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Влияние микропрозы Роберта А. Блоха на сверхкороткие сказочные истории и психологический хоррор современных японских писателей: попытка сравнительного анализа

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Аннотация

Среди сверхкоротких рассказов американских авторов, переведённых на японский язык в конце 1950-х – начале 1960-х гг. писателем Цудзуки Митио, впервые была представлена и микропроза Роберта Альберта Блоха (1917–1994): детективы, сказочные истории, психологические ужасы, фэнтези. Японские писатели, известные своими экспериментами в жанре сверхкоротких мистических и детективных историй, а также в жанре психологического хоррора, отмечают влияние Роберта А. Блоха на их творчество: это Атода Такаси (р. 1935), Акагава Дзиро (р. 1948) и Тамару Масатомо (р. 1987). Некоторые аллюзии можно обнаружить и в творчестве менее известных авторов современного сверхкороткого рассказа — например, Аояма Сёдзи (р. 1975).

В статье анализируются темы, идеи, приёмы, психологизм японской микропрозы, относящейся к таким жанрам, как сказки и ужасы; рассматривается метафоричность и образность произведений. Предлагается взгляд на *сё:то сё:то* современных японских писателей, принимая во внимание отсылки в их творчестве к произведениям указываемого ими предшественника — Роберта А. Блоха. Литературные параллели с сюжетами сверхкоротких историй Роберта А. Блоха обнаруживаются в рассказах сборника *сё:то сё:то* Тамару Масатомо *«Тысяча и одна ночь»* (*Сэнъя ития*), опубликованного в 2016 г.; в сборниках микропрозы Акагава Дзиро *«Прогулка»* (*Сампомити*, 2002), *«Танцующий мужчина»* (*Одору отоко*, 1986) и *«Болтливая женщина»* (*Каттэ-ни сябэру онна*, 1986); а также в сборниках микропрозы Атода Такаси *«Странный день»* (*Кимё:на хирусагари*, 1996), *«Съеденный мужчи-*

на» (*Табэрарэта отоко*, 2008) и *«Случай с кошкой»* (*Нэко-но дзикэн*, 2010). В одном из рассказов Аояма Сёдзи из сборника *«Площадь сё:то сё:то-1»* (*Сё:то сё:то-но хироба-1*, 2007) также очевидно влияние Роберта А. Блоха. Вслед за американским писателем для японских авторов на первый план выходит иносказательность произведений, символизм, чёрный юмор, обращение к проблемам современного мира и свойствам человеческой натуры. Сравнительный анализ японских *сё:то сё:то* и сверхкороткой прозы Роберта А. Блоха проводится впервые.

Ключевые слова: психологический хоррор, фэнтези, микропроза, аллюзии, Роберт А. Блох, Акагава Дзиро, Атода Такаси, Тамару Масатомо.

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The Influence of Robert A. Bloch's Micro Fiction on Short-Short Fantasy and Psychological Horror by Contemporary Japanese Writers: An Attempt of Comparative Analysis

L. Yu. Khronopulo

Abstract
Among the short-short stories by American authors translated by Japanese writer Tsuzuki Michio in the late 1950s — early 1960s, there were also extra-short stories by Robert Albert Bloch (1917–1994): detective stories, fantasy,

psychological horror. Japanese writers known by their experiments in the genres of extra-short mystic and detective stories, as well as in the genre of psychological horror, note that their creative activity was partly influenced by Robert A. Bloch: these are Atōda Takashi (b. 1935), Akagawa Jirō (b.1948), and Tamaru Masatomo (b. 1987). Some allusions can also be seen in contemporary short-shorts by less famous Japanese writers, for example, Aoyama Shōji (b. 1975).

This paper examines the topics, ideas, artistic devices, and psychologism of the Japanese micro fantasy and horror fiction, as well as its metaphorical meanings and the system of images. Allusions to Robert A. Bloch's micro fiction in the *shōto shōto* stories by contemporary Japanese authors are analyzed from a comparative perspective. Literary parallels to Robert A. Bloch's micro fiction can be found in the Tamaru Masatomo's collection of short-short stories *One Thousand Nights* (*Sen'ya ichiya*) published in 2016; in Akagawa Jirō's collections of short-short stories *The Walk* (*Sampomichi*, 2002), *The Dancing Man* (*Odoru otoko*, 1986), and *The Talkative Woman* (*Katte-ni shaberu onna*, 1986); in Atōda Takashi's collections of short-short stories *The Strange Day* (*Kimyōna hirusagari*, 1996), *The Eaten Man* (*Taberareta otoko,* 2008) and *The Cat Case* (*Neko-no jiken,* 2010). The influence of Robert A. Bloch's micro fiction can also be traced in one of Aoyama Shōji's short-shorts from the collection of stories *The Square of Shōto Shōto-1* (*Shōto shōto-no hiroba-1*, 2007).

