

## Structural Similarities in the Work of Anais Nin and Natsume Soseki

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"An act has to be interpreted on two levels—one as action, the other as meaning," writes Anais Nin in *The Novel of the Future*. Every detail, or motif, in fiction has such a dual level of objective fact and meaning, and thus offers two levels of interpretation. Anais Nin and Natsume Soseki effectively use motifs both as structural devices and as vehicles for themes. Structural patterns of juxtaposition and repetition of motifs are the backbone of Nin's and Soseki's novels. In *Kojin* and *Ladders to Fire*, similar motifs of madness (neurosis) lead to similar patterns of destructiveness in intimate (family) relationships. We can thus compare these two novels by comparing the structural patterns of their motifs and the resulting thematic similarities. To further understand such a comparison, we look to parallel motifs of drowning at the end of Soseki's *Wagahai Wa Neko De Aru* and Nin's *The Four-Chambered Heart*. The link between drowning and the discovery of peace of mind at the end of these two novels contrasts markedly with the frustrated search for such peace at the end of *Kojin* and *Ladders to Fire*. The cross-comparisons we are thus able to make among these four novels are based on the similar structural patterns they contain and lead to the conclusion that they have similar thematic structures and thus convey similar meanings.

The direct statement made by a novel constitutes its subject, and the arrangement of the text to communicate this subject constitutes the structure of the story. But, as Anais Nin writes: "The creation of a story is a quest for meaning."<sup>1</sup> A story alone does not make a work of literature, for, Robert Penn Warren tells us, "fiction shows...a logical structure which implies a meaning."<sup>2</sup> To be even more precise, Robert Scholes, in his book *The Elements of Fiction*, says: "Fiction generates its meanings in innumerable ways, but always in terms of some movement

from the particular characters and events of the story to general ideas or human situations suggested by them.”<sup>3</sup> Meanings, or themes, in fiction are generated by interpretation of details of a story, and these details—for example, gestures, images, actions, statements, key words, descriptions—we shall call motifs. A good definition of motif is what Anais Nin has called “symbolic act”: “An act has to be interpreted on two levels—one as action, the other as meaning.”<sup>4</sup> Such “symbolic acts,” indeed all motifs, operate on the denotative level in the structure of the story, and on the connotative level in the thematic structure.

A motif, then, is the smallest comprehensible unit of a literary work. Strictly speaking, each motif, that is, each detail of the story, has a meaning. Each motif carries a theme. The interrelationship of motif and theme, and of themes to one another, is the thematic structure of a work of fiction—and it is the thematic structure of several novels which concerns us here. In the system of structural coherence of a novel, motifs operate in the design of the text (structure of the story) as well as acting as generators of meaning and thus as the building blocks of the thematic structure. The meanings of a work of fiction, then, are not what the text says literally in any particular instance. The meanings are rather generated by the interaction and the integration of the particular and individual parts of the text in a system separate from their arrangement in a sequence by the author.

As we study certain works of Natsume Soseki and Anais Nin, then, we are not concerned to know whether Soseki did not intend, or Anais Nin did intend certain motifs to carry certain meanings, or themes. What is important is that there is a coherent structure of motifs and themes within each novel and that internal structural thematic analysis reveals striking similarities in the communication of meaning by these two authors. Whether by choice of the same motifs to carry similar meanings, by similar arrangement of motifs in a pattern designed to carry certain themes, or in the striking similarity of the themes themselves, Soseki and Nin show us that what we see as the distinctly variegated and diverse nature of human experience in East and West based

on different circumstantial particularities is really the revelation of similar universal truths about human experience.

