

The Theme and Structure in *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*: The Hero's Pursuit of True Strength

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“If I wasn’t hard, I wouldn’t be alive. If I couldn’t ever be gentle, I wouldn’t deserve to be alive.” – Philip Marlowe in *Playback* (Chandler 58)

INTRODUCTION

Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, a Japanese manga series written and illustrated by Koyoharu GOTOUGE, was serialized in Shueisha’s popular comic magazine, *Weekly Shonen Jump* from February 2016 to May 2020. The series consists of 23 comic books with 205 chapters. Now, it has become one of the best-selling manga series of all time. Thanks to the series’ success, “A 26-episode anime television series adaptation” produced by Ufotable aired in Japan from April to September 2019. In 2020 a movie has been released with the title: *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train*. It has become the highest-grossing anime film so far. It has set smashing box office records—the fastest film in Japanese cinema history to make over \$300 million.¹

The manga series has increased sales over time, with cumulative sales for the 23 comic books. The manga series, now a global hit, has been translated into 14 languages and is available in 33 countries and regions, according to publisher Shueisha Inc.

The TV series, dubbed in eight languages and subtitled in 13, is also being streamed online in about 110 countries, Aniplex said. It won Anime of the Year in an annual awards contest presented by U.S. anime streaming service Crunchyroll in February.²

Why so popular? As the story is set in pre-modern Japanese society during Taisho period (1912-26) when Japan is supposed to be infested by human-devouring demons or “oni,”³ is it a nostalgia for the

¹ Alex Dudok de Wit, “‘Demon Slayer’ Movie On Verge Of Topping Japan’s All-Time Box Office; Passes \$300M Globally.” (Dec. 14. 2020)

² KYODO NEWS. ‘Anime “Demon Slayer” rakes in 10 bil. yen in 10 days, breaks record’ (Oct 26, 2020).

³ “Oni” is a kind of demon in Japanese folklore. The demons that appear in *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (hereinafter referred to as *Kimetsu*) are a race of monstrous, supernatural, and malevolent beings and one of the main antagonists of the series. They were originally human beings, but they have been transformed by Muzan KIBUTSUJI, the ancestor and the king of the demons born over a thousand years ago. The demons kill and eat humans to maintain their bodies and possess supernatural abilities such as super strength, magic and regeneration. Since the demons are immortal, they can regenerate their bodies even if they are destroyed. To kill the demons, one needs to either expose them to the sun until they vaporize. Sunlight is the greatest threat to nearly all demons, as it ignites their cells, severely limits their regeneration, and fatally burns them to ashes. Or one needs to decapitate them with a special sword called the Nichirin Blade (lit. “Sunflower

bygone days? Part of *Kimetsu*'s success lies in its compelling storyline: an old-fashioned tale of family ties with its focus on brothers and sisters. As its title *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba* (lit. "Demon Slayer: Blade of Demon Destruction") suggests, the story centers on the hero's fight against human-eating demons to avenge the slaughter of his family. Tanjiro KAMADO, the hero of the series, joins a band of demon fighters, the Demon Slayer Corps,⁴ a group of warriors committed to wiping out all the demons.

Tanjiro, however, is not a luster after power like Luffy⁵ or Goku.⁶ He is not completely crazed by his desire for revenge like, for example, Captain Ahab or Heathcliff, either. Tanjiro's purpose in life is just to bring his demonized sister back into being a normal person. Unlike Luffy or Goku, Tanjiro is not ambitious but just an ordinary boy. He happens to be destined to be a demon slayer for his sister who has been transformed into a demon. His sole purpose in life is to regain family ties and the universal yearning for a simple normal lifestyle, which was taken for granted until the sudden appearance of disasters such as the demonic forces in the world.

Tanjiro's dangerous journey in life starts with his wish to bring his half-demonized sister back into being a human. How can he make it? The whole series is the story about the hero's acquisition of power to realize his wish: the pursuit of strength. How does the author develop the theme of the pursuit of strength? We shall see the author's technique handling it in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 1. TANJIRO & NEZUKO: A Bond between Brother and Sister

Humans have endlessly witnessed the fact that evil prospers and good perishes from time immortal, so it is understandable that private revenge has been one very popular subject. As a matter of fact, there are a great deal of revenge stories in literature, such as *Hamlet*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Moby-Dick*, and *Les Misérables* to mention but a few. However, revenge is never sweet. Because of its brutality and violence, the revenge drama turns the audience off, as Francis Bacon wrote, "Revenge is a kind of wild justice" (Bacon 18). It may be the fate of the revenge drama, as it were, to produce an extremely awkward atmosphere. For a breakthrough the author of *Kimetsu* adds the story of brother-sister relationship to the revenge story.