Following Robert A. Bloch's methods and techniques, the Japanese writers in their short-short stories demonstrate symbolism, allegory, and black humor, as well as probing into certain social problems and human nature. For the first time, Japanese *shōto shōto* stories and Robert A. Bloch's micro fiction are investigated from a comparative perspective.

Keywords: psychological horror, fantasy, micro fiction, allusions, Robert A. Bloch, Akagawa Jirō, Atōda Takashi, Tamaru Masatomo.

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Introduction

According to Matsushima Sayuri (who quotes the literary scholar Ikushima Jirō), the short-short story was first introduced by the Japanese writer Tsuzuki Michio, who, in the late 1950s — the early 1960s, familiarized the Japanese reader with extra-short science fiction, micro fantasy, and detective stories by four American authors: Fredric William Brown, Stanley Bernard Ellin, Henry Slesar, and Robert Albert Bloch [Matsushima 2003, p. 98]. In American literature, three major specific features of a short-short story were formulated on the basis of the creative writing of these authors:

1) a well-rounded plot;
2) a fresh idea;
3) an unexpected turn of events with an unpredictable, surprising ending.

These specific features can be traced in Japanese *shōto shōto* as well. The Japanese extra-short story has a special name — *shōto shōto*, from English "short-short"; with regard to the plot, a *shōto shōto* story most often refers to the genres of science fiction, fantasy, or detective fiction. Robert Oberfirst explains that, since a short-short story must come to a quick, surprising conclusion, it can be easily achieved in science fiction, detective fiction, or fantasy stories, because the nature of these genres implies creating unusual situations [Oberfirst 1960]. Arthur Gordon agrees with a remark that action short-shorts are the easiest to write: the suspense pulls the reader along, and the man-against-death theme has been a favorite since story-tellers lived in caves. But at the same time, Gordon adds that short-short fantasy is hard to write because the author has to persuade the reader to believe, for the moment, something that he knows is impossible [Gordon 1958, p. 26]. Nonetheless, Stewart Beach disputes some traditional formulae of a short-short story: for example, he suggests that short-shorts with a traditionally surprise ending should be discarded as outdated, though there was a time when they were highly successful; when a situation is disguised during the entire length of the story for an unpredictable ending, such a fool-the-reader story brings no sense of satisfaction to the reader, because it is a cheat from beginning to end [Beach 1958, pp. 373–374]. Dwayne Decker agrees that the short-short no longer has to have the trick ending; "if a trick ending

springs up naturally, almost inevitably, in a short-short that's fine; but a trick ending that is strained for is no good and neither is the story" [Decker 1958, p. 369]. Another interesting aspect pointed out by Oberfirst is that a good short-short must contain a single main character and a single main plot problem or situation leading to a single emotional effect. The short-short must move very rapidly: there is no room for detailed reminiscing, or meditation on a log [Oberfirst 1958, p. 358].

The short-short is one of the most difficult forms of literary composition because it must embody all the technique and consummate skill required in short-story construction "and then some". The short-short requires tremendous — and skillful — condensation and repression. It must not be synopsized. It must contain all the inherent drama in short-story form within a restricted length. According to Oberfirst, a good plot alone will not sell a short-short, — it must have a new idea, or an old idea and an old image freshly presented [Oberfirst 1960, p. 212]. Robert A. Bloch drew on recognizable images of folklore, myths, and urban legends in his fantasy stories, but used them in a new way; it will be discussed how these principles and canons were followed by contemporary Japanese short-shorts' writers Akagawa Jirō, Atōda Takashi, Tamaru Masatomo. The writers themselves admit the influence of the American micro fiction on their *shōto shōto* stories [Tamaru 2015, pp. 7–12; Atōda 2001; Atōda 2008, p. 284].

As a short-short story is distinguished by its increased semantic fullness and symbolism, there are often stories that have some parabolic content; besides, most stories have an ironic and satirical shade, which brings them close to fables. Fred Chappell, an American author of short-short stories, notes that unease, whether humorous or sad, is the effect the short-short aims at. Even if the story achieves resolution, it cannot be a simple resolution and it should not give the impression of permanence. The self-containment of the short-short is incomplete; this form does not create a world in the way that a poem or a short story may do; rather, it inhabits a larger world which it must take pains to imply [Chappell et all 1986, p. 227]. This can be seen as a reason for the popularity of a *shōto shōto* story in Japan, given that short prosaic and poetic forms are traditional in Japanese artistic culture; in some of the minor prosaic and poetic forms that became traditional for Japanese literature, Zen Buddhism served as the basis for certain artistic devices. This determined the specific features of poetics which is characteristic of some original minor genre forms, such as *tanka*, *haiku*, or *zuihitsu*, and later — of a short-short story: the

succinctness of expression, the use of allegory and allusions, a hint, the subtext based on image associations and wordplay, a fleeting mood full of understatement. The emergence of the short-short story — *shōto shōto* — in Japanese literature marked a new period of development of Japanese minor genre forms [Swann, Tsuruta (ed.) 1982, *i–x*].

