel based on Oe's true life experiences and an in-depth analysis about his own literary works.

This novel was written when Oe was 52 years old. He was a middle aged man and facing a midlife mental crisis. In this work he drew heavily on Dante, which he had read years earlier. [28] In this novel, the character Cato and 'the gloomy forest' are mentioned many times, and are obvious references to Dante's *La Divina Commedia*. [29] These references are also thought to be an indicator that the writer was at that time sinking into a melancholic condition.

This novel constitutes three main parts and the story is divided into two sections. The first section is a story about K, which you will remember is the first initial of Kenzaburo Oe's name, and is meant to represent Oe himself. K was born in the deep wooded valley village in Shikoku and now is a middle aged writer living with his wife Oyu-san, which is a derivative of Oe's real wife Yukari's name. They live with their three children in Tokyo - including Hikari who appears by his real name. K's younger sister lives in the village and she keeps him up to date on village news. In this novel, K criticizes his own works and quotes many of his own novels.

The second parallel story is about Big Brother Gii, who is K's mentor since his youth. Gii in this part plays many roles for K. Gii is an educator, a guide for the soul, and a critic of K's works. Unlike K, Gii returns to the village after graduating university and works for the Forest Union for many years as a chief. In his free time he reads and studies Dante.

Big Brother Gii's major in University is W. B. Yeats. So the *Under Saturn* of Yeats which Big Brother Gii taught to K is also an important part in this text: "*I am thinking of a child's vow sworn in vain / Never to leave that valley his fathers called their home.*" K had vowed as a child never to leave his home village but he ultimately remained in Tokyo. Conversely, Big Brother Gii, like in the poem never left the valley his fathers called their home. Yeats is another important influence in Oe's works.

Quotation is an important element in Oe's novels. He not only quotes his own works, but also quotes others frequently. By doing so, Oe enriches his literary world and adds a kind of polyphonic (multiple sounds) rhythm to his work. At the same time he can criticize himself more objectively and his fictionalized world can maintain

coherency.

In 15 June 1960, Big Brother Gii's over active imagination forces him to leave his home village to rescue K's wife who he thought might be participating in an anti-Protection-Treaty protest while K was away in China. Gii receives a head wound from right-wing activists while he tries to find Oyu-san at the demonstration. Wounded Big Brother Gii lies on the muddied ground and the reader sees the anger of the demo participants reflected in direct quotations from Dante's vision of Purgatorio (Canto XV Line 106~114) and Inferno (Canto VII Line 109-111) (Part II. 8). Oe frequently draws upon the image of the hero's head as having been wounded by violence or by an unexpected accident. This image is derived from his eldest son Hikari, who was born brain-damaged at birth.

After leaving the hospital and returning to his village, Gii begins to construct a commune in the valley to build a 'beautiful village' with young followers. One of the main members is Shige-san who is an actress and looked after Gii while he was injured. One night, Big Brother Gii and Shige were driving through the valley and got in a car accident. Shige was mortally wounded and in great pain. Gii took pity on her and killed her to end her suffering.

Although Shige's death was a form of euthanasia, Gii was sentenced 10 years to prison. He felt guilty for Shige's death and didn't appeal his sentence. He continued to study Dante in prison and was sent many related books from K, who mailed books to Gii while he was in prison. Accordingly, K begins to read Dante guided by Big Brother Gii. And for Gii, his 10 year prison sentence is a journey into hell similar to Dante's inferno.

After returning to the village from prison, Big Brother Gii continued to study Dante and inspired by the Purgatorio, he began a big scale construction project to make an artificial lake in a bowl located in the village highlands. In the center of the bowl there was an island with a big old tree standing in the middle. Gii wanted to fill the bowl with water to row back and forth to the island on a small boat to do his spiritual training. For Gii, this became his model for viewing the world. Gii's journey of his soul shifted from the hell of prison to his island purgatory. This journey mirrors Dante's steps in the *La Divina Commedia*.