Soseki's novel *Kōjin*, to begin with, is not about marriage or madness on the thematic level, for Ichirō does not really doubt his wife, nor is he really mad; rather, these two central motifs of the story serve as signals, or symbolic acts, if you will. Ichirō's doubt is not of his wife's integrity, but it is self-doubt, and his elaborate scheme to "test" O-Nao is really a signal, a call for help. If O-Nao were to react to such outrageous behavior, then perhaps her reaction will be an indication to Ichirō of the way he himself should act. O-Nao does not react, at this point or at any other, but this is not indifference to her husband; her actions (or non-actions) indicate rather that she will not indulge him as the others do, she will not judge and therefore will not restrict his freedom as the others do, she will not take the responsibility for leading him out of his self-doubt. Her consistent use of irony indicates her clear vision, but also her realization that life is not a matter of responsibility for others. When she says such mildly ironic things as: "As you please," or "As a woman I cannot tell you what to do," or "Do whichever you like,"<sup>5</sup> we can see that she understands and refuses the role thrust upon her by the family into which she has married. The family blames O-Nao, makes her the scapegoat responsible for Ichirō's worsening relationship with them. But she is the only one among them who sees that no one person can alter the course of a relationship. The complexity of interrelationships involved in the family depends on the stability of each and every member of the family. Ichirō is blind to the fact that others in the family have weaknesses, or problems; he has unconsciously accepted the common family belief that if only *he* could resolve *his* problems the family relationship would be smooth and harmonious. It is very obvious that this is not at all true, but only the outsider, O-Nao, has the distance and wisdom of objectivity to see this.

In Anais Nin's novel, *Ladders to Fire*, Lillian's signals, her calls for help are expressed in different motifs: she seeks in outside relationships the answers that her husband has been unable to provide. The thematic

aspect of Lillian's actions, however, is the same as in Ichirō's case: she is looking desperately to another person to give her a direction, an indication of how she should act and live. Lillian has a dream in which her lover, Jay, became her iron lung. "She was lying inside of him and breathing through him. ... She felt at times that she had fallen in love with Jay's freedom, that she had dreamed he would set her free, but somehow or other he had been unable to accomplish this."<sup>6</sup> Anais Nin says that in writing this novel she wanted

to concentrate on conflicts between individuals in their search for themselves through others. In *Ladders to Fire* I explored whether one human being could liberate another, whether we could, through the association of love, learn to be liberated of false values and false roles, whether through love we could create one another. I used as an illustration of such dependence in love the painting by Picasso which represents two figures breathing through one lung.<sup>7</sup>

Neither Ichirō nor Lillian are able to force another person to take the responsibility for them, to be their "iron lung." In writing her novel, Anais Nin discovered the truth that applies to *Kojin* as well, the theme "that we cannot let others act for us what we cannot act ourselves because we are merely living through them. This freedom must come from within and must be self-generated. But in the recognition of that inhibited part of ourselves in the other lies the first step in becoming free."<sup>8</sup>

One of the obstacles to becoming free for both Ichirō and Lillian is self-doubt. They do not trust themselves and so look to another person to help them discover their true selves. Like Lillian, Ichirō is rebelling against his own unconscious acceptance of himself as his family sees him. Surely his growing fury at O-Nao arises partly because she is neither in collusion with the family nor with her husband. She says, when asked about him, that he is: "Just as usual"(p.236)—that is, in the midst of unresolved conflict, but she will not ascribe any particular

quality to him. It is paradoxically because of this freedom tacitly granted him by O-Nao that Ichirō hopes she will reveal his “true self” to him, a self he only vaguely senses and feels she has the key to. But she will not be his “iron lung” even though he tries to beat her into playing that role. She leaves him his ultimate freedom and he cannot accept it.