The Japanese short-short story is very diverse; with a strong element of grotesque, it combines comedy and tragedy and uses various means and techniques, the main one being satire, in order to make one muse about the problems of contemporary society. In the English-language tradition, the volume of a text is usually determined by the number of words and short-short stories are considered to be texts of between 200 and 1,500 words, in some cases 2,000 words [Shapard, Thomas 1996, p. 12], while Japanese literature lacks a common point of view regarding the volume of a literary work. Japanese researchers usually consider the size of such stories to be from four to fourteen pages [Satō, Murai, Tokosumi 2009, pp. 133–134]. Pat Frank, a short-short story writer, remarks that there are some critics who see no art in the short-short. He argues that this is a true art form, as distinctive as the one-act play; "a good short-short is so compact, so intricately woven, that not a single word can be added or subtracted without damaging the structure, mood, or impact of the story, or warping its characters" [Frank 1958, p. 11].

Quite remarkable is the fact that the growing popularity of the short-short story has recently been observed not only in Japan and the United States, but all over the world. This is caused by the process of miniaturization of prosaic genres, which is noted in contemporary literature of many countries. The emergence of the Japanese *shōto shōto* may be related to the dashing pace of life in modern Japan that gave rise to the need for laconic literary works with a thrilling plot capable of capturing the reader and holding his or her attention at least for a short time. L. V. Zhilina wrote that one may also notice that, in *shōto shōto*, the writers' attempt to "awaken" the readers and to make them think about the complexity of the world at least for a second [Zhilina].

Robert A. Bloch sold his first short stories to *"Weird Tales"* in the 1930s and, for a while, was a disciple of H.P. Lovecraft [Ashley 2002, p. 58]. In these early stories, introduced to the Japanese reader in the end of the 1950s, he drew upon the supernatural, and also branched into science fiction — expanding the genre boundaries of a short-short story, which was followed by both American and Japanese writers of short-shorts

[Pierce 1983]. Bloch is best known for his fantasy, horror, and mystery; in his works in these fields — consisting almost entirely of short and short-short stories — he emphasized social criticism with a particular concern for individuality, paradoxical perception, the outcast, and the existential concept that struggle gives meaning to life [Gunn (ed.) 1988, p. 56; Bloom 1995]. He wrote more than 400 short stories, often combining fantasy and horror with mystery and science fiction. Interestingly, many writers combine science fiction with mystery, detective, and horror [Murphy 1999]; for example, in a number of works by Akagawa Jirō and Atōda Takashi, both of whom are horror and fantasy writers of *shōto shōto*, it can be seen that they also double as science fiction and mystery authors. Other literary parallels to Bloch's micro fiction in Japanese writers' short-shorts can also be found — such as the structure of the stories; plots, topics and characters, psychologism, social criticism, paradox, and existential concepts.

Literary Parallels Between Robert A. Bloch's Micro Fiction and Akagawa Jirō's *Shōto Shōto*

Akagawa Jirō (born in 1948) is well-known in contemporary Japan for his detective fiction and adventure stories. It should be noted that Akagawa has continued and expanded the traditions of Hoshi Shin'ichi's (1926–1997) short-short story, but he has broken away from the science fiction genre choosing also other genres to implement the same *shōto shōto* form, its canons and ideas realized by Hoshi [Hoshi 1985]. Stories about miracles, meetings of common people with something or somebody unusual is what we see in medieval Japanese *otogizōshi*, and this is what was practiced by Hoshi who gave a new life to the short story in Japanese literature in the second half of the 20th century. With Akagawa, a short-short story also acquires another subject matter: this is not just fantasy, mystics, and miracles, but, to a considerable extent, the life of citizens presented as an anecdote, brief love stories, sketches from everyday life of common people: female secretaries, trade companies' employees, etc., who may or may not encounter something mysterious. In the stories of *"The Walk"* ("*Sampomichi*") short-short stories' collection by Akagawa (27 short stories of no more than 10 pages each), the borderline between the reality and the imagined world of the characters appears to be blurred: while daydreaming, Akagawa's character is taken captive by his imagination which can both amuse the dreamer and teach him something as