When the artificial lake was almost completed, the water became dark and smelly. The ground of the bowl was mud and the dark water poured out from it. This dark water is a direct reference to the village's myths and tales. Thus Gii's project provoked fear and fury from the villagers that the village would be destroyed and immersed under water by Gii's madness.

One rainy night, Gii died mysteriously. The reader can't be certain whether he died by suicide or was murdered. This ending means that the reader has to decide for themselves the outcome of the story. This is one of the main techniques employed by Oe, and is a way to make the reader an active participant in the story.

Big Brother Gii and Hermit Gii

In several of Oe's books the character of Gii appears in many guises. In *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* he appears as two characters, Big Brother Gii, and Hermit Gii. The character of Hermit Gii has appeared before in Oe's work and is known to be a rebellious person who resists the authority of the government – a popular theme in Oe's work.

Hermit Gii first appeared in Oe's 1967 novel, *The Silent Cry (Man'en gannen no Futtoboru)*. In this novel, he was refused to enlist in the army and disguised himself as a mad man living in the forest during World War II. He sometimes visited his village at night. After the war Hermit Gii tried to return to village society, but was driven out for his inaction during war time. Despite being the most educated person in the village, he wasn't allowed to participate in normal society. From this story the reader understands that Hermit Gii is a rebellious person by nature.

The Silent Cry (1967) was followed by a short story known as *Gaku Jidai no Intonsha (Hermit, in the Nuclear Age, 1968)*. In this story Hermit Gii dies in an unusual manner. He pretends to be a spirit of forest and covers himself in tree branches and leaves during the Goryo-festival (Japanese vengeful ghost festival) in the village. During the event he fell into a bonfire pit and the dried leaves on him burst into flame. He refused help from onlookers who saw his plight and he burned to death dancing and chanting his poems of horror and nuclear apocalypse to the village. Before his death no one had any interest in the poems, but many people were affected by his death and gradually there appeared people who secretly moved

into the forest in the name of the freedom they first saw embodied in Hermit Gii.

Big brother Gii is inspired by Hermit Gii's story after reading K's books in prison. He begins to strongly identify himself with Hermit Gii, and has a strong admiration for his poetry. Big Brother Gii goes so far as to use Hermit Gii's name in his signature in a letter. At the end of the novel, before Big Brother Gii's death, he shouts the words which are a quote from Hermit Gii. The last three lines of this poem are:

Someone who is willing to live through the nuclear age,
interact with the power of the forest,
and flee from every city and every village - hermit at the forest!

(The last three lines from Hermit Gii's poem)

The poem above is a good match to a part of *Purgatorio* which reads:

118 We were spellbound, listening to his notes,
119 when that venerable old man appeared and cried:
120 What is this, laggard spirits?
121 'What carelessness, what delay is this?
122 Hurry to the mountain and there shed the slough
123 that lets not God be known to you.'

(*Purgatorio* Canto II Line 118-123)

In the poems above, 'hermit at the forest!' and 'Hurry to the mountain' are similar in that both express man's relationship to the power of the forest or mountain. Hermit Gii implores people to quickly move into the forest. And in *La Divina Commedia* Cato encourages Virgil and Dante up the mountain. And like in Dante's work, Hermit Gii is referred to as 'old man,' just like Cato.

In this novel, Oe follows Dante's *La Divina Commedia* very naturally and as a consequence, the novel has some religious overtones. The work combines these religious overtones with nuclear themes, 'abnormal birth,' sin and atonement, and the irrational violence of man. These controversial themes connect and mingle together to make for a vibrant environment.

Both Big Brother Gii and Hermit Gii have an overactive imagination that leads them to their deaths. In his real life, Oe had a friend from Tokyo University who was a specialist in International political studies. But in 1964, he committed suicide with no note or known reason. But Oe surmised he might have died from pessimism about the nuclear age. [30] Oe was really shocked by his friend's sudden death and mentioned him in many essays and depicted him in a various ways in his novels. And because of friend's death, the concepts of the nuclear age, madness, and absurd violence seem linked together in Oe's mind. Hermit Gii's and Big Brother Gii's inconclusive deaths are but one example of Oe drawing upon this personal tragedy to create his art.