When one opens the series, the first thing that catches his/her eyes is the picture of a young boy carrying a visibly-wounded, unconscious girl through a snowy path on his back. The series opens with this scene. [Fig.1] This first page is the epigraph of *Kimetsu*, as it were, for it represents the subject of

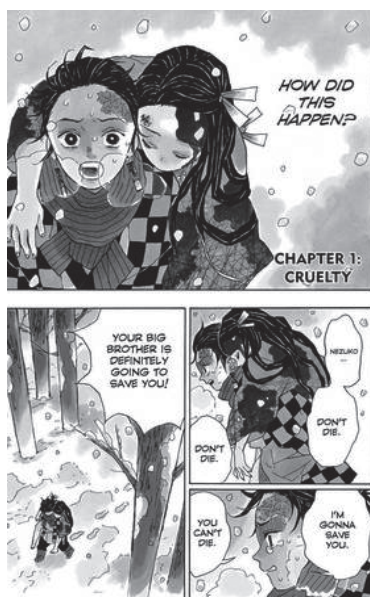
sword"), the only weapon that can defeat demons. It is a special sword which is forged from a unique ore that constantly absorbs sunlight.

⁴ The Demon Slayer Corps is an organization that has existed since ancient times, dedicating its existence to protecting humanity from demons. There are hundreds of demon slayers within the organization, however they are not officially recognized by the government. That is to say, the Demon Slayer Corps is a secret society that have been waging a secret war against demons for centuries.

⁵ Monkey D. Luffy is the main protagonist of *One Piece*, another Japanese manga series by Eiichiro ODA. Luffy is the founder and captain of the increasingly infamous and powerful Straw Hat Pirates, as well as one of its top fighters. His lifelong dream is to become the Pirate King by finding the legendary treasure left behind by the late Gol D. Roger. He believes that being Pirate King means having the most freedom in the world.

⁶ Son Goku is the main protagonist of the *Dragon Ball* manga series created by Akira TORIYAMA. Goku is a Saiyan male originally sent to destroy Earth as an infant. Goku wants to be the strongest man in the world.

the whole series, a picture which represents the bond between a brother and his sister. Tanjiro struggles frantically through the snow and begs her to stay alive, vowing he would save her. “How this happen? Nezuko. Don’t die. Don’t die. I’m gonna save you. You can’t die. Your big brother is definitely going to save you.” (I.1)⁷



[Fig.1]

Tanjiro believes in what is left of Nezuko’s humanity, so he encourages her to do her best to hold the demon blood back. “Nezuko! Hold on Nezuko! Fight it! Fight for your life! Be strong! Don’t turn into a demon! You can do it.” (I.1)⁸ Actually, thanks to her resilient mental strength, Nezuko has not lost her human emotions. Unlike other demons, Nezuko fights off her urge to be a demon and carries Tanjiro through the crisis.

However, Tanjiro has not learned yet that he needs strength to realize his wish. The story of *Kimetsu* begins with his awakening of strength. The book cover of the volume 1 [Fig. 2] shows Tanjiro under extremely harsh condition: he has to guard his demonized sister by himself. The book cover of the volume 23 [Fig. 3] shows Nezuko’s eventual return as a human: she is no longer a demon with bamboo in her mouth. Instead, her smile suggests that *Kimetsu* is a story that winds up with a happy ending. It starts out rough, but it all ends well.

⁷ For the text I have used *Demons Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba, Shonen Jump Edition*. Story and Art by Koyoharu Gotouge. Translated by John Werry. Published by VIZ Media, LLC, 2018-2021. English version of the penultimate vol. 22 and final vol. 23 of the *Kimetsu* manga series is to be published on June 1, 2021 and August 3, 2021 respectively. I have put in parentheses after each quotation the book number in Roman numerals, followed by the chapter number in Arabic, as the page number is not given in the text.

⁸ In hindsight, what Tanjiro’s says to Nezuko as the words of encouragement in the beginning of the series turns out to be the author’s final message of the whole series to the general reader in the present age.



[Fig. 2]



[Fig. 3]

By Nezuko's return as a human, Tanjiro eventually realizes his wish: "I'll make her human again!" though it is declared by TOMIOKA that "A human who becomes a demon cannot go back" (I.1). By acquiring strength Tanjiro realizes his wish to recover his sister's humanity. In the process of his acquisition of strength Tanjiro undergoes trials and tribulations. *Kimetsu* is a testament to the deeds of love and sacrifice necessary to seek after true strength.

CHAPTER 2. TOMIOKA: Tanjiro's Initiation into Strength

Tanjiro's story begins with his wish to bring his half-demonized Nezuko back into a human. His life changes when he comes across a demon slayer. When Tanjiro hurriedly carries Nezuko on his back to the doctor, a mysterious swordsman suddenly appears out of nowhere and tries to strike at her. He is Giyu TOMIOKA, the Water Hashira. In other words, Tanjiro's pursuit of strength starts with encounters with Giyu TOMIOKA. He is the first Hashira⁹ in the Demon Slayer Corps with whom Tanjiro encounters. He turns out to be a man with a definite purpose: his job is to slay every demon he finds, so he tries to decapitate the demonized Nezuko. However, Tanjiro cannot risk losing Nezuko, for she is the only survivor of the family left behind for him. For Tanjiro, to protect Nezuko means to retain a person with a strong sense of family ties knitted by bonds of mutual love. Nezuko is a synonym for a family, so Tanjiro appeals to what is left of his sister's humanity.

⁹ There are 10 ranks in the Demon Slayer Corps, and the nine Hashira are high-ranking members. The Hashira is a title given only to the best of the best in the demon-slaying business. They are the strongest: the nine most powerful combatants in the Demon Slayer Corps. As such, they are the organization's top-ranking, most elite soldiers who each serve a pivotal role in the war against Muzan KIBUTSUJI and his demonic forces.