well as destroy him. The works of imagination are the uniting motif of the *"The Walk"* collection. In Hoshi's short-shorts the protagonist is usually cheated by the evil spirit, a wizard, an inventor, a miracle-working drug, etc., while Akagawa's characters get obsessed by their own imagination which, like a fantasy creature or aliens in Hoshi's stories, eventually take them for a ride and confuse them, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, help the characters to become aware of themselves and the real state of affairs. Similarly to the miraculous creatures and magic objects in Hoshi's stories, the imagination in Akagawa's *shōto shōto* performs the function of a teacher, tutor, and punisher when it becomes a reality setting the dreamer free and showing them the real state of things. Like Hoshi and Bloch, Akagawa uses characters from fairytales and legends in some *shōto shōto* — for example, in *"The Stranger in the Mirror"* ("*Kagami-no naka-no tanin*"), a story about vampires [Akagawa 2002, pp. 236–244] to be discussed further. Therefore, Akagawa appears to be close to Natsume Sōseki's short-shorts and to Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's novelettes; Natsume, in his cycle of short-short stories *"Ten Nights of Dreams"* ("*Yume jūya*", 1908), approaches the blurred borderline between the reality and fantasy where truth can be found; Akutagawa, in his semi fairy historical novelettes, depicts the contemporary world and its vices by means of mythological characters. The stories written in the style of magic realism in Akagawa's short-short works are not so frequent, and the mystic element is always used so as to reveal a psychological problem to the maximum. Many of Bloch's and Akagawa's stories combine comic and tragic elements, making one muse about the problems of the contemporary society; nonetheless, in the afterword to Akagawa's collection *"The Talkative Woman"*, Hoshi Shin'ichi pays attention also to the extra-short stories written just for fun, as an entertainment [Akagawa 1986a, p. 220].

Akagawa's *"The Stranger in the Mirror"* (*Kagami-no naka-no tanin*) is a story about three schoolgirls who never actually realized they were vampires before one night, when, only with the help of their imagination, seeking for new impressions, they occasionally find out their true nature, which long remained hidden. The most tender, weak, and modest girl struggles with the new entity inside her; on the contrary, one of her friends, having become a vampire, does not resist and reveals her worst qualities, while another one is strong enough to reason and reflect on what is happening to the three of them and tries to protect her weak friend from the newly born aggressive creature who used to be their friend before being

reborn. The same thing happens in Bloch's *"The Cloak"* story [Bloch 1995, pp. 32–43], where a man going to a costume party buys the cloak which gradually reveals his true nature as a vampire, scaring and, at the same time, amusing the protagonist. He tries to explore his new nature just like the principal character of Akagawa's *"The Stranger in the Mirror"* and is doing his best to gain control over his new vicious desires — while a vampire woman he meets at the party and falls in love with does not try to resist and attacks him. Both Akagawa and Bloch draw on an image of a vampire in their short-shorts; but, according to one of the important canons of micro fiction, they made this old image function in a new way, depicting human in a constant struggle with self and symbolizing the long-suppressed subconscious emotions and fears that bring out the worst parts of a person who allows them to take over — or, on the contrary, may suppress them by a force of will and with the help of self-reflection.

After Hoshi Shin'ichi's death in 1997, it is detective fiction, fantasy, and horror that became most popular in the *shōto shōto* form of both Akagawa Jirō and another famous follower of Hoshi — Atōda Takashi, to be discussed later on. In 1986, two collections of Akagawa's short-short stories were published — *"The Dancing Man"* ("*Odoru otoko*") and *"The Talkative Woman"* ("*Katte ni shaberu onna*"); most stories of the former do not exceed four or five pages, while, in the latter, the average size of a story is 12 pages. Most stories of *"The Dancing Man"* collection are crime fiction with elements of horror, black humor, grotesque, and irony. For example, in *"The Legacy"* ("*Isan*") story [Akagawa 1986b, pp. 17–20] of *"The Dancing Man"* collection by Akagawa, the protagonist was so proud and independent that he did not want "to prostrate" himself before his superiors to obtain leave; as a result, he worked himself to extreme exhaustion, both nervous and physical, and turned into a maniac: he started killing his relatives one after another when he wanted to have some rest because, in such cases, the employee in whose family there had been a disaster was entitled to a certain number of legitimate days-off (the closer the relationship of the victim, the more days off were given). This story satirizes both the proverbial workaholism of the Japanese and the traditional fear and awe of the superior reduced to an absurdity and grotesquely presented: it was easier for the hero to kill his relatives than to ask the superior for help. The pride is also presented in a grotesque manner: transformed into pridefulness, it drives the man crazy when he becomes a serial killer.

In 1943, Bloch wrote *"Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper"* [Bloch 1995, pp. 177–189], about the reincarnation of the infamous Victorian psychopath in response to modern society's problems and violent tendencies which create maniacs. In this story, Jack the Ripper is reborn and roams the streets of present-day Chicago; but, this time, his killings are necromantic sacrifices done to sustain his youth. The story blended an acute inquiry into the criminal mind with deft social criticism and was recognized as an instant classic. Bloch used a technique of allowing the reader to see the action through the mind of the maniac; the same technique, as well as social criticism, was used in Akagawa's *"The Legacy"*.