The Complicated Character of 'Gii': Introducing the Ideas of Constellation and Totality into Oe's Novels

Letters to these Years of Nostalgia was published in 1987 twenty years after *The Silent Cry* (1967). Oe's advocate Big Brother Gii is a fictionalized protagonist who already existed in Oe's prior works. This novel depicts him as living in his deep wooded valley village in Shikoku. Moreover this novel contains Oe's true life experiences and his literary works appear by their original titles, and thus reinforce reality with biographical elements. It's an important technique for Oe, using reality to strengthen fiction. It gives readers a false impression that the fiction is in fact based on a part of reality. We can say this novel is a meta-fiction (a fiction based on fiction).

In 1996, Oe said his aim in *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* (1987) was want to create a constellation to unify all his works. He sets the stage in 'the village' that was seen in *Nip the Buds, Shoot the Kids* (1958), *The Silent Cry* (1967), *Dojidai Gemu (Contemporary Game)*, 1979). The outcome is the *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* where he builds a 'meta-fiction' novel of his own prior works. [31]

Oe create the expression a 'novel of constellation' to define his works. The original concept of constellation is derived from Walter Benjamin's (1892~1940) terminology. "According to Benjamin's definition, there's a glitter in the stream of the past, and the glitter represents a historical event or historical person. But the darkness or unseen area between those stars is where the meaning of our human lives can be found. To discover its meaning is Benjamin's idea about constellations. Of course

he's connecting the glittering stars, too." [32]

Oe had developed a strong idea about a 'novel of totality.' In Oe's mind the definition of a 'novel of totality' is just like Dante's *La Divina Commedia* which he "wrote all the things in the contemporary"; "Dante expressed his idea of totality by means of the structure of the Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso". For Oe, *La Divina Commedia* is "an example of the novel of totality". [33]

Oe studied Dante intensively for three or four years and seems to have found this concept within Dante's work. Around the same time he stopped to write a novel utilizing this concept. Part way through his project, Oe abandoned his work because he was unable to replicate Dante's efforts, and because Dante is a special author. [34] Some may interpret the *Dojidai Gemu* (*Contemporary Game*, 1979) as an ambitious experiment for Oe to build a 'novel of totality' to express his feelings about the contemporary age.

In *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* Big Brother Gii sometimes criticizes K's work and gives him advice, using Dante as an example. Big Brother Gii wants K to participate his movement of constructing a base in the village. Gii uses the village base as a metaphor to emphasize to K the importance of making a base for his own literary works. (Part II.10) Namely this base, 'a village in the deep wooded valley in Shikoku' is the main stage for Oe's literary work.

This fictionalized village became Oe's most important literary device and the forest appears in several of Oe's later works. In these works Gii appears in many guises. For instance, 'New Big Brother Gii' appears in the trilogy *Flaming Green Tree* (1993, 1994, 1995), 'New young boy Gii' in the *Somersault* (1999) and in these novels the fictionalized village became a special place for the spiritual training that Big Brother Gii sought in *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*, using Dante as a guide for his soul. Of course in these works, and other later works, the fictionalized village is written so vividly that the reader could easily mistake the village for a real place on the map.

Oe abandoned writing a 'novel of totality,' but he attempted to make a 'novel of constellation' in *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* to unify his prior works. Oe utilizes several meta-fictions to connect his literary works; including the literary

stage in the special village in the valley. In doing so, he created a ‘constellation’ novel. Just as a constellation in the sky relies on the surrounding stars, Oe lets the reader access his prior works for further understanding of the big picture he is trying to communicate in *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*. Oe tries to connect all his novels to express the totality of the contemporary age.

Death and Resurrection and ‘My Tree’

In *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* Big Brother Gii mentions to Oyu-san that K has a special feeling for big old trees. One day, K saw a big old tree that had been cut down in the village when he was a child. Later that night he had a dream in which the tree shed blood. This reference allows the reader an insight into Oe’s feelings about protecting the environment and his relationship to his natural surroundings.

Another quotation from *La Divina Commedia* that appears in *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* relates to a tree, and has deep implications.

