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Essay 2

Locational Destiny

*Child’s Play* by Higuchi Ichiyo tells the tale of two rival gangs of school children in Tokyo’s Yoshiwara district. The main street gang and back street gang are locked in conflict over who is the proverbial king of the streets in a classic demonstration of class conflict between the rich and the poor. The story *Ikebukuro West Gate Park* by Ishida Ira draws strong parallels to *Child’s Play* despite being written and set far later. The west gate park, an area near the Ikebukuro train station, is in the outskirts of Tokyo, nestled along the dark sex industry of the city, in the same way that Yoshiwara was the prostitution hub of the time. The youths in both stories quickly become involved in gangs of some sort and are immersed in the streets commonly used as adult playgrounds. The children that occupy the space in the periphery of Tokyo grow up with a pessimistic view of life with little social mobility or happiness in their perceived future.

The characters’ social standings are determined by their spatiality in the city, and they are locked in these classes. In Yoshiwara, the divisions are obvious; the denizens of the main street are wealthy, but not necessarily well loved, and those of the back street are poorer, but more lovable in their community. Mobility is frowned upon and those who try to join a gang above their station experience retribution. Sangoro lives a modest low class life on the back street, living in a borrowed house on labor wages. He eventually gets fed up with the antics of the back street gang’s leader Chokichi and switches to the front street gang. Sangoro, “an amusing child, without a mean streak in him” was well liked everywhere and created an uneasy friendship with Shota and his main street gang, despite always playing the role of class clown (Higuchi 261). Despite this, on the night of the festival, Sangoro’s old gang mates spot him with the main street kids, and attack him angrily, yelling “you double crosser! This’ll teach you!” (264). Almost as a karmic punishment, the innocent and kind Sangoro is brutally beaten despite the fact that the back street gang set out that evening to accost someone else entirely. Sangoro’s upward mobility is immediately met with a push back down. The Yoshiwara kids are as locked in their class structures as the main and back streets are immovable within the district.

Even in *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*, a story set over one hundred years later, the class structure is set in stone. This story shows us that even downward social movement is disliked in society, even after many years of development and change. Hikaru, a friend of Makoto’s who also roams the West Gate Park, comes from a very wealthy family. Despite this, she chooses to spend her time with the G-Boys and hoodlums in the park, and becomes a steady member of Makoto’s band of friends. In an attempt to please her friends and bring some joy to the group, Hikaru brings gifts for each member of the small gang, but Makoto is unnerved by this and tells her to stop, saying, “’Listen Hikaru, we’re not hosts. Even if a girl doesn’t spend money on us, if we like her, then we’ll hang out together. So, no more presents” (Ishida 55). Makoto and his group accept Hikaru as a friend, but they reject the upper class side of her. Though not as harsh as the treatment of Sangoro, the group rejects the part of Hikaru’s persona connected to her social class. They try to teach her that the gift giving of her upper class will not work in their social circle. An even more striking statement of her high class is made by the author himself; Hikaru is constructed out to be clinically insane, and a major villain of the story through her direct role in the murder of Rika, “Hikaru is now in long-term hospitalization somewhere. I got a postcard once” (89). Hikaru, and especially her father, paint a picture that the high class is twisted, corrupt and insane. Even after one hundred years societal norms are still set in stone, and the high class is not depicted well and not well liked by the lower class around them.

In both stories and time periods, because of their positions near the Tokyo sex industry, the children grow up with unsavory role models and a bleak outlook on the future. Most of the adults in their lives are somehow involved in criminal dealings or the sex industry. The West Gate Park youths have people like the strangler or the predatory club patrons. With headlines like, “The Pitfalls of Schoolgirl Prostitution,” the park youths create an image of the world that casts all adults as sexually exploitative and corrupt. They see nothing else to become but creepy adults with little success or choice. Even the most monetarily successful figure, Hikaru’s father, is an abusive father and rapist, corrupting Hikaru’s personality (85). The Yoshiwara children have an even more direct example before their eyes. Each sees the unhappy lives of their parent figures, with the knowledge that they too share the same fate. Shota lives with his grandmother, who has all of the money she could ever need. Despite this, she still lives alone, having been abandoned by her family and children, with only young Shota for company. Shota sees very clearly that, even if he is very wealthy, happiness is not guaranteed. Sangoro’s father works his fingers to the bone at a dead end job, and Nobu’s father is a gluttonous monk. Each sees the miserable dead-end lives of their parents, solemnly locked into the same destiny. Despite this, Makoto shows us a glimmer of hope in his sense of vigilante justice and moral code.

The youth most doomed to their fate is Midori, both forced into a life of prostitution. Midori is the adopted younger sister of the most esteemed courtesan in Yoshiwara, while Rika is an average teen. Midori begins the novel carefree and headstrong, but eventually falls into a depression at the close of the tale along with the full realization of her sister’s trade. In a bout of foreshadowing, Midori is said to transform easily into the guise of a courtesan, “Needless to say, Midori, who spent hher days and nights immersed in such a world, soon took on the color of the quarter” (Higuchi 271). So heavily immersed in the sex industry, Midori finds it natural to wear the garb and makeup of a geisha. Living in the shadow of her sister, Midori eventually realizes she can choose no other path than her sister’s. The adults around her will try to shape her in order to replicate Omaki’s success. Midori is locked into a fate she dreads, simply because she must follow the path her sister laid.

The children’s location decides their fate and class. With terrible role models, all our characters grow up with a jaded and pessimistic view of adults and in extension, Japan as a whole. Even across one hundred years of social change, the Japanese youth in these stories are not the proud ambitious youths in other tales. Even Makoto who displays a vigilante heroism resigns himself to ripping customers off at a melon stand (Ishida 90). Hope grows in the community though; while Nobu, the hope of his generation, flees the city, Makoto stays by the West Gate Park to enact his vigilante justice and protect his cherished park.

Works Cited

Higuchi, Ichiyo. *Child's Play*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1981. Print.

Ishida, Ira. *Ikebukuro West Gate Park*. Boston, MA: Cheng &Tui, 2011. Print.