The two maniacs meet in Bloch's short-short horror story *"A Toy for Juliette"* [Bloch 1995, pp. 196–200], when a young sadistic nymphomaniac Juliette receives new "present" — Jack the Ripper — from her psychopathic grandfather, a time-traveler in a post-apocalyptic world, who randomly abducts people with his time machine from various moments in history for his granddaughter so that she could torture and kill the "toys" in her sexual games. The last "toy" he gives her, however, turns out to be Jack the Ripper. In this case, we can see the combination of science fiction and horror, which is often characteristic of a short-short story, as was noted in the Introduction. Another Bloch's story about a maniac from the past who travels to the contemporary world is *"Slave of the Flames"*, written in 1938 [Bloch 1987, pp. 138–146]: the Roman emperor Nero mysteriously arrives in Chicago in 1871 to burn it, as he did with Rome in July AD 64. In addition, Akagawa's *"The Boy from Leonding"* (*Reondingu-no shōnen*) [Akagawa 1986a, pp. 16–24] also combines science fiction and psychological horror, when a researcher travels in time to the end of the nineteenth century and saves an unknown drowning boy who later appears to be Adolf Hitler as a child. Bloch's and Akagawa's horror stories merged with science fiction pessimistically demonstrate the eternal evil traveling through centuries, carrying the idea that, no matter what is done, evil cannot be defeated, and the world cannot change for the better. As can be seen, the two writers are united by the fact that, in their short-short stories, they both succeed in showing human vices and depicting the problems of the contemporary world.

In fact, some researchers indicate that the genres of psychological horror and fantasy have become so popular with both American and Japanese short-shorts because, involving intertextuality, they used superb imagery and symbolism, could be read as an allegory, and seemed to be

the appropriate means to explore the chain of evil and violence in the post-war and contemporary society [Apter 1982, pp. 1–11; Nakamura 2015, pp. 131–132; Hutcheon 1988, pp. 124–140]. This may be regarded as one of the reasons why, in short-shorts, we can see the revived images of Hitler, Nero, Jack the Ripper, etc. as eternal evil brought to the modern and contemporary urban environment — because the evil never gives up and, as a legacy from the past, is a part of human nature; or the society with its rules and restrictions can produce new maniacs, like in Akagawa's "The Legacy" — and, in this case, the "legacy" can be regarded from the perspective of the psychological problems and unfairness inherited from the past experience. Bloch, while pointing out that fiction writers in every genre should pay more attention to social issues than to individual psychological dynamics, explained this phenomenon: "In the beginning my work was almost entirely in the field of fantasy, where the violent element was openly and obviously a product of imagination… The mass violence of World War II caused me to examine violence at its source — on the individual level. Still unwilling or unable to cope with its present reality, I retreated into history and recreated, as a prototype of apparently senseless violence, the infamously famous mass murderer who styled himself, *"Yours Truly, Jack the Ripper"*… Since that time, while still employing science fiction, fantasy and horror for satire and social criticism, I devoted many of my subsequent short stories to a direct examination of violence in our society… For the violence has come to its own now; the violence I examined, and at times projected and predicted, has become today's commonplace and accepted reality. This, to me, is far more terrifying than anything I could possibly imagine… I realized, as a result of what went on during World War II and of reading the more widely disseminated work in psychology, that the real horror is not in the shadows, but in that twisted world inside our own skulls" [Szumskyj 2009, p. 136, 154].

The Short-Short Stories by Atōda Takashi, Tamaru Masatomo, Aoyama Shōji, and Robert A. Bloch: Literary Intersections

Atōda Takashi (born in 1935) is mainly writing in the style of magic realism. Atōda has written action-packed or comic short-short stories continuing the traditions of Hoshi Shin'ichi, a number of mystic and psychological thrillers, and a series of essays. In addition, after the death

of Hoshi, since the late 1990s, Atōda has headed the annual All-Japan Literary Competition for authors of short-short stories, with collections of the best works published according to the results of the competition; Atōda has been the permanent chief editor of these collections for more than 20 years [Atōda 2001]. He has published four popular collections of *shōto shōto*: *"The Strange Day"* ("*Kimyōna hirusagari*", 1996), *"The Eaten Man"* ("*Taberareta otoko*", 2008), *"The Last Message"* ("*Saigo-no messēji*", 2009), and *"The Cat Case"* ("*Neko-no jiken*", 2010). In these collections, Atōda's element of mystics is much stronger than that in Akagawa's short stories; the characters often meet otherworldly forces: devils, ghosts of the dead people, mermaids; the action may be presented in the form of a fairytale with a plot taking place in a magic kingdom, or in the form of a sort of a fable. The mystics may quite unexpectedly emerge in the life of the characters far from witchcraft and the world of magic. Not all of Atōda's *shōto shōto* carry a philosophical idea; some mystic stories are entertaining horror stories, their plots coming from folklore or urban legends.