Tanjiro's encounter with TOMIOKA becomes the turning point in his life, for it turns out to be Tanjiro's initiation into strength. Tanjiro recognizes his needs to acquire strength to realize his wish among other things. Therefore, Tanjiro's encounters with TOMIOKA in the first chapter serves as a prelude to the succeeding chapters in which Tanjiro acquire true strength. By accepting TOMIOKA's invitation to be strong, Tanjiro's story of pursuit of strength starts, to seek a cure for Nezuko's demon curse and avenge the death of the rest of his family. This pursuit of strength is akin to pursuing excellence.

Tanjiro sets out on a dangerous journey to save his sister and ultimately the world from the demonic forces. When TOMIOKA tries to kill the demonized Nezuko, Tanjiro, whining and begging, frantically begs the demon slayer to leave her alone, vowing he would cure her. In front of the strong swordsman who is eager to kill his sister, Tanjiro can do nothing but wail and beg for his sister's life, as he has no strength to fight. In the worst-case scenario he has to lose both life and dignity. Then, TOMIOKA spits out the famous words, in John Werry's translation: "Never leave yourself so defenseless in front of an enemy!" (I.1)¹⁰ Though TOMIOKA is a man of few words as himself admits: "I hate talking" (XVII.148), he gets very emotional and talkative. In his perspective Tanjiro's spineless whimpering is nothing but a laughing matter. In spite of himself, TOMIOKA lays bare his heart. "Stop bowing so pitifully!" (I.1) As Tanjiro begs, TOMIOKA commands him to BE STRONG and fight for what he wants. Can he turn his sister back into a human? Then, answering to Tanjiro's pathetic cry asking for mercy, TOMIOKA screams at Tanjiro not to let others take control of life and death.

"Never leave yourself so defenseless in front of an enemy. Stop bowing so pitifully! If that worked, your family would still be alive! How can a weakling like you, who bows and down when it's time to fight and, to kill or be killed. How can such a man cure his little sister? Or even find his enemy? If you want something, you must fight for it! The meek have no power and no options! The strong will crush them in every way! Demons might know how to cure your little sister. But no demon will respect your whining and begging!" (I.1)

TOMIOKA says that the weak have neither rights nor choices. The only way is to be relentlessly strong. This is the harsh reality. These words touch Tanjiro's heartstrings and become his initiation into strength. Then, TOMIOKA reveals his inner voice to the reader in the form of interior monologue.

"Don't cry. Don't despair. Those things will do you no good. Your family is dead and your sister has become a demon. Your heart is crushed. I know your pain, how you must want to cry out. If I'd come half a day sooner, your family might have survived. But there is no turning back time. Fill your heart with anger. Strong, pure anger that gives no quarter. Anger that becomes the unwavering force that drives your limbs. Weakness and empty promises cannot protect your sister or find her a cure. And they certainly cannot avenge your family." (I.1)

¹⁰ The literal translation of the original Japanese (Seisatsuyodatsunoken o tanin ni nigira seru na!) can be put into "Don't let others take the power of life and death!" However, in the original context, the line should be put into "Don't ever allow anyone to murder your family!" or "Don't ever give others a chance to kill your sister!" In either cases, what TOMIOKA means is that Tanjiro should not throw away his life and his family's. One translation, "Don't ever give others a chance to murder you!" or "Don't give your enemies the chance to kill you!" is an apt translation. In any case, John Werry's translation does not convey the subtle psychological nuance of the original Japanese.

In this way, the issue of strength is set as the core theme of the series at the beginning of *Kimetsu*. Eventually, TOMIOKA becomes Tanjiro's hero. Tanjiro goes on gathering strength step by step, and his fighting techniques have been remarkably elaborated. Later in the series, when Tanjiro combats AKAZA, Upper Rank 3, at the Infinity Castle, TOMIOKA remembers the first day when he met Tanjiro.

“Tanjiro has really developed his techniques. It would not be an overstatement to say that your ability is equal to a Hashira's. You do this well against an Upper-Rank Kizuki. That snowy day all you could do was hang your head in despair. You wailed and begged for your sister's life. But now you can fight. Now you won't lose either life or dignity.” (XVII.147)

Tanjiro goes through his initiation into strength by the encounter with TOMIOKA. Tanjiro comes to realize the necessity of strength to achieve his wish. Thus, the theme of *Kimetsu*, the pursuit of strength, is already unveiled in the first chapter of the whole series. Furthermore, the whole series revolves around the meaning of “strength,” and how various characters handle it.

CHAPTER 3. RENGOKU: The Guide to True Strength

Kyojuro RENGOKU is another character who has influence on the formation of Tanjiro's character and his fighting spirit. He is another Hashira with a define purpose in life. A deep sense of mission is his *raison d'être*. Through the encounter with RENGOKU, Tanjiro comes to be aware of a man who finds a definite purpose in life so as to make his life worth living.