31 Then I stretched out my hand
32 and plucked a twig from a tall thorn-bush,
33 and its stem cried out: ‘Why do you break me?’
34 When it ran dark with blood
35 it cried again: ‘Why do you tear me?’
36 Have you no pity in you?

(Inferno Canto XIII Line 31~36)

In this scene, Dante stretched out his hand and plucked a twig from a tall thorn-bush. Suddenly the twig cried out, dark blood ran from its wound and the twig begins to criticize Dante’s action. This same quotation appears in Part I.2 of *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*.

So far we have seen how two important poems from Hermit Gii and Dante relate to the mountain and the forest. In many of Oe’s works, the main action takes place in his fictionalized topographical place, which is a representation of his birthplace – the deep wooded valley in Shikoku.

In Oe’s fictionalized village, when people die, their spirit sheds its body and circles

up, flying into the deep forest to find their own pre-destined tree. This tree is called 'My tree' and the spirit will stay under the root, waiting to be reborn until a new body is found. When they find a new body, the spirit will fly down to the village again and into the new body. This image is from Oe's grandmother who introduced him to the concept when he was young. [35] The idea of 'My tree' represents a circle of death and resurrection in this special village. This is an endless cycle linked to 'the eternal dream time' which is how Big Brother Gii defined it in this novel (Part I.3). This can be seen as Oe's way to overcome the fear of final death.

In Part II.5 of *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*, Gii points out that direction appear to be rather important to Dante. Dante took the left track while traveling down to hell, and he took the right path while climbing up to purgatory. Gii made similar distinctions in his dialogue, also.

In *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* Gii tries to apply Dante's theory of direction in his own world, but gets confused. To clarify his confusion Gii turns to Aristotle's theory of the 'cosmological man' for clarification. As part of his spiritual training, Gii takes a counter-clockwise (left) track into the forest and a clockwise (right) track down to the village. When K joins Gii on his purifying trips up the mountain, Gii's choice of direction force deeper understanding upon K. He comprehends that the forest is a place of purity and the village represents a place of impurity.

In the trilogy *Moeagaru Midori no Ki (Flaming Green Tree, 1993, 1994 and 1995)*, spirits of the recently deceased circle upwards into the pure forest to find their 'My Tree.' On their journey they follow a right (clockwise) direction. Later, when the spirit is reborn it returns to the village to join with its host body. And as the spirit flies down to the village it follows a left (counter-clockwise) path.

Furthermore in this trilogy, Oe created a new village custom, known as 'The Young Fireflies'. 'The Young Fireflies' constitutes of twenty pairs of village children aged seven to ten. When village people died, they carried a lantern to escort the spirit to the mountain so the spirit can find its way. Of the twenty pairs, one is for the spirit and the others are a diversion to occupy the attention of the villagers. This is so no one will know which tree the spirit chooses as its 'My Tree'. According to custom, 'The Young Fireflies' took the 'right' track when they are going into the forest and take the 'left' track while returning to the village.

At the end of *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*, Big Brother Gii's body floats in the dark water of the artificial lake. His wife and K's younger sister pulled his body by boat to the island and lay him near the big old tree. This is might be Gii's 'My tree', which he had a strong feeling for since he was young. This fits with an idea which his Oe's grandmother shared with him when he was young. She explained that people who are unusually aware can identify their personal 'My tree' from the moment they are born. [36]

Big Brother Gii's favorite parts in *La Divina Commedia* are Canto I and II of the Purgatorio. And when K learns of Big Brother Gii's death, he thinks of Cato from *La Divina Commedia*. He reflects upon Dante's work where Cato ordered Vigil to put a reed on Dante's waist and wash his face to clean off the filth of hell. Then he urged them to climb the mountain for spiritual training. An important character in *La Divina Commedia* is Cato, who had no religious beliefs, because he died before Christ. Cato committed suicide, but wasn't banished to 'the gloomy forest' to suffer in hell because he chose death in the name of liberty. Cato was admitted as the keeper of purgatory, and encouraged those spirits who wanted liberty to atone for their sins.