"The Hair" ("*Kami*") horror *shōto shōto* [Atōda 1996, pp. 22–28] may contain an allusion to Bloch's horror story written in 1937, *"The Black Kiss"* [Bloch 1987, pp. 227–242]. *"The Hair"* is about a woman who committed suicide because of her unhappy love, but, having drowned, she turned into an evil creature living under the sea. The female character knew she was terminally ill but did not tell her beloved about that and persuaded him to commit suicide allegedly because of the impossibility of being together (their families were against their marriage). The man happens to avoid death through drowning, but he still experiences pangs of guilt that he survived; and, twenty years later, the dead woman comes up for her beloved from the sea bottom as a vindictive ghost, entangles him with her long hair, and fulfills her plan to deliver him to the afterlife. The same thing happens with the principal character of Bloch's *"The Black Kiss"* short story, who is taken to the afterlife on the bottom of the sea by a vindictive woman ghost lusting for his love. Both writers depict lethal love as a destructive feeling.

Psychological horror and fantasy are the favorite genres of Atōda's *shōto shōto*. Atōda's characters are trade company employees, office workers, housewives, students; they unwittingly go beyond the limits of the common world and find themselves in transcendental reality, in the grip of myths and fairytales, often on the verge of insanity as it is not clear which is more illusory: their everyday life or the mystical experience. In this respect,

Atōda's *shōto shōto* approach micro fiction by Akagawa and Bloch, with imagination as one of the main plots of their short-short stories. In *"The Pisces Woman"* ("*Uoza no onna*") [Atōda 1996, pp. 69–77], a sterile man gradually starts going mad hearing constant assurances of his young wife that they will still have a child, "a big-eyed boy". The imagination of the man whose psyche is already broken after the death of his first wife in a car accident brings up to his mind an ugly "big-eyed" creature with a thousand little eyes that will become his son, and the man goes out of his mind. The same thing happens with the protagonists of Bloch's *"The Doll"* [Bloch 1987, pp. 52–63] and *"Enoch"* [Bloch 1995, pp. 74–84] short-short stories: the little evil creature — it's unclear whether imaginary or real — starts growing on or inside the character's body, gradually gaining more and more control over his mind and making him lose his sanity. Imagination and reality have a blurred borderline in some of Atōda's and Bloch's short-short stories: the protagonist can often hardly understand where the imagination and where the real life are, engaging in an unequal battle with his subconscious.

The human nature, a man striving for happiness and never content enough with what he has, is a source of the plots of Robert A. Bloch's *"That Hell-Bound Train"* [Bloch 1995, pp. 98–108], Atōda Takashi's *"The Horror Story"* ("*Kowai hanashi*") [Atōda 2010, pp. 255–258], and Aoyama Shōji's *"The Bottle"* ("*Bin*") [Aoyama 2007]. Martin, the protagonist of *"That Hell-Bound Train"*, is a young hobo with a fondness for trains. One night, as he is considering whether to abandon crime, a large unmarked black train pulls up beside him. The train conductor (presumably the devil) offers Martin anything he wants, in return for which he will "ride that Hell-Bound Train" when he dies. Martin requests the power to stop time, which he plans to use at the happiest time of his life. The conductor accedes to this request; however, over the years that follow, Martin reaches welfare, experiences love, and enjoys being a father etc., — but discovers that he cannot choose which moment is his happiest. In the end, he dies, never having stopped time, and indeed boards the train which takes souls to hell. However, he likes the sinful look of the passengers and chooses to stop time then and there. The train never reaches the depot and Martin, now the brakeman, finally finds happiness — which appears to be not the achieved result, but a process toward one's final destination. The same idea underlies the plot of Aoyama's *"The Bottle"*: the protagonist is waiting his whole life for

the moment to open the bottle with a genie inside — but is motivating himself to wait and tries to achieve welfare and to cope with problems without the help of the magic creature who is ready to fulfil his wishes; at the end of his life, the man just throws the bottle back to the sea without having chosen the appropriate moment to use the genie's power. Atōda deals with a similar plot in a different way: the main character of his *"The Horror Story"* manages to find the happiest moment of his lifetime he wants to stop in order to enjoy it forever; he dedicates his life to inventing a time machine and travels back to the past to reunite with his beloved one — but, due to the error in the time machine's mechanisms, he is brought to the unhappiest moment a few minutes before the encounter with the love of his life and is stuck in this most painful moment to suffer forever. These three short-shorts concentrate on the concept of happiness and the way humans act to achieve it, demonstrating that happiness is a fragile illusion that does not last long; it either cannot be achieved, or can bring satisfaction only in the process of striving for it — but not in the final result.