The unresolvable conflict in which Ichirō and Lillian find themselves is also partly a function of the “familial connections” hidden behind the family’s designation of one member to be neurotic. R. D. Laing, in his research on the attribution of schizophrenia in similar family situations, “is sceptical about the very existence of a schizophrenic malfunction from which the patient can be said to be suffering: ‘schizophrenia’ means, if anything, the communication disorder of the whole family, so that the language of ‘diagnosis’ and ‘treatment’ of somebody called a ‘schizophrenic’ would simply mask the web of familial connections which is the real truth of the matter.”<sup>9</sup> We can substitute “neurotic” for “schizophrenic” and see how this “communication disorder of the whole family” has taken hold in Lillian’s case. When she is not behaving as the family wishes “anxiety settled upon the house. Paul clung to his mother longer when they separated for short periods. Adele was less gay. Larry was more silent. Nanny began to weep noiselessly.” (*Ladders to Fire*, p. 29) In Ichirō’s case, we are told: “He became easily peevish at trifles, and as a consequence would cast his gloom over our otherwise sunny home.” (*Kōjin*, p. 95) In both cases what Gregory Bateson first called the “double bind”<sup>10</sup> is operating—the Nagano family has “elected” Ichirō to be the neurotic one and O-Nao to take the blame as scapegoat so that the family is left, to outward appearances, intact; Lillian’s family, too, sees her as the neurotic and disruptive member.

Ichirō is not destroying himself, nor is Lillian destroying herself, nor are their families destroying them. The family is helping them to be destructive, actually encouraging such behavior in them while blaming them for it. In *Kōjin*, the often repeated motif of the demented girl (*seishin byo no musumesan*) in Misawa’s family shows the same pattern

and thus reinforces the pattern seen in the main plot. This pattern consists of the misreading of the signals or symbolic acts of a member of the family by the others who then attribute some form of mental aberration to him or her and this in turn serves as an expectation of behavior which the designated member fulfills willy-nilly. The fulfilled expectation of aberrant behavior on the part of the so-called "neurotic" person then leads to judgments that the family's "diagnosis" of madness is accurate and this reinforces the behavior in the designated person, and so on, round and round. This is the sort of pattern R. D. Laing describes in *The Politics of the Family*:

For some years I have been directly concerned with *the study of people in situations*. Usually I am 'called in' to a 'situation' which has already been defined by the people in it, and possibly also by other agents of society, as one in which there is 'something the matter' with *one* person in the situation; and the others do not know what to do about him or her; it is implied that if that one person were all right the situation would right itself.<sup>11</sup>

This is the same kind of pattern that is described in *Ladders to Fire* as the realization

that life tended to crystallize into patterns which became traps and webs .... (people) had the greatest difficulty in seeing the transformations of the loved one, in seeing the becoming. If they finally did perceive the new self, they had the greatest difficulty nevertheless in changing the rhythm. ... If you attempted to change ... you would find a subtle, perverse opposition, and perhaps sabotage! Inwardly and outwardly, a pattern was a form which became a prison. And then we had to smash it. Mutation was difficult. Attempts at evasion were frequent, blind evasions, evasions from dead relationships, false relationships, false roles, and sometimes from the deeper self, too, because of the great obstacle one encountered in affirming it. All our emotional history was that of the spider and the fly, with the added tragedy that the fly here collaborated in the weaving of the web.... People in desperation turned about and destroyed each other .... There was

no visible victim. It always had the appearance of suicide. (*Ladders to Fire*, pp. 28-29)

The trap, the web, the prison in which Ichirō and Lillian find themselves is, certainly, partly of their own making. Their collaboration has consisted in their inability to resolve the dreadful conflict they feel between the neurotic personality ascribed to them by their family and the deeper reality they sense to be true but different from that which the family could understand or accept. They rebel against accepting themselves as the family sees them, but cannot break with the family (or lover, or friend) and breathe without the "iron lung." There is, thus, a double conflict at work in *Ladders to Fire* and *Kōjin*—an inner conflict for both Ichirō and Lillian, as well as a linking conflict with the family which both causes and reinforces the conflict within the self.

