

The Creature of Asexual Love in *My Name is Shingo*

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Introduction

Last year, I was trying to explain my paper to an American who was trying to proofread the English translation. In that paper, I discussed the romantic and asexual relationship that existed between two women, developing the idea of Rothblum and Brethony (1993). The American told me that ‘romantic’ and ‘asexual’ love is paradoxical, and cannot coexist and that when you use the word ‘romantic’ to describe a relationship, this will usually suggest a physical dimension as well as an emotional one. He went on to say that he understood ‘romantic’ and ‘asexual’ love to represent a relationship between children. Does this mean that adults cannot experience both a ‘romantic’ and an ‘asexual’ kind of love? Adults tend to disregard the love that exists between children because the conventional wisdom is that love is something that takes place between physically and emotionally mature individuals. When children

announce that they love each other, adults like to suppose the feeling is not so deep, or sincere.

This article discusses the story of Kazuo Umezu's comic book, *Watashi wa Shingo* (*My Name is Shingo*) (1982-1986) within the context of asexuality. Readers see how two elementary school pupils, a girl named Marine and a boy named Satoru, fall in love and are blessed with a rather unorthodox child which happens to be a robot. This robot is called Shingo and the story recounts how its mind develops and how it travels the world in pursuit of its 'parents' whom it has never had a chance to meet.

On the subject of Japanese comic books, there are several works which touch on the subject of children's asexuality and asexual reproduction such as cloning, especially in 'girl comics.' One major characteristic, which has often been pointed out, is the contradiction between the matured female body and an unsexualized mind (Otsuka 1990: 182). In the story of *My Name is Shingo*, the girl Marine clearly shows this mismatch. She has difficulties in dealing with the reality of being both physically matured and an object of desire.

The reason why I would like to discuss the comic book, *My Name is Shingo*, is because this hints at children's asexual reproduction, as well as child asexuality, which, I think, contributes significantly to the intensity and uniqueness of the story.

Umezu views children as closer to an ideal and especially in his later works, including *My Name is Shingo*, we can see some significant metaphors of asexual reproduction. In his *The Drifting Classroom* (1972-1974), elementary school pupils have drifted into an uninhabited, future world and the elder pupils take on the role of the younger ones' 'parents' in order to survive there alone. In his *The Fourteen* (1990-1995), which is Umezu's most recent and longest work to date, a cultivated chicken cell gets a sense of self awareness and develops into "Dr. Chicken George", who happens to have a higher level of intelligence than humankind. He declares that humankind cannot live beyond the age of fourteen years old. Some selected small children escape into outer space in order to survive.

My Name is Shingo has not been published outside Japan. However, it was extremely popular when it was first published in the 1980s and has recently started to enjoy favorable critical acclaim. Last year, this work was dramatized and performed in Tokyo, and Umezu himself recently said in an interview that he would like this work to be made into a film in the future (the evening edition of The Daily Yomiuri, June 18, 2005: 15).

In this article, I would like to consider the meaning of 'asexuality' and whether there exists any similarities between the asexuality of children and that of adults. I

will then take a closer look at the author's views, descriptions of children's love and reproduction and finally some metaphors of asexual reproduction by interpreting the story of *My Name is Shingo*.

Several important Japanese writers have put forward what they consider to be the motifs of this story; "what you can do only in childhood" (Takahashi 2004); "when can children become parents?" (Yomota 1987) and "madness of love" (Kure 1997).

However, as space is limited, I will concentrate on discussing the story within the context of asexuality. The definitions of the word 'asexual' as used by researchers and people who identify themselves as 'asexual', are varied and open to discussion.

Asexuality is distinct from asexual reproduction, still, I think the idea of 'asexuality' suggests a greater diversity of relationships between couples and family members *et cetera*, not focused on genitality, gender or heredity. This article ends with a look at the further possibilities of asexuality today by exploring children's 'asexual love' and 'asexual reproduction.' It should be noted that in this article, as well as in the original comic book story, the words; "the robot"; "the machine"; "the computer" and "Monroe" are used to refer to the same character which later on in the story is called "Shingo."

What is asexuality?