In Tamaru Masatomo's (born in 1987) *shōto shōto*, we find well-known creatures from the Japanese and other countries' legends, folk tales etc.; such images usually function in his extra-short stories in the metaphorical sense. Bloch's *"Sweets to the Sweet"* [Bloch 1995, pp. 87–93] horror short-short story and Tamaru's fantasy *shōto shōto "Saving the Mermaid"* ("*Ningyō sukui*") [Tamaru 2016, pp. 35–48] are metaphorically examining family issues that reflect on the children's future lives and their interactions with other people. Bloch's *"Sweets to the Sweet"* portrays a family conflict when a father suspects his little daughter Irma of being a witch; a loving, nice, and kind girl in the beginning, she gets more and more angry because father regularly punishes her without any grounds — and she turns into a wicked witch, full of hatred and killing people, just like her father had long inspired her. This story depicts a detrimental influence of the unfair parents on their children capable of ruining not only a child's life, but also the lives of other people interacting with a traumatized child.

The same thing happens in Tamaru's story *"Saving the Mermaid"*. The protagonist took part in a fair attraction at a Shintō shrine for catching tiny mermaids; having caught one of the size of an aquarium fish, he took it to his home and raised it there until the mermaid became an adult and reached the standard parameters of a young girl. At the same time, it was obvious that the mermaid was fixated on one and the same situation: as a child, she

was greatly impressed by the traditional Shintō festival, when, according to an ancient ritual, palanquins were carried out, — and suddenly they crashed into the crowd, crushing a large number of people. The young mermaid, observing this as a child, connected the accident with the singing that sounded on the occasion of the holiday at the temple. When the mermaid grew up, the man realized that he could not cope with her, and took her to her natural habitat — to the sea, where he released his foster-daughter, believing that he was doing good by saving her. However, he did not take into account the serious impact that the event that had frightened her in her childhood had on the mermaid's psyche: as soon as she found herself in the sea, she began to subconsciously reproduce the situation again and again, singing songs and watching ships and other vessels crash into stones and shatter. Thus, the siren's thirst to kill, her murderous instincts, like that of Lorelei, acquire a metaphorical interpretation in Tamaru's story: it is easy to guess in the fate of a mermaid the fate of many people who, having experienced a traumatic situation in childhood and matured, cannot tear themselves away from the past; they subconsciously recreate a dangerous situation that once knocked them down, and turn from a victim into an offender, whose trauma grows with them, destroying the lives of innocent people. At the same time, the image of the mermaid's foster-father, who took care of her since childhood, can be interpreted as the image of a parent who did not bother to figure out what was happening with the child and released the traumatized child into the world, to the misfortune of the people who have to interact with them.

Tamaru's story *"The Night the Lion Dances"* (*Shishi mai-no yoru*) [Tamaru 2016, pp. 159–170] is dedicated to the traditional Japanese holiday — the lion dance, which is held once a year near a Shintō shrine: actors in masks and lion costumes dance a frantic ritual dance. During one of these holidays, the protagonist in his youth witnessed how the dancer killed the audience; no one was found under the lion's costume, and the case was closed for lack of evidence. The young man began to independently investigate what had happened and came to the supernatural version, having become acquainted with an ancient Indian legend: according to the legend, once lions of a certain breed ate people, but then began to absorb evil spirits, thus taking on the role of defenders of man. However, their passion for human blood still did not subside, and, since then, some peoples have sacrificed people to lions in order to appease their ferocious patrons. The young man believes that, on that fateful night, the

spirit of a lion-devourer of evil spirits moved into the dancer. When, after a few years, the hero marries, the same thing happens to his wife one day: he pays attention to her thorough preparation for the lion dance at the holiday, begins to suspect her of possession and realizes in fear that the spirit of the lion has taken possession of his wife and now the death is inevitable, but the man can do nothing to stop her. In this short-short story one can see an appeal to the hidden negative qualities of a person, in this case, a spouse who showed her "animal face" only after they got married. The rampage of the spouse as a furious lioness attacking her victim can be seen as an allegory of a family scandal, when the rage of a loved one is so frightening that the thoughts of madness involuntarily come to mind. *"The Night the Lion Dances"* symbolizes the dark moment in one's family life when the worst, "animal" qualities reveal themselves.

Family life is allegorically depicted in the same way in two short-shorts by Bloch: *"The Bogey Man Will Get You"*, written in 1946 [Bloch 1987, pp. 23–28] and *"The Animal Fair"*, written in 1971 [Bloch 1995, pp. 143–153]. The protagonist of *"The Animal Fair"* tells a scary story about a girl trained by some wild tribe to become a lioness, revealing the wild nature inside human being: "She's inside this lion skin… all alone in the dark, smelling that damn lion smell… all she can do is whine and growl... You know what happens to someone like that? They go crazy. And after a while they get to believing they really are a lion. The next step is for the witch doctor to take them out and train them to kill" [Bloch 1987, pp. 151–152]. This is a metaphorical story about betrayal and cruelty of the closest and most trusted ones, that are able to embitter and, allegorically, to turn a human into "an animal". *"The Bogey Man Will Get You"* is also a story about the true essence of the loved one which stays hidden but can be revealed under some circumstances: the boyfriend of the main female character turns out to be a werewolf.