There is another striking similarity of motifs in these novels seen in the violent images of nature which indicate the inner conflict which has been labeled neurosis by others. Of Lillian we read, "... inwardly she was in a state of chaos and confusion. Inwardly she was like nature, chaotic and irrational. She had no vision into this chaos: it ruled her and swamped her. It sucked her into miasmas, into hurricanes, into caverns of blind suffering." (*Ladders to Fire*, p. 22) There are frequent references to "storms" with regard to Lillian. Soseki, too, uses motifs of wild and chaotic nature to indicate the state of Ichirō's mind, the most striking of which occurs near the end of the book: "In no time he was rushing into the teeth of the choking wind. Like a bouncing ball he was leaping in the midst of those indescribable reverberations—the splashes of water or the booming from the sky. And he was shrieking with violence enough to rupture his blood vessels." (*Kōjin*, p. 304) And Ichirō returns to the inn "swamped," drenched to the skin. He has no vision into this chaos either, and the declaration of his personal inability to deal with it comes in his melodramatic cry: "To die, to go mad, or to enter religion—these are the only three courses left open for me ...." (*Kōjin*, p. 296)

Another motif in *Ladders to Fire* which indicates the conflict within the self is that of the mirror; and the most striking of many mirror motifs in this book appears in the scene where Lillian is playing the piano in concert and her friend, Djuna, while listening, looks through the window into the garden where she sees "three full-length mirrors placed among the bushes and flowers as casually as in a boudoir .... Lillian was playing among among vast mirrors. Lillian's violence was attenuated by her reflection in the mirrors." (*Ladders to Fire*, p. 81) Anais Nin herself has explained how this motif works:

The real garden represented nature, relaxed, fulfilled. The mirrors: neurosis, reflection, artifice, illusion. The mirrors in the garden were the perfect symbol of unreality and refraction, a miniature reproduction, in terms of images, of the drama I had been portraying of a conflict between nature and neurosis.<sup>12</sup>

In *Kōjin*, Ichirō's closed study door acts as a mirror to reflect the conflict of the family which compounds the inner conflict of Ichirō himself. This closed door is like a mirror reflecting the judgments of neurosis that his family ascribes to him. This motif of the closed door works to generate two distinct themes, but in the present context it can be seen as a mirror of the family's repeated labels of Ichirō as "difficult" (*ki muzukashii*), "neurotic" (*seishin byō*), or headed for a "nervous breakdown" (*shinkei suijaku*). The mirror reflects the conflict of the family itself which has been mistakenly attributed to Ichirō's neurosis.

Another of the important motifs which links Ichirō's conflict with the family relationship is that of "fog." Jiro says: "In this manner my brother went on to discuss his futile philosophy, futile because he was only tilting with a windmill. And I felt myself imprisoned in his eery fog as I sat before him. Indeed, it was far more punishing to brush aside this dense fog than it would have been to bite through a thick hawser." (*Kōjin*, p. 210) This fog in which Ichirō is isolated is also a motif for Lillian's conflict: "The mist came into the room. Djuna thought: She's such a hurt woman. She is one who does not know what



she suffers from, or why, or how to overcome it. She is all unconscious, motion, music. She is afraid to see, to analyze her nature. She thinks that nature just is and that nothing can be done about it." (*Ladders to Fire*, p. 33) These and other motifs of fog in these two books point to the same idea, expressed in Anaïs Nin's novel *The Four-Chambered Heart* in the motif of the "fog of imprecise relationships,"<sup>13</sup> and this idea is that the fog of isolation which we experience and tend to blame on others is really of our own making.

In the party scene at the end of *Ladders to Fire* this interpretation of fog as self-created barrier appears in a different motif:

In each studio there is a human being dressed in the full regalia of his myth fearing to expose a vulnerable opening, spreading not his charms but his defences (sic), plotting to disrobe, somewhere along the night—his body without the aperture of the heart or his heart with a door closed to his body. Thus keeping one compartment for refuge, one uninvaded cell. (*Ladders to Fire*, pp. 146–47)

Ichirō's study serves as a motif communicating the same meaning, a motif of the refuge he keeps carefully closed, but which at the same time he wishes O-Nao to invade in order to reveal its truth. The excuse that "one can never know another person" is thus inoperative as we shroud ourselves in fog because we are unable to face what is behind the closed door of our heart's innermost compartment and then craftily shift the blame onto others saying "they cannot know me." But we all hold the keys to the uninvaded cell ourselves. This is one reason that O-Nao's actions always appear unexpected and surprising to Jiro. O-Nao is "an unshackled and free woman ... extraordinarily at one with herself." (*Kōjin*, p. 240) She holds the keys to her self firmly in hand and seems to move freely in and out of her own innermost compartment of the self. No wonder Ichirō beats her unmercifully. He desperately wishes to be able to be as O-Nao is.