Let us consider what ‘asexuality’ actually means. There are various definitions of ‘asexual’ or ‘asexuality’ in use, today. There is debate as to whether this is a sexual orientation or, in fact, a sexual disorder. Some people take ‘asexuality’ to mean celibacy or abstinence, others disagree because they do not have sexual desire and do not have a need to restrain themselves. Some of them say they have feelings of romantic love, others do not and sometimes people use the word ‘asexual’ to mean ‘genderless.’ Researchers have defined the term ‘asexual’ differently, too. Prause and Graham (2003) concluded in a survey on this topic that “asexuals appears to be better characterized by low sexual desire and sexual excitation than by low levels of sexual behavior or high sexual inhibition.” Bogaert (2004) conducted a survey defined asexuality as “having no attraction for males or females” (11th paragraph) and found that 1.05% of the participants “reported being asexual” (21st paragraph). Also, people who identify themselves as ‘asexual’ have various definitions of their own, and engaged in active debate on this topic. According to guidelines provided by a large internet network for asexual people, AVEN(Asexual Visibility and Education Network), founded in the United States, the definition of an asexual person

is “someone who does not experience sexual attraction” (‘Overview’) and go on to welcome the individual’s self-identification as an asexual as far as that person feels this is beneficial and makes them feel comfortable. AVEN also present “vast possibilities for non-sexual intimacy” (‘General FAQ’).

These discussions occur mainly in the context of adult ‘asexuality.’ People do not pay much attention to the concept of child ‘asexuality’ since they are assumed to be ‘asexual.’ In this sense they may mean that they do not have sexual desire or/and they do not engage in sexual behavior. Some people may think it important not to confuse adult asexuality with child asexuality. Regarding this issue, S. Lotringer, a theoretician and a professor of French literature and philosophy at Colombia University, makes comments which are highly relevant and help to shed some light on the similarity between two forms of asexuality.

After pointing out that there are more and more ‘asexual’ people who do not want to have sex because they have lost interest in it, loudly proclaiming a post-sexual revolution in New York, in 1981, Lotringer said: “If asexuality means *experiencing sexuality in non-genital ways*, its potential is truly infinite” (Lotringer 1981: 286). In answer to the question “Are we heading toward an asexual society?” by Arthur Bell, Lotringer replies in this article: “It depends, of course, how you define asexual. A

non-genitally-focused, polycentric, polysexual society: yes, eventually” (Lotringer 1981: 289). He mentioned what Freud had discussed on the subject of characteristics of children’s sexuality: “In his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), he demonstrated that the polymorphous perverse constitution is present in the early stages of human development. What this really meant is that the sexuality of the child is essentially open-ended and exploratory, not focused on genitality, and like libido itself, genderless” (Lotringer 1988: 14).

We can still see diversity and ambiguity in definitions of asexuality today, which Lotringer related to polysexuality in his papers. By these comments, he means, asexuality does not have to be taken as only in the context of children. In fact, fundamental change has taken place since Lotringer wrote these words: it is estimated that there are many adults who identify themselves as asexual and more and more people, not only in New York or the United States, are becoming aware of this. In this article, I will treat ‘asexuality’ as meaning “vast possibilities for non-sexual intimacy” (AVEN); “sexuality in non-genital ways” (Lotringer) and explore diverse intimate relationships.

The Author and the story of My Name is Shingo

Kazuo Umezu was born in Wakayama, in 1936 and brought up in Nara, which is in the western part of Japan. He had a talent for drawing as a child and began his career as a professional comic book artist in 1955 at the age of nineteen. His creativity covers most genres of the Japanese comic books; horror (e.g. *Hebi Shoujo* [*The Snake Girl*]; romantic love story (e.g. *Romansu no Kusuri* [*The Magical Medicine for Romance*]); comedy (e.g. *Makotochan*) and grand drama (e.g. *Hyouryu Kyoushitsu* [*The Drifting Classroom*]) (www.UMEZZ.com 'Profile').

My Name is Shingo (*Watashi wa Shingo* in Japanese) was originally serialized in a magazine called *Big Comic Spirits* from 1982 to 1986. The story features three main characters, two elementary school pupils, a girl named Marine, and a boy named Satoru and a robot, called Shingo which is called "Monroe" at the beginning of the story. The boy, Satoru, is described early on in the story as still a child, unlike most of his classmates who are entering puberty. Satoru's father works for a small factory making farm machine parts. However, the factory owner plans to replace most of the workers in the factory with industrial robots. Since Satoru's father has a hard time getting used to one in particular called Monroe, Satoru steps in and leads him a hand.