In *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* Big Brother Gii speaks with K's wife and they discuss how K really admires Cato. Because of his father's death K constantly shows an interest about suicide and 'the gloomy forest' (Part III.4). This could be a metaphor for Oe's reluctance to face the real life consequences of mental crisis. Thus, Big Brother Gii's inconclusive death may have fulfilled one of Oe's desires as he is unable to commit suicide in his real life. From this point of view we may be able to say Gii's death brought to Oe a kind of resurrection. In this novel, Big Brother Gii embraces Dante's journey as his own. He embraces the circle of death and resurrection, too. Accordingly Dante's *La Divina Commedia* is well-linked the idea of 'My tree' as both works deal in part with the concept of death and resurrection.

Conclusion

Throughout *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia* we can see how Oe utilized Dante's work and images in his novel. At the same time, we can have some understandings about Oe's important writing techniques. For example, he uses repetition as a device, and has the character Gii appears in various incarnations throughout his

body of work. He also employs quotation from other works, and draws upon quotes from his own previous novels. Also Oe mingles his personal experience and real historical events into his novel simultaneously to create a reality that surpasses fiction.

The fictionalized village in *Shikoku* takes the form of a living creature and unfolds to readers very vividly. These literary devices mainly start from this *Letters to these Years of Nostalgia*, and from this point of view this novel is one of the big turning points in his literary works.

Letters to these Years of Nostalgia is a biographical novel and for Oe, 'Big Brother Gii' was created as an ideal model who can live in the forest reading and studying the works of Dante. [37] But Oe can't return to the village in which he grew up. Thus, for Oe, the village always remains an object of his unfulfilled dreams, and that's the one of the main reasons why this novel is titled 'nostalgia'. It is "a very special novel" for the writer and this is a journey of his soul. [38]

.....End Notes

1. This chronological table about Oe's personal history was mainly based on *Gunzo Tokubetsu Henshu Oe Kenzaburo* [Kenzaburo Oe: Special Edition from the Journal Gunzo] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1995), *Oe Kenzaburo Sai Hakken* [Rediscover Kenzaburo Oe] (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2001).

2. Kenzaburo Oe, *Sengo Sedai no Imaji* [Images from One of the Post-war Generation] (1957) in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* [Solemn Rope-walking] (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp.22-26.

3. Kenzaburo Oe, *Hoanden to Yokei Onshitsu* [Hoanden and a Greenhouse of Raised Chicken] (1960) in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), p.91.

4. Kenzaburo Oe, *The Day the Emperor Spoke in Human Voice* (May 7, 1995, New York Times Magazine), the original English version can found at:

<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=990CE7DE103FF934A35756C0A963958260&scp=1&sq=&st=nyt>

The Japanese version is *Tenno ga Ningen no Koe de Hanashita Hi* in *Nihon no*

Watashi kara no Tegami [Letters from 'I' in Japan] (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1996), pp.24-37.

5. Oe's *Background in Art and Healing, Conversation with Kenzaburo Oe, 1994 Nobel Laureate in Literature* from Institute of International Studies, April 16, 1999, at UC Berkeley. <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Oe/oe-con1.html>

6. See the footnote above No.5.

7. Kenzaburo Oe, *Sengo Sedai to Kenpo* [Postwar Generation and the Constitution] (1964) in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp.168-176.

8. See the footnote above No.7.

9. Kenzaburo Oe, *Nihon Gendai no Yumanisuto Watanabe Kazuo o Yomu* [Read Kazuo Watanabe: A Humanist in Contemporary Japan] (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1984).

10. Kenzaburo Oe, *Japan, the Ambiguous, and My Self* (1994), The Nobel Prize Speech: http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1994/oe-lecture.html

11. Kenzaburo Oe, *Dai Nibu no tamenoto Noto* [The Note for the Second Part] in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp.95-98.

12. Kenzaburo Oe, *Ichi Nihon Seinen no Chugoku Ryoko* [A Young Japanese Man Travel around China] in *Sekai no Wakamono tachi* [Youth in the World] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1962), pp.8-18.