Is Ichirō's fear, his insecurity (*fuan*), in fact the fear of facing himself as he is behind the closed door? He obviously has some block, some last veil through which he cannot let himself break. As long as his true self is hidden he can indulge in the optimistic belief that there is some sort of magically untainted and ideal self behind the closed door. His "disappointment" or "disgust" with O-Nao stems from his unrealistic expectation that she would open the door for him, "bring out the best in him," since he is unable to do it for himself. His neurosis, then, grows out of the unresolved conflict between the personality projected on to the door of his study, the closed door of his innermost self, by his family, and the real self he senses to be present behind the door. But what if Ichirō tears the last veil, and opens the innermost compartment of himself? He could live with himself in wholeness, perhaps even live with O-Nao, but he could no longer live with (i.e., be accepted by) his family. In his present insecure state he believes such a situation would be unbearably lonely, and his state of isolation under the circumstances is easier to bear because the family continues to indulge him as long as he conforms to their projections of him as neurotic. Only O-Nao challenges the true self he has hidden. Testing O-Nao's "loyalty" or "integrity" is testing the indulgence of the family, testing their image of him to see if it rings true. It does not ring true, and the unsuspecting O-Nao becomes the focus for Ichirō's rage as he discovers that the image projected by the family is false. O-Nao is henceforth an intolerable presence for him and he is left with the ultimate conflict—whether or not to break with the family's image of him and find his true self. He is pathetically like a man banging passionately, furiously at a gate that is not even locked.

By studying the motif usage in these two novels by Soseki and Anais Nin, we see that Ichirō and Lillian have trapped themselves, and their collaboration in imprisoning themselves lies in the pattern of their relationship with their families. Their performance of a role they think is expected of them by the family has become a prison in which their true self has been locked into inaccessibility. Not only are the motifs

of the two novels similar, so are the themes.

To help us understand how and why Ichirō's and Lillian's conflicts remain unresolved at the end of these novels, we can look to the striking similarity of the endings of two other novels, one by Soseki and one by Anais Nin. The cat, at the end of *Wagahai-wa Neko-de Aru*, finds himself drowning in a rainbarrel. The cat will drown despite desperate struggle because the "water in the barrel was about five inches below the rim, and" as the cat says, "my paws are less than three inches long. If I could have floated on the water and stretched my front paws as far as possible, I would still have been about two inches away from the rim."<sup>14</sup> The drowning of the cat is not annihilation, however, but an awakening into "the mysterious but wonderful realm of peace (*taihei*)!"<sup>15</sup> A similar motif of drowning occurs at the end of Anais Nin's *The Four-Chambered Heart* where we see Djuna purposely pull up a plank of her houseboat to sink the boat because she could no longer stand the trap of relationships in which she found herself. But, in the intense light shed by impending death, she awakens to the realities of her situation and sees that "the trap was the static pause in growth, the arrested self caught in its own web of obstinacy and obsession. ..."<sup>16</sup> As the water fills the houseboat there is the realization that "... in the last role Djuna became immune from the passageway of pretense, from a suspended existence in reflection, from impostures ...."<sup>17</sup> This "suspended existence in reflection," can be linked to the reflection of the mirror motifs we examined earlier. We can then see Ichirō and Lillian in a situation in which the waters of life eternally remain at five inches below the rim of the barrel, and the reach of which they are capable is eternally set at less than three inches. They are drowning in a rainbarrel-trap each of them has collaborated in building. For Ichirō and Lillian, who in "her drowning...was like one constantly choking those around her, bringing them down with her into darkness," (*Ladders to Fire*, p. 45) as well as for Djuna, and even the cat, the attribution of a role by others has become a trap in which they are imprisoned as collaborators. They are all blindly struggling against odds that seem insurmountable because