One day, when Satoru and his classmates visit the factory to see what the robots are like, Satoru meets a girl, Marine who is from another school and on a similar visit. It was love at first sight and their lives are never the same again. Marine's father is a diplomat and his work takes the family to London and so the two children, fearing separation, decide to get married and have a child so they can stay together. The story leads the two children to the robot and they start out by inputting their personal information into it for fun, and later in order to get advice about what might happen to them in the future and what they should do about it. Since they do not know how to have a child, they ask the robot and it instructs them to jump from the top of the '333.' They guess the '333' must mean Tokyo Tower since its height is known to be 333 meters. They climb up to the top of the tower, and jump but are saved just in time by a helicopter.

The action of the two children jumping from the tower triggers something in the robot Monroe and it suddenly develops a sense of self awareness. However, Marine and Satoru are not aware of the changes that have taken place in Monroe's mind as the result of what they have done. They say: "Our child wasn't born..." "There wasn't enough data." "We couldn't have our child in our way... It is as everybody had told us it would be ..." (Umezumi 2000 3: 61-62) The two lonely children think the reason why

they could not have a child was because they had input information such as nursery tales, the prophecies of Nostradamus and the American movie *The Omen* (1976). They were disappointed that they had failed and said they would forget their fondness for each other.

But Satoru cannot forget Marine and he returns to the factory to input that he still loves her into the robot's computer before moving to a new home with his family. And meanwhile, the robot begins to identify itself as Shingo, the 'human' child of Satoru and Marine as it communicates with other children and it tries to convey Satoru's message to Marine, now in London, that he still loves her. Meantime, Marine is having a hard time in London. She develops a kind of amnesia, as a result of trying to forget her love and their relationship. She cannot remember what had happened before she moved to London. Shingo finds her later and tries to save her from an obsessed English teenager's unwanted advances. Shingo's body loses parts and functions during his search for its mother and then for its father.

Despite this physical outer dilapidation, the robot gradually develops its mind to that of a 'human', then in tune with the Earth, and then later finally a deity. Shingo tries to kill Marine's 'fiancé' in order to prevent their marriage but this attempt very nearly results in Marine's death instead and in the process of rushing to protect her, it

temporally transforms into a 'human child.' However, Marine's 'childhood' is over at the same time and she cannot recognize Shingo. Shingo can never tell her that its father still loves her and that Shingo is their child. Also, at the end of the story, the robot shows up in front of its father but due to its damaged and dilapidated condition and fact that Satoru's childhood has long since ended, Satoru does not recognize it at all either. In the end, Shingo's mind separates from its body and becomes a deity.

The Author's views and descriptions of children's love and reproduction

Self-awareness of a robot

Kazuo Umezu, the author of the story, *My Name is Shingo*, said in an interview in 1988 that he had often wondered how much computing power would be required to mimic human intelligence and stressed the importance of this point. He imagined that the moment the machine [the robot] acquires a sense of self-awareness is the moment the computing power has reached that key threshold. He tried to portray this critical point by having Marine and Satoru jump from the top of the '333' which, as previously mentioned, was a code for the Tokyo Tower. Umezu went on to say that if you consider the machine [the robot] as partly human, we can also consider

Shingo's mind as displaying human characteristics such as emotion and intention (Umezu 1996: 115-116).

A monster-like child and its parents who are still children

The author continued by explaining that Shingo's appearance is not at all attractive since it is in the form of a crude machine. "A good-looking boy and a good-looking girl happen to have a child and that child is grotesque." He was using the machine, Shingo, to represent a strange life form, a kind of monster, because monsters are unfamiliar and scary to children (Umezu 1996: 114). He used the idea of a boy and a girl having a child in other stories, too. In *The Drifting Classroom*, children become 'fathers' and 'mothers.' He said that his vision of the future of humankind was inspired by the children he saw around him and that this is a recurring theme throughout his works (Umezu 1996: 113-114).

The ability of children

The author, however, does not portray children as only innocent or good, but also as pitiless and irrational. For example, in *My Name is Shingo*, some small children steal a car and run people over in their attempt to help Shingo elude capture by pursuers and some boys trick Satoru into becoming involved in a murder. Having said that the author sees children as being closer to his own ideal in comparison with

adults (Umezū 1996: 61,113-114). Marine and Satoru do not want to become adults and Marine especially rebels at being regarded as physically attractive, but they cannot avoid ‘growing up.’ During their childhood, they had the ability to hear the voice and recognize the existence of their ‘child’, Shingo. But, in due course, to borrow Umezū’s phrase, their “growth reaches a point” (Umezū 1996: 116) that they lose this ability forever which means that the two children are unable to recognize their ‘child’ even when they come face to face later in the story.

