



## READING, RECOLLECTION, AND REALITY

Seminar Leader: **Morris Reeves**

House Leader: **Shiro Kuriwaki**

*“The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!”*

– Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

### Course Description

Have you ever felt that you can understand events in your life only after they have happened? In his now-famous Stanford commencement speech<sup>1</sup>, Steve Jobs said something similar: “you can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking back.” So how do we “connect the dots” and give meaning to past events? This question lies at the heart of storytelling. We also think that it lies at the heart of your life. In this seminar, we will answer this question by reading stories and essays by Japanese and European authors (such as Shiga Naoya and Oscar Wilde). These texts illustrate the relationship between stories and past events from multiple viewpoints. By reading them and applying their ideas to the lives of the speakers we meet at KSS, we will observe the fragility of the boundary between fiction and nonfiction.

### Schedule

#### **Day 1:** *What is the “time” of a story?*

When we tell a story, we “recollect” past events. In a novel, authors create characters that also tell their own story, also by recollecting past events. To understand this concept, we will discuss an essay by Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin that compares the “novel” with another genre, the “epic.” In the discussion we will explore how the story has changed over time, but also how time changes the story. In particular, we will focus on Bakhtin’s following quotation: “The novel comes into contact with the spontaneity of the inconclusive present.”<sup>2</sup>

#### **Day 2:** *How do characters “connect the dots”?*

In the last class, we discussed the time setting of the story; in this class, we will focus on time within the story. In other words, we will see characters “connect the dots” to understand past events. Our material is two short stories by Shiga Naoya (志賀直哉), who has been called “the god of the Japanese short story” (小説の神様). The scholar Tomi Suzuki thinks that “Shiga’s texts...make the reader aware that any experience

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.ted.com/talks/steve\\_jobs\\_how\\_to\\_live\\_before\\_you\\_die](http://www.ted.com/talks/steve_jobs_how_to_live_before_you_die)

<sup>2</sup>Epic and Novel, p.27



ultimately is knowable only through narration.”<sup>3</sup> By discussing the two stories, we will try to understand what she meant.

**Day 3:** *Why should we “connect the dots”?*

Now that we have dug into specific stories, we move out to our own lives. We will debate: should stories teach us about our behavior and the world around us, or provide an escape from it? We will read excerpts from works by French author Émile Zola and the Irish playwright and novelist Oscar Wilde, who sat on opposite sides of this debate.

**Day 4:** *Presentations on Presentations: “connecting the dots” at KSS*

In the final day, we apply what we have learned about how and why we “connect the dots” to Komatsu Summer School itself. In Komatsu Summer School, you will meet adults and friends who will tell you their “story.” And after KSS, you may very well be telling more of your own stories too! In this final exercise each of you will present on a speaker’s presentation at KSS, to see how the ideas we learned about stories also apply to real life (details in the following section).

## Final Exercise

Before the final day, choose a KSS speaker that interests you (each student will be assigned a different KSS speaker). On the final day, tell the rest of the seminar how the speaker “connected the dots” in a short presentation (10 minutes each). In other words, how did the speaker turn his/her various experiences into a presentation? As with our discussion of Shiga Naoya, focus on the difference between past events and the “recollection” of those events. Do not focus on the details of the past events themselves.

We encourage you to connect your presentation to our discussions in the first three days. In particular, the following questions may help you as you prepare.

### Description Questions

- What was the purpose or “moral” of the speaker’s presentation? Was the speaker encouraging a point of view, or a set of experiences?
- What was the structure of the presentation? Did the speaker, for example, start with his/her background, and describe her experiences as a contrast or result of that background? In this regard, did the presentation align more with Zola’s naturalism (e.g. taking a fixed hereditary or environmental background to explain subsequent actions) or with Wilde’s wit (e.g. a work of art or an impression led to action, rather than the reverse).

### Interpretation Questions

- In your opinion, did the act of “connecting the dots” change the dots themselves, as we discussed in the case of Shiga Naoya’s work? In other words, did the “moral” of the

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<sup>3</sup>Narrating the Self: Fictions of Japanese Modernity, 100



presentation require a re-interpretation of past events? (i.e. were the past events less or more life-changing than the speaker claimed?) In your opinion, can we understand the significance of events as we live them? If not, did the speaker make it seem like he did? Were there any coincidences that were not described as coincidences (recall 仙吉 in 小僧の神様)?

- Did the presentation feel like a “novel” according to Bakhtin’s definition, which we discussed on the first day of class? (e.g. was the “character,” i.e. the speaker as she referred to herself evolving, or fixed?)

## Pre-Seminar Assignments and Readings

- p. 34-38 of Mikhail Bakhtin (1941/1981), *Epic and Novel*, in ed. Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, University of Texas Press.
- Shiga Naoya (1913/2008), 范の犯罪 (Japanese), in ちくま日本文学 021 志賀直哉, 筑摩書房 ; skim *Han’s Crime* (English translation)
- Shiga Naoya (1920/2008), 小僧の神様 (Japanese), in ちくま日本文学 021 志賀直哉, 筑摩書房; skim *The Shopboy’s God* (English translation)
- p. 24-27 of Émile Zola (1893/1964). *The Experimental Novel*, in *The Experimental Novel and Other Essays*, Haskell House.
- p.4, p. 12-14, p. 16-17. Oscar Wilde (1891/2014), *The Decay of Lying*, <http://virgil.org/dswo/courses/novel/wilde-lying.pdf>
- p. 3, p. 6 of Oscar Wilde (1895/2014), *The Importance of Being Earnest*, <http://elearning.uaf.edu/cc/eng1200x/wilde-importance-being-earnest.pdf>

## Message from the House Leader

My name is Shiro Kuriwaki – I’ve just finished my first job as a political data analyst also in D.C. I study psychology, statistics, and politics (especially U.S. politics). I don’t have as much background in literature, but one of my favorite courses in college was a literature class on Leo Tolstoy. Regardless of what you are focusing on in high school, being exposed to literature is an enriching and important experience – for reasons we hope you will see in the seminar!

## Message from the Seminar Leader

Hi! I’m Morris Reeves. I’m going to be a sophomore at Williams College in the fall, and am currently considering double-majoring in Japanese and Economics. Apart from Japanese and Economics, I’ve enjoyed classes on Tokugawa Japan and “The Nature of Narrative,” a comparative literature class. In high school, I particularly enjoyed taking a class on Victorian fiction. Outside of class, I like to sketch, play soccer, and play the violin in my college orchestra. I’m excited to meet and have discussions with you all both inside and outside of class!