they are perceived as "given" or "fated" to be that way, as the cat sees the length of its paws in relation to the distance between water and rim to be an unchangeable "given" fact. Within this perceptual frame rescue must come from another person. Ichirō and Lillian are both trapped in a barrel of static expectations and there is no rescue in sight lest it come from an outsider (O-Nao, death, madness or religion for Ichirō, a new and finally "perfect" lover for Lillian). The peace achieved by the cat's acceptance or the awakening Djuna experiences elude Ichirō and Lillian because they have neither one taken responsibility for their own struggle.

*Kojin* and *Ladders to Fire* are about the difficulty of human relationships and not about neurosis. The question implicitly asked in both novels is "How do we live with each other?" We live with each other destructively by isolating ourselves one from the other, by projecting our own wishes and desires onto others, forcing them to play a role unsuitable for the true expression of themselves. We endow others with our judgments and we misunderstand, misjudge, project wrong images and persist in our refusal to communicate honestly with others. We establish patterns of behavior in which we are willing participants in the emotional blackmail practiced upon us, and these patterns quickly become woven into webs, traps, prisons from which we find it increasingly difficult to escape. We become immured in the destructive patterns as Ichirō and Lillian find themselves immured, because we try to play the game by the roles (rules) made by others, we act out our life according to the labels projected upon us by others' needs, never revealing our true self, never seeing the needs of others which forced them into such defensive postures vis-à-vis us. The acceptance of the projection of the family's judgment of Ichirō, a projection which only mirrors their own weaknesses and problems, is what makes Ichirō like the drunken cat which has fallen into the rainbarrel. Ichirō has sent out increasingly frantic signals for help (for example, his school lectures became more and more irrational), but wrongly followed Jiro's non-solution of flight. He is headed in the wrong direction, struggling helplessly like the cat

in the water which is still five inches below the rim of the barrel. And Lillian, too, makes flight, not a solution, but part of the destructive pattern in which she is drowning in the death of the self. As Ichirō's friend H. so accurately foresaw, there is nothing but misfortune in store for the family as long as the destructive pattern operates. And operate it will, out of the interior fatality described by Anais Nin and by Natsume Soseki, which has murder disguised as suicide waiting at the bottom of the rainbarrel.

#### NOTES

- 1 Anais Nin, *The Novel of the Future* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968), p. 111.
- 2 Robert Penn Warren, *Why do we read fiction?*, ed. Naozo Ueno (Tokyo: Nan'Un Do, 1964), p. 13.
- 3 Robert Scholes, *Elements of Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 24.
- 4 Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p. 11.
- 5 Soseki, Natsume, *The Wayfarer (Kojin)*, trans. Beongcheon Yu (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1967), pp. 111, 140, et passim. Subsequent references are to the same edition and will be cited by page numbers in parentheses.
- 6 Anais Nin, *Ladders to Fire* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1959), p. 90. Subsequent references are to the same edition and will be cited by page numbers in parentheses.
- 7 Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p. 74.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Peter Sedgwick, "R. D. Laing: Self, Symptom and Society," *Laing and Anti-Psychiatry*, ed. Robert Boyers and Robert Orrill (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 25.
- 10 Sedgwick, p. 22.
- 11 R. D. Laing, *The Politics of the Family and other essays* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1972), p. 22.
- 12 Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p. 110.
- 13 Anais Nin, *The Four-Chambered Heart* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1959), p. 178.
- 14 Soseki, Natsume, *I Am a Cat (Wagahai-wa Neko-de Aru)* (London: Peter Owen, 1961), pp. 430-31.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Nin, *The Four-Chambered Heart*, p. 917.
- 17 Ibid., p. 181.