The Author describes the process of the children’s growth and the crucial moment they pass from childhood to adulthood as well as the crucial moment a robot becomes a ‘human.’ This story allows various interpretations of what it is to be a child and what it means to become an adult, but I would like to move back to the core issue of asexuality in children and adults.

Asexuality, asexual love and asexual reproduction in *My Name is Shingo*

Erotic metaphors for asexual love and asexual reproduction

Now, on the subject of children’s asexuality and asexual reproduction in *My Name is Shingo*, one of the reasons that makes this story unique and extremely interesting is

its use of sexual innuendo. Despite the children's love being asexual in nature, readers can nevertheless interpret some scenes as erotically metaphorical. For example, the scene when the children jump from the top of the Tokyo Tower. This scene is full of thinly veiled metaphors of erotic symbolism. Sawaragi (1995) says that this scene, despite its lack of graphic content, is highly intoxicating and describes it as like a *ménage à trois*: the two children and the tower. Sawaragi goes on to say that it is, therefore, natural that a machine, not a human is conceived and that these scenes could be seen to represent a large ejaculation within a large electronic network (Sawaragi 1995: 186).

Religious metaphors for asexual reproduction

Next, let us look at Marine's marriage in Jerusalem. In this scene, Umezu uses heavy religious metaphors and we witness the rebirth of Shingo in the form of a human child who is born to save Marine from disaster which parallels with the birth of Jesus Christ who was born to save humankind. Shingo tries to kill Marine's 'fiancé' with a piece of a satellite which is shaped like a cross however Shingo in the form of a human child sacrifices itself to save Marine and dies. As a result, Shingo becomes a deity but it is not described as absolutely perfect but rather a complex, humane being with a sinister and monster-like characteristics which has unfortunate and terrible

consequences. It does not know what it means to die or to be dead and as a result kills many people and animals in the process of trying to meet and save its parents. When Shingo develops its mind in tune with the earth, it realizes that it has caused war and destruction in the world and feels a terrible sense of guilt. Berenstein (1996: 27) pointed out: “Monsters do not fit neatly with a model of human sexuality in which eros and danger, sensuality and destruction, human and inhuman, and male and female blur, overlap, and coalesce. In this schema, sexuality and identity remain murky matters, steeped in border crossings and marked by fuzzy boundaries.” We can see this tendency in Shingo’s monster-like aspect. We also see Marine as a metaphor of the Virgin Mary who experiences asexual conception.

Shingo’s gender and asexuality

One more factor that relates to asexuality in *My Name is Shingo*, is Shingo’s gender. Since the name, “Shingo” in Japanese is usually for boys, I had assumed that Shingo is male for a while. However, there is no gendered pronoun, “she” or “he” in the story. Instead of using these pronouns, Umezu, the author always uses such as “Shingo” (Ogawa 2004: 75), “the robot” or “the machine.” In the story, Shingo named itself, combining *kanji*, Chinese characters used in the names of its parents, Marine and Satoru. Whether Shingo is described as male/female or genderless is still

open to discussion. In my interpretation, however, the two children rejected being regarded as adults in the sense that they (un)consciously shun the reproduction model of adult sexuality (Frayser 2003: 263): “The acceptable pattern for sexual expression was to fall in love, marry, have sex with the goal of having children, and achieve the roles of mother and father, which would take precedence over those of husband and wife.” Instead, they love each other, and as a result of this romantic and asexual love, a non-gendered, non-sexualized being is created.

Summary

In summary, I would like to state the following few points: we can see the diversity and some kind of similarities of asexuality between children and adults and some metaphors of asexual reproduction by interpreting the story of *My Name is Shingo*. Yet, there still remains a question regarding asexual love. Umezu relates how children become adults once they experience romantic love and that adults cannot experience love the way children do. However, by describing the distinction between children’s and adults’ forms of love clearly, Umezu is suggesting the existence of a greater diversity of relationships between couples and family members *et cetera*,

which are not necessarily focused on genitality, gender or heredity. These relationships may mean those between people and also people and the earth, nature and deities.

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