Literature In Translation: Literary Aspects Of The Novel The Sailor Who Fell From Grace With The Sea

The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea by Yukio Mishima is a tale of a gang of savage thirteen-year-old boys who have difficulties coming to term with the adult world and rejects it as illusionary, hypocritical and sentimental. Their view is based on so called objectivity they have set the criteria for themselves. The protagonist’s mother falls in love with a sailor and despite the gang idolizing him at first, they conclude he is very much part of the world they despise, labelling him as soft and romantic, which has no place in their so called objective worldview. The feeling of betrayal on the boy’s part as they are disillusioned by their hero, perpetuates various acts of violence in their reaction as protest and response to the adult world and their experiences. Noboru and his companions are wonderfully characterized in the novel, where Mishima masterfully uses language to portray the facets of their inner workings.

The literary aspect of characterization creates an immediate image in the reader’s mind that corresponds with the name of the character, sometimes signifying their character, even foreshadowing of the events, sometimes it is ironically given to contrast the character with their actions. We are introduced to a character's name first, before we get to know the hero, the protagonist or antagonist through their actions and relationships with other significant or less significant characters in the work. One example for world literature is the name Raskolnikov in the iconic Crime and Punishment by Dostoyevsky. His name is the most primal and singularly depicts the characters most notable and defining characteristic, which is revealed through the entire literary work. The relatability of characterization through the name enables the reader to form a view of them as well as adopt a perspective against which all subsequent actions of them are contorted. In the novel The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea, the author gives one of his characters a personal name that guides the character's actions and beliefs.

Noboru, the main character in Mishima's novel is significantly characterized by the meaning of his name. In Japanese, Nobrou means little boy. A strong association is immediately placed in the readers mind as being a little boy is something relatable and already predetermines the reader’s perception of the character as somebody who is not able to participate in the adult world, is immature and if you will a rascal, like little boys often are. The phrase boys will be boys is not just that, it implies that actions of little boys are expected, often forgiven or understood as they cannot help it, don't hold it against them, they are just boys and boys will be boys. Noboru's actions and beliefs are therefore expected to be nothing short of what is characteristic of a small child. As boys would, Noboru, especially after a row with his mother begins to spy on his mother upon discovering a peephole in the wall. Shortly after he made the discovery, Noboru began spying on his mother at night, particularly when she had nagged or scolded him (Mishima 7). Noboru is aware of the wrongfulness of his action, yet it is his immature and infantile way of punishing his mother when she does wrong by him in his view. Yet, when his mother treats him as he'd like to be treated he does not have the need to resort to spying; when his mother had been gentle to him, he was able to sleep without looking (Mishima 9).

Noboru’s characterization is far from being limited to his age and actions contributed to it. Being a teenager, one can hardly say little boy any longer as it would apply to a toddler or an elementary school student, not a teenager dealing with adolescence. Noboru's name not only

applies to his age but to his set of opinions and beliefs, those being of a little boy as the name implies. Following the meaning of his name, his actions, thoughts are based upon childish beliefs and boyish logic. After he kills a defenseless kitten, Noboru thinks: I killed it all by myself ... I can do anything, no matter how awful (Mishima 61). His view of himself as being in control, almost invincible and untouchable is an example how Mishima further develops his character and gives support using language in his thought process. When contemplating himself and his gang, the view of them as seen by Noboru illustrates a larger than life opinion absent form critical thinking and nonetheless experience.

All six of us are geniuses. And the world, as you know, is empty....As a matter of fact, we are the ones who do the permitting. Teachers, schools, fathers, society - we permit all those garbage heaps. And not because we are powerless either. Permitting is our special privilege, and if we felt any pity at all, we wouldn't be able to permit this ruthlessly (Mishima 161). These examples clearly show the mindset of an inexperienced and infantile mind. Classifying himself as a genius, able to do anything, literally untouchable is nothing short of a Noboru mind, a small child. His callousness allows him to think he is the chosen who is permitted to do anything he desires.

Furthermore, Mishima takes characterization away from merely giving a name to his character that is a signpost for their development in the novel. In the case of the sailor, Ryuji, he illustrates his development through seasonal symbolism, another powerful literary aspect of his work. Ryuji starts as unsociable and eccentric (Mishima 15) as described by his crew. His summer period is a time where he sees himself as a heroic figure against the brink of man’s world, convinced that there must be a special destiny in store for (Mishima 17). Summer, representing his past is what Ryuji is drawn to, still pursuing his calling, viewing the other men who read letters accompanied by drawings of their children as having thrown opportunity away (Mishima 38)from the rest of their lives; they will never experience the special destiny he has waiting for him.

During the summer, Ryuji still responds to the call of the horn probing deep inside him, rousing his passion for the Great Cause (Mishima 77). However at this point changes are on the horizon and the novel shifts its seasonal setting towards winter. He is questioning if the Great Cause is truly the noble death he thought it to be (Mishima 77). During the first part of the book, Ryuji is trying to live an exciting life, one typically enjoyed by men younger than him.

At the beginning of winter, Ryuji returns from his voyage a changed man. Having found love, he abandons his obsession with the poignant voice of glory from the distance and will have to jump out of bed and set out alone out of frustration with the squalor and the boredom of a sailor’s life. He has even decided that there is no glory to be found (Mishima 111). He sees great love as glorious, leading him to marry Fusako. In marrying Fusako, Ryuji is abandoning his Japanese identity for smart’ English clothes and tailored suits (Mishima 135) and he is abandoning what he one thought as a missed opportunity in the pursuit of glory – a father.

Mishima's different approaches to characterization, be it through the name or symbolism associated with seasons, or the use of language, show his succinctness as a writer and reveals a complexity to the novel that goes beyond of what one would call a rather typical plot. Especially with Noboru's name and its Japanese meaning, it is very significant that the reader is aware of author's choices. Namely, names are more often than not left original in the translated versions of literary works and offer an insight such as the significant characterization of Noboru

gets lost in that translation, leaving the reader unaware of the author's intention. One of the most notable examples is the difficulty of Ibsen's work Gengangere, loosely translated as Ghosts in English and different approximations in other languages shows how some words are either untranslatable or significantly impact the reader’s experience if left in the original and thus not allowing the reader to understand the complex impacts of the word choice, or as in Noboru’s case, the inability to translate a person’s name into its literal meaning in another language. Not being aware of the meaning or rather being aware of it significantly influences the reader’s interpretation and relatability of the text. Mishima’s characterization through Noboru’s name is an important element of his literary choices and not understanding its meaning, the reading of the novel might not be as deep an experience as knowing we are dealing only with a little boy.

1. Mishima, Yukio. The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea. New York: Vintage International, 1994. Print.