Soon after ENMU, the Lower Rank 1 of the Twelve Kizuki,¹¹ is unceremoniously defeated, a mysterious figure appears out of nowhere just like a terrorist. When the dust settles, there appeared a tattooed demon, AKAZA, the Upper Rank 3. The mysterious newcomer attacks the injured Tanjiro. Then the battle follows between AKAZA and RENGOKU, the Flame Hashira. As Tanjiro severely injured, RENGOKU fights against AKAZA alone. It is actually the climax of the film, *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba the Movie: Mugen Train* (2020).

While engaging in combat, AKAZA acknowledges RENGOKU's battle spirit, saying, “I can tell your strength by looking at you. You're a Hashira, right?” That is, The Upper Rank 3 is able to distinguish Hashira's real strength just by looking at him. AKAZA compliments his strength: “You've developed your fighting spirit to the edge of perfection” (VIII.63). Then, Upper Rank 3 goes on to explain that, despite his being so close to it, RENGOKU will never reach supreme territory because he'll just grow old and die before it can happen. Upper Rank 3 even goes as far as to offer to turn RENGOKU into a demon so that he could surpass his human limits and become much stronger. This is something special as AKAZA

¹¹ The Twelve Kizuki (lit. “The Twelve Demon Moons”) is a group of the twelve most powerful demons in existence. They were made and are under the direct command of the demon king, Muzan KIBUTSUJI. As KIBUTSUJI's most powerful subordinates, they have been given two tasks to complete. KIBUTSUJI's commands are (1) To find the Blue Spider Lily, a mythical flower KIBUTSUJI believes would grant him the perfect immortal body, and (2) the destruction of the Demon Slayer Corps (XII.98). The Twelve Kizuki are divided into two groups, the six Upper Ranks, numbered one through six, and the six Lower Ranks, also numbered one through six. The upper six demons are called “Upper Ranks,” and the lower six demons are called “Lower Ranks.” The number signifies their ranking among the Twelve Kizuki, determined by each member's level of strength, Upper Rank 1 being the strongest and Lower Rank 6 being the weakest.

only offers to swordsmen whose abilities he believes are refined to the utmost. The demon calmly remarks that it would be a pity to kill RENGOKU when he hasn't reached his full potential. In AKAZA's value judgement, RENGOKU really should choose to become a demon and fight with him for all eternity.

However, RENGOKU rejects being a demon. Then and there their fighting spirits clash and an explosion takes place. When the dust disperses, it is revealed that RENGOKU is fatally wounded. AKAZA has stuck his arm through RENGOKU's solar plexus. AKAZA screams at RENGOKU that he's going to die, and asks the demon slayer once more to tell him that he'll become a demon. "You're one of the chosen strong ones!" AKAZA's words reminds RENGOKU of his last dialogue with his dead mother. The succeeding flashback reveals the final moments when mother and son talk together. Ruka RENGOKU, the mother, asks her son, the young RENGOKU to think hard about what she's about to ask him, "Do you know why you were born stronger than other people?" The young RENGOKU cannot answer well. Then, Ruka explains to her son, saying "So that you can help people weaker than you" (VIII.64).

RENGOKU is a man with a deep sense of mission. When RENGOKU says to AKAZA "You and I have very different values" (VIII.63) during the battle, the war of ideas on "strength" is brought to the fore. AKAZA invites the prominent demon slayer to become a demon like him and come over to the immortal world. AKAZA goes on explaining that RENGOKU will never cross into "the domain of supremacy" (XVIII.153) because he is human and destined to grow old and die. Throughout the dialogue with RENGOKU, AKAZA consistently uses RENGOKU's first name, "Kyojuro" with endearments.

AKAZA's contempt for human life stems from his disregard for the ephemeral.

"Let me tell you Kyojuro, why your power will never truly reach perfection. It's because you're HUMAN. Because you age. Because eventually you'll die. Become a demon, Kyojuro. If you do, you can train for hundreds of years and keep getting stronger." (VIII.63)

To AKAZA strength is the goal itself to aim for. He embraces the idea "strength for strength's sake," as it were. Strength is his *raison d'être*. The fighter appreciates the pursuit of strength for its own sake. RENGOKU repeats his earlier observation of their different moral values, "You and I value different things," and firmly declares that he will never become a demon. RENGOKU expatiates on his belief of human beauty and frailty, showing no upset or hesitation about AKAZA's invitation to become a demon.

"Growing old and dying is what gives meaning and beauty to the fleeting span of a human life. It's precisely because we age and die that our lives have value and nobility. Strength is not a word that means much in regard to the flesh." (VIII.63)

RENGOKU explains that the fleeting beauty of humanity is set against change and decay, and that their strength doesn't lie in the body. For RENGOKU strength is not the end but the means. Strength for a purpose, not for its own sake, is his rubric. It is the means to protect the weak. RENGOKU rejects AKAZA's nihilism: his insistence that man is a futile being. AKAZA's sense of value is a vulgar Nietzscheanism,¹² a familiar moral nihilism that seem to never entirely vanish. AKAZA repudiates RENGOKU's compassion

¹² Repudiating conventional Christian morality, it emphasizes the "will to power" as the initiative of individual and society, and preaches that only by the morals of the strong can one reach the realm of "superman," i.e., a man of extraordinary power or ability, a superior being.

for the weak, exalting the will of strength, and formulating “the domain of supremacy” where one can rise above the restrictions of creatures.