13. Kenzaburo Oe, *Kyoken ni Kakushitsu o Kamoshu Kokorozashi* [Continuous Will to Resist the Political Power] (1961) in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp.110-111.

14. Kenzaburo Oe, *Totei Shugyo chu no Sakka* [A Writer's Apprentice] (1958) in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp.59-62.

15. Kenzaburo Oe, *Warera no Sei no Sekai* [Our Sexual World] (1959) in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp.309-323.

16. Kenzaburo Oe, *Chosha kara Dokusha e* [Writer to the Readers] (1991) in Author's Notes from *The Day He Himself Shall Wipe My Tears Away* (*Mizukara Waga Namida o Nuguitamau Hi*, 1971), (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1994), p.265.
17. In addition to *Hiroshima Notes* (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1965), you can reference the UC Berkeley's interview at:
<http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/people/Oe/oe-con3.html>
18. Kenzaburo Oe, *Kaihuku suru Kazoku* [A Healing Family] (1995), (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1998), pp.29-38.
19. See the footnote above No.10.
20. Kenzaburo Oe, *Watashi to iu Shosetsuka no Tsukurikata* [Me, How to Write a Novel and How to Become a Novelist] (Tokyo: Shinchosha, 1998), pp.150-151.
21. Kenzaburo Oe, *Shinko o Motanai Mono no Inori* [Prayer from One Who Has No Beliefs] (1987) in *Jinsei no Habitto* [Habit of Being] (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1992).
22. Kenzaburo Oe, *1960nendai no Akamohu* [A Red Blanket of 1960s] (1962) in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp.138-144.
23. See the footnote above No.10.
24. Kenzaburo Oe, *Kibo to Osore to Tomoni* [With Hope and Fear] (1995) in *Nihon no Watashi kara no Tegami* [Letters from 'I' in Japan] (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1996), p.63.
25. Kenzaburo Oe, *Shosetsu no Shuen* [Peripheral of Novel] (1981) in *Bunka no Genzai* [Culture, in the Contemporary Age] (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1981), p.15.
26. See the footnote above No.25, pp.23-26.
27. Oe loves to use frameworks or 'structures' that conflict with each other. The first is 'Region & Culture of the Popular' and the other one is 'Tokyo & The Emperor

System'. Oe used the myths and histories of his village to make a counter-culture to challenge the central one.

28. Kenzaburo Oe, *Chosha kara Dokusha e Gii Nii-san* [Writer to the Readers: Big Brother Gii] (1992) in Author's Notes from *Natsukashii Toshi e no Tegami* [Letters to these Years of Nostalgia] (1987), (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1992), p.593. This paper uses this edition.

29. English quotations of Dante's *La Divina Commedia* are from the Princeton Dante Project found at: <http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp/>
Commentary of Dante's *La Divina Commedia* which is referenced in this paper is from the new Japanese edition of Dante's translation work (Tokyo: Iwanamishoten, 1982) by Heisaburo Yamakawa. Oe used this edition in *Letters to These Years of Nostalgia*.

30. Kenzaburo Oe, *Boku Jishin no Naka no Senso* [The War Inside Myself] (1963) in *Genshuku na Tsuna Watari* (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1991), pp.152-167.

31. *Oe Kenzaburo Shosetsu* [Novels of Kenzaburo Oe], Pamphlet (1996) in *Oe Kenzaburo Sai Hakken* [Rediscover Kenzaburo Oe] (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2001), p.209.

32. *Oe Kenzaburo Sai Hakken* [Rediscover Kenzaburo Oe] (Tokyo: Shueisha, 2001), p.75.

33. See the footnote above No.32, pp.74-75.

34. See the footnote above No.32, pp.74-75.

35. Kenzaburo Oe, *Jibun no Ki no Shita de* [Under 'My Tree'] (Tokyo: Asahi Shinbunsha, 2001), pp.20-21.

36. See the footnote above No.35, p.21.

37. See the footnote above No.28, p.595.

38. See the footnote above No.28, p.593.