It is important to note that Atōda, Tamaru, and Bloch, being masters of the *social* as the dimension of horror and madness, portray the deranged and dangerous individual. The stories analyzed above display a corruption of human relationship, either metaphorically or straightly: love gone sour, families destroying their members; the characters from the short-shorts by the three writers, *"Sweets to the Sweet"*, *"Enoch"*, *"The Doll"*, *"The Hair"*, *"The Pisces Woman"*, *"Saving the Mermaid"*, *"The Night the Lion Dances"*, grow insane internalizing the madness of the family, distilling it to a lethal essence. The theme of damaged family relationship runs

through the key short-shorts of the three authors who portray the family as a microcosm of society, and the individual as a microcosm of the family. Conflict and ambivalence run deeply through the writers' perception of the human condition. This sense of human nature as something divided and unstable is what gives a short-short horror fiction its nervous edge and resonance.

Conclusion

The Japanese *shōto shōto* have borrowed a number of traditions from the American short-short form; the mandatory principles, i.e., an original idea, a completed plot, an unpredictable turn of events, and an unexpected ending, were used in Bloch's horror and fantasy short-shorts, as well as by Japanese writers who followed this trend in Japan. Bloch, Akagawa, Atōda, and Tamaru use grotesque technique, skillfully combining tragedy and comedy in their short-short stories, which enables them to show human vices and raise the problems of contemporary society. Bloch, explaining the importance of black humor and grotesque for horror and fantasy stories, as well as the importance of a comedy element for short-shorts, summed up his ideas that, as can be seen, were followed by Japanese writers of *shōto shōto*: "Comedy to me, as I have often remarked, is skin to horror in that both are opposite sides of the same coin… since both deal with the grotesque and unexpected, but in such a fashion as to provoke two entirely different reactions… Comedy is based on fantasy; comedy is fantasy usually… But we don't generally regard it as fantasy because it's designed to promote laughter rather than tension or fear. Again, the element of catharsis is common to both. Once that tension is relaxed in fantasy or is exploded by the resolution of a comic incident with laughter, we have obtained a catharsis" [Szumskyj 2009, p. 66].As for characters, most, if not all, short-shorts by Bloch, Akagawa, Atōda, and Tamaru involve damaged people or creatures. They are abandoned by their world, left to find solace in unsavory redemption. Abnormality attracts its own, and so humanity's refuse finds value in the darker corridors of exploration. The protagonists of short-shorts written by Bloch and Japanese writers find comfort and delusional grandeur in satanic ritual and supernatural depravity (Juliette in Bloch's *"A Toy for Juliette"*, reborn Nero in *"Slave of the Flames"*, the main character of *"The Cloak"* and his beloved one, the protagonist of *"That Hell-Bound Train"*, Akagawa's young vampires in *"The Stranger in*

the Mirror", the insane employee in *"The Legacy"*, the foster-father of the mermaid in Tamaru's *"Saving the Mermaid"*, the female character of *"The Night the Lion Dances"*, Atōda's inventor from *"The Horror Story"*, etc.). Often, their rebellious rage threatens the very balance of sanity and reason; their decadence and deformity threaten to overcome the waking world, like night consumes the sun.

This research aimed at tracing what Japanese short-short horror and fantasy stories have borrowed from the American micro fiction. Since there are very few works dedicated to the Japanese short-short story, its American origins appear to be almost disregarded, and the phenomenon has been studied predominantly from the viewpoint of the literary culture of the East. The present research aimed to fill this gap and to examine the literary parallels to the American micro fiction in *shōto shōto*; yet a detailed comparative investigation from a variety of perspectives is still of great importance both for the history and the theory of Japanese modern and postmodern literature, as well as for other disciplines in the humanities studying literary micro forms. The integrated and comparative analysis encompassing both historical and contemporary perspectives of the Japanese short-short story with an emphasis on intertextuality — shaping of a text's meaning by another text — is considered interesting and relevant. The represented results of the analysis show in what aspects Robert A. Bloch influenced the origination and formation of fantasy and psychological horror of the authors of the short-short stories in Japanese literature. This influence includes the textual interactions in their social, literary, and cultural contexts, artistic devices and techniques used in short-short stories. The interconnection of American and Japanese micro fiction was examined from a comparative perspective, revealing also social and psychological problems underlying the plot of such stories.

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