Growing old and dying, the brevity of human life, is the very essence of being human, therefore people are lovable and precious due to this aspect of human life. Moreover, what humans call strength is not a word that they use in regards to the body. RENGOKU stands against AKAZA and tells him that he will never ever become a demon. He declines the demon’s invitation, after all. AKAZA finds it hard to understand his logic, especially because only those who are chosen can become an immortal being. Saddened by the thought that someone with wonderful talent must die, AKAZA says,

“One cannot simply decide to become a demon. You must be chosen. But you, who worked so hard to build such magnificent talent, would simply let it wither away. Such a waste! It’s hard for me to accept. I can’t stand it. [. . .] Such amazing speed! And your wonderful sword technique! Time will steal it all, Kyojuro! Aren’t you sad?”

RENGOKU replies, “That’s how it goes. It’s normal. That’s what it means to be human!” (VIII.63). What is apparent in *Kimetsu* is the repetitive structure of the conflict of different values. Later in the series, the war of sense of values is reiterated in the battle between KOKUSHIBO¹³ and HIMEJIMA¹⁴ [Fig. 4] with slight variations:



[Fig. 4] KOKUSHIBO versus HIMEJIMA

KOKUSHIBO:

Your body and the techniques you have developed to their utmost ability will disappear from this

¹³ Gyomei HIMEJIMA is the current Stone Hashira. He is the tallest and oldest Hashira, and is introduced as “the strongest man of the demon hunters” (XIX.168).

¹⁴ KOKUSHIBO is Upper Rank One, a demon holding the highest position in the Twelve Kizuki. So the battle between HIMEJIMA and KOKUSHIBO is a summit decisive battle, the “Match of the Millennium.”

world. Do you not think that is lamentable?

HIMEJIMA:

No I don't. [. . .] As long as you are in the Demon Slayer Corps, there is no guarantee you will live tomorrow. Why would I cling to life at this point? No one becomes a Hashira with such half-hearted determination. (XX.170)

As a matter of fact, their battles are basically the battles between diabolical terrorists versus security forces for the sake of human life. This themes and motifs interweave and recur, circling around each other, acquiring new associations with each repetition. However, it can also be interpreted as the age-old battle within one man, for there are dual natures in one man: a constant battle between egoism vs altruism. The confrontation of the two diametrically opposed interpretation of the sense of value in life continues to the end of the story.

RENGOKU is greatly enthusiastic in regard to his duties as a Hashira. To AKAZA he proudly proclaims his identity as the Flame Hashira: "I will fulfill my duty! I won't let anyone here die!" However, it is like praying to deaf ears.

AKAZA:

Such fighting spirit! Even with those wounds you're full of determination and spiritual fortitude. Your stance has no weakness! You really should become a demon, Kyojuro! Then you could fight with me forever! (VIII.64)

By AKAZA's deathblow RENGOKU is fatally wounded, and when he is going to die, AKAZA screams and asks RENGOKU one more time to become a demon, crying that he's one of the strong chosen ones. AKAZA's cry: "You're one of the chosen strong ones!" (VIII.64) reminds him of a testament by his late mother. We will discuss these words in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 4. AKAZA: A Pursuit of False Strength

Kimetsu is the story about the hero overcoming the harsh reality through the acquisition of strength. However, the wrong-headed attitudes towards strength result in misery because of the misunderstanding of the meaning of strength. While false strength makes for self-preservation, true strength unleashes the capacity for compassion

AKAZA is another seeker of strength in the series. The case study of AKAZA shows the error of seeking false strength. AKAZA is a member of the Twelve Kizuki and holding the position of Upper Rank 3. Later in the series, it is revealed that AKAZA originally had a warm human heart. When he was a human, he was called Hakuji. In the world of *Kimetsu* its major characters, including the demons, have well-developed back-stories. Each character, even the demons, has their own unique story. AKAZA is no exception to this rule: AKAZA is a demon with a tragic past. His life story is, as it were, a dark story of the psychology that energized his terroristic brand of nihilism. By losing his loved ones, "the most important people" (XVIII.155), Hakuji also loses *joie de vivre*, i.e., a feeling of great happiness and enjoyment of life. He no longer cares for anything.

Over a century ago, when HAKUJI [AKAZA's former identity] was in despair, Muzan KIBUTSUJI, the father of demon, appeared in front of him recruiting the candidate for the Twelve Kizuki, and forcefully transfused his blood into the boy's body. That is to say, HAKUJI did not become a demon of his own free will. He was forced to be a demon and forgot all his memories when he was a human. Ironically he adapted himself to the infused blood of KIBUTSUJI and Hakuji the human almost lost his memory and became AKAZA the demon who devoted himself exclusively to the acquisition of strength. For more than one hundred years AKAZA has been trying to master martial arts, aiming for "the domain of supremacy" (XVIII.153).

When KIBUTSUJI transformed Hakuji's identity from a human into a demon, in all probability, he has also changed the boy's name from Hakuji to AKAZA suitable to assume his new identity. Hakuji, literally means, "Kamainu"¹⁵ that has *raison d'être* because it has something important to guard. As his master, Keizo, says to Hakuji, "You need to have something to protect. Like a 'Komainu' protecting a shrine." (XVIII.155). On the other hand, AKAZA, literally means, "a castrated dog that has lost something important to guard," or "Useless Komainu" as the title of the chapter 155 suggests. Like RENGOKU, Hakuji used to wish to help the weak. Initially this was the reason why he wanted to be strong. However, something went wrong in his life. In all likelihood, when KIBUTSUJI poured his blood into Hakuji's empty mind, and forcefully turned him into a demon, the demon king pours the false cult of strength.¹⁶

Now known as AKAZA, the former Hakuji goes on killing people. The tattoo all over his body represents proof of the many sins which he has committed after he became a demon, and have accumulated and spread all over his body. It is a symbol of AKAZA's being tainted by the power-mad nihilism,¹⁷ as it is clear in the fact that it all disappeared when he finally returned to a human in the end. When he dies, AKAZA, ruminating over his life, recognize that his life has been "sad, laughable, and ridiculous." After turned into a demon, he has repeated a number of empty murders which he ridicules as "pointless." For he has repeated murders not even knowing why he does it.

"I became a demon, lost my memories and again began seeking strength. There was nothing left that I wanted to protect. I didn't even want to continue living in a world without my family. For over a hundred years I committed pointless acts of carnage. It's a horribly sad, laughable, and ridiculous story." (XVIII.155)¹⁸

AKAZA not only feels disgust for the weak, but for the human in general. First he says, "Humans are

¹⁵ The translator's original footnotes: "Guardian statues at Japanese shrines." "Kamainu" literally means "an imaginary guardian beast at Shinto shrine represented as a lion-dog."

¹⁶ To take a cynical view, it may be the author's intention to assume AKAZA not as "Koma-inu" but as "Kamase-inu." "Kamase-inu" is a slang for a weak dog in dogfight that is originally assigned to a young dog that is expected to bite and build confidence. "Kamase-inu" is expected to lose and to serve as a foil for the favorite or top dog. It is also commonly called "an underdog."

¹⁷ It is against this nihilistic feeling that Kanao TSUYURI, Tanjiro's future wife, should fight when she says, "It doesn't matter. Nothing matters at all, so I can't decide by myself" (VII.53). The real demon for her is this nihilistic feeling, "Whatever [i.e., I don't care]."

¹⁸ AKAZA's last words on an emptiness of false faith in power, echo another nihilist in Shakespeare's play. The Elizabethan nihilist says, "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing." These are the lines uttered by Macbeth when he hears of Lady Macbeth's death (*Macbeth* 5.5.24-28; The Riverside Shakespeare).

soft, fragile weaklings. They die easily. They break and disappear.” He goes on explaining the reason of his hatred: “I hate weak people. Weak people don’t confront you head-on. They put poison in the well. They’re ugly. The weak lack forbearance. They soon give in to desperation” (XVIII.156). After losing his identity as a kindhearted young man, he is turned into a cruel demon to take the role of a homicidal automaton, as TOMIOKA says, “He’s a killing machine” (XVIII.152). Increasingly losing his admirable human characteristics such as kindness, sympathy and altruism he had when he was Hakuji, AKAZA the callous demon gains strength more and more. This is because AKAZA is obsessed with a fixed idea in the name of strength. He feels hatred for the weak who killed his important people in his life by throwing poison in the well as quoted above, and he is also obsessed his own weakness, i.e., self-hatred against his weak “self” who was unable to protect the loved one.

Tanjiro meets AKAZA again in the series, when he is running with TOMIOKA at the Infinity Castle.¹⁹ It is AKAZA who suddenly breaks through the ceiling and presents himself in front of them. AKAZA always appears out of nowhere with no warning. It is an appearance worthy for a terrorist. The motifs of battle between good and evil is repeated with slight variations. The battle between AKAZA versus Tanjiro plus TOMIOKA, the Water Hashira, is an reenactment of the battle between AKAZA versus Tajiro plus RENGOKU, the Flame Hashira.

Kimetsu can be regarded as a manga series dramatizing the meanings of the single word “Nature.”²⁰ The word “Nature” in *Kimetsu* has two diametrically opposed meanings, which are illustrated and explored both through the action and in certain key characters in the series. As the title of chapter 148, “Clashing,” suggests, there occurs the clash of the two views of Nature. Two views of Nature are juxtaposed. Looked at in this way it becomes obvious that *Kimetsu* is a drama of war of ideas. It is certainly at the heart of the series as a never-ending battle between the two forces fought by the Demon Slayer Corps and KIBUTSUJI and his demonic forces.

Though the theme of strength recurs throughout the series, this time the difference of meaning of Nature comes into focus. Both Tanjiro and AKAZA strive for strength in their life. Both are in constant pursuit of strength. Their difference is made clear in their different views of Nature, the battle of two ideas in chapter 148, a war over the interpretation of two views of Nature worthy for the chapter title “Clashing.” The clash begins with AKAZA’s memory of his last fight against RENGOKU, and it gradually develops into his view of Nature.

AKAZA:

I’m glad Kyojuro died that night. He might not have been able to grow any stronger, because his worthless values made him want to stay human.

TANJIRO:

What did you say? You don’t say another word. Don’t talk about RENGOKU.

¹⁹ The Infinity Castle is the lair of the Twelve Kizuki, and the final battle between the Demon Slayer Corps and the Twelve Kizuki takes place there.

²⁰ The word “Nature” has several meanings. Terry Eagleton says, “‘Culture’ is said to be one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, and the term which is sometimes considered to be its opposite, ‘Nature,’ is commonly awarded the accolade of being the most complex of all.” (Eagleton 1)

AKAZA:

Why? I'm praising him. You and Kyojuro.

TANJIRO:

No. You're just casting insults. You only spit on everyone.

AKAZA:

You misunderstand, Tanjiro. I only despise the weak. I only spit on weaklings. Yes. Weaklings make me sick. It is the law of nature that they be weeded out.

TANJIRO:

Everything you're saying is wrong. Your presence here now is proof. Everyone is a helpless baby when they're born. They can't live without someone's help. Same with you, AKAZA. You don't remember it, but when you were a baby, someone protected and helped you too. The strong protect the weak. Then the weak get stronger and help those weaker than themselves. That is the law of nature! AKAZA! I can't forgive your way of thinking! Your days of doing whatever you like are over! (XVII.148)

In his fight against Tanjiro, the memory of RENGOKU comes back to life in AKAZA. RENGOKU has never walked away in his minds.

In their battle, two combatants are contrasted, but also two concepts of Nature are contrasted, too: the malignant Nature versus the benign Nature. A battle between two combatants is the presentation of the two diametrically opposed ideas. Through this war of ideas, the whole series examines the very different and conflicting views of the world. Two main meanings, strongly contrasted and mutually exclusive, run through the series. They hold to whatever meanings they will abide by, and their ideas propel them into action, towards a richer realization of what their ideas imply. Most significant of all, a debate over the meaning of Nature is not merely verbal: fighting techniques will out as often as words.

On one side is the view of Nature consciously adopted by the party of AKAZA and his demonic forces. AKAZA'S view of the world is that of "a dog-eat-dog world" where the weak are victims of the strong. AKAZA thinks of Nature as actual and dangerously explosive force. Since the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and maybe more so since 3.11 [Great East Japan Earthquake] we came to think of Nature as a cruel and dangerously explosive force. AKAZA's Darwinian view of Nature whose concept is aptly phrase by Tennyson's *In Memoriam*, "Nature, red in tooth and claw /With ravine" (Canto 56). In other words, it is a view of malignant Nature which sees humans are, under natural conditions, in a state of battle against everyone "the war of all against all" (*L. bellum omnium contra omnes*; Hobbs, *De Cive – Prefatio*, 1642)²¹ To a post-Darwinian age, the Nature AKAZA explains as deceptively familiar commonplace.

Tanjiro directly opposes and contradicts AKAZA's malignant view. Juxtaposed to oppose AKAZA's

²¹ "I demonstrate, in the first place, that the state of men without civil society (which state we may properly call the state of nature) is nothing else but a mere war of all against all; and in that war all men have equal right unto all things." [Wikipedia: "Bellum omnium contra omnes."]

malignant Nature is Tanjiro's benign Nature. The author, in the ideological dynamics of his dramatic progression, aligns Tanjiro and the Demon Slayers as exponents of the benevolent and benign Nature where people are disposed by nature to pursue a redeeming corporate existence. Tanjiro thinks of Nature as a kindly motherly dame toward humans, using the image of "a baby." The benign Nature Tanjiro abides is assumed to be the absolute shape for man as an image of tenderness, comfort, generosity, charity, courtesy, and gratitude. He holds up an idea of a world where individuals support each other based on relationships of mutual trust, which are seen in family or community ties held dear in the Taisho period (1912-26). This is the traditional view of Nature, the "benignant" Nature which upholds "bountiful" Nature and which is vindicated in the series as a whole. The author, is much more unequivocally on the side of the traditional view of Nature, and against AKAZA's arguments which justify his principle that holds "Kill or be killed. Only the strongest survive." Accordingly, AKAZA reiterates his diabolical temptation to be an immortal being, something he only asks of the most worthy of his opponents, in his confrontation with Giyu TOMIOKA. In their first encounter, AKAZA is amazed and admits that TOMIOKA possesses finely developed swordsmanship to the point that he offers a proposal to become demon: "Don't die like Kyojuro and Tanjiro. You should become a demon too, Giyu" (XVIII.152).

Tanjiro is a sympathetic character and AKAZA is a demon. However, we cannot be sure from this that everything Tanjiro says is to be considered true, and everything AKAZA says false. The author has a partial sympathy for AKAZA as well. This would account for the charm and attractiveness with which the author always invests the demons. However, it is clearly a hyperbole to suggest that the author of *Kimetsu* is "of the Devil's party without knowing it."²²

Tanjiro and Hakuji are as alike as two peas in a pod. It is worth noting what they have in common. In addition to the fact that Tanjiro and Hakuji share the same Chinese character "ji" meaning "management" in their names, they share the three following characteristics: (1) Both of them lose their "most important people" when they were away. The life of Tanjiro changes one day when his family is attacked and murdered by KIBUTSUJI when he is away from home. AKAZA laments the death of his fiancée and her father by being poisoned: "Once again, a crisis had visited the people most important to me, and I wasn't by their side" (XVIII.155). (2) Both of them are liked by cute girls while having a friendly chat. Tanjiro is liked by Kanao TSUYURI and AKAZA by Koyuki. Kanao is a quiet girl due to the abuse she suffered in the past. She is unable to make decisions by herself, so as to protect her "self" she represses her emotions as a defense mechanism. Likewise, by the work of his unconscious AKAZA refused to kill girls, for he still maintains a thread of humanity even after becoming a demon. It is probably because of the affection he felt for Koyuki, a sick girl. Practically all demons possess a murderous instinct to kill and devour humans. However, AKAZA never eats girls. According to DOMA, the Upper Rank 2, AKAZA is the only demon of the Twelve Kizuki who refuses to eat or kill girls: "... he would never eat girls. I told him women are so nutritious because they can raise babies in their stomachs, so eating lot of them makes you stronger

²² William Blake once said in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793): "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it" (Blake 35).

faster. But not only would he not eat them, Lord AKAZA wouldn't even kill them!" (XVIII.157). (3) Both of them are hard-working and stand-up guys. When Hakuji lost his father, his fiancée, and his master, he lost all faith in life as well, then HAKUJI turned into a born-again power-mad combatant. After losing humanity, obsessed with the idea of gaining strength, AKAZA transforms himself into a killing machine. As quoted, TOMIOKA says: "What a demon! This is Upper Rank 3! He's a killing machine. He's cast aside everything except fighting!" (XVIII.152). AKAZA proposes RENGOKU and TOMIOKA to become a demon many times, even though his offers are refused every time. AKAZA's obstinate proposal is due to his pure, innocent, but stubborn belief in the pursuit of strength.

Then, what is the difference between Tanjiro and AKAZA? The only difference is the presence of mentors. When Tanjiro is in despair, TOMIOKA appears and initiates him into strength. After TOMIOKA, RENGOKU turns out to be Tanjiro's second mentor. Arguably TOMIOKA and RENGOKU, the two Hashiras, are the most meaningful role models for Tanjiro. In the case of Hakuji, when he suffers from the poison of nihilism: the rejection of all vital principles in the belief that life is meaningless, KIBUTSUJI, the father of demons, appears, looking for the candidates for the Twelve Kizuki. Before becoming a demon, he didn't even have the idea of being a demon in the back of his mind. In the monologue Hakuji says: "Don't care anymore. I don't care about anything. I became a demon, lost my memories and again began seeking strength" (XVIII.155). On the other hand, Tanjiro is just lucky. He has honed his physical strength to nigh-superhuman levels to hold his own against even the Upper Rank, AKAZA, who can move at subsonic speeds. Eventually, Tanjiro and TOMIOKA, two demon slayers, show a good combination of their superb skills and succeed in killing AKAZA in the end.

CHAPTER 5. RUKA & KOYUKI: Women's Strength

In *Kimetsu* two women exert powerful influences for the lives of boys. They are Ruka RENGOKU and Koyuki. Firstly, Ruka RENGOKU. She is the mother of Kyojuro RENGOKU. As discussed in chapter 3, RENGOKU, hurt and cornered, cannot do his best in his battle against the Upper Rank 3. Then, AKAZA repeats his proposal to be a demon, stating that RENGOKU is one of the strong ones that has been chosen: "Say you'll become a demon! You are one of the chosen strong ones!" (VIII.64) When he hears the phrase, "the chosen," what comes to RENGOKU's mind is his dialogue with his mother. The combat scene cuts to a flashback of RENGOKU in his childhood. In the flashback RENGOKU remembers what had happened between mother and son. The mother is already fatally ill and cannot get out of her bed, so beckoning her son at her bedside, she asks him why he was born stronger than other people.

RUKA:

Do you know why you were born stronger than other people?

RENGOKU:

Um . . . I don't know!

RUKA:

So that you can help people weaker than you. Those blessed with more natural talent than others

must use their strength for the good of the world, for other people. It is unforgivable to use strength granted by heaven to hurt others and empower yourself. Helping the weak is the duty of those born with strength. You must take your responsibility seriously and do your duty. And never, never forget that. (VIII.64)

The mother transmits strong moral values to her son. Prior to her death, Ruka instills into the notion of responsibility and duty, as one who was born stronger than the rest, is to protect those who are unable to do so themselves. She then hugs her son, tearfully noting that she will not be alive for much longer, but that it is a blessing to be the mother of such a strong, gentle child. In other words, the mother inculcates in her son a sense of *noblesse oblige* (lit. “nobility obliges”): people with advantages should help and do things for other people.

At the critical moment in the battle against AKAZA, RENGOKU remembers her wish and understands what he should be—not a special person elected by his strength, but one chosen to save the weak. Against AKAZA's temptation RENGOKU declares “I will fulfill my duty! I won't allow anyone here to die!” (VIII.64) Eventually RENGOKU dies, suiting the action to the words. However, the reader would have never known RENGOKU's love in all its heights and depths if he had not died; nor could we guess his mother's deep affection if she had not allowed her son to die. In a flashback just before he dies, Ruka appears and approaches to him. Noticing her phantom nearby RENGOKU asks her if he has done everything right, “Mother, did I do well? Did I use my gifts wisely?” To which she replies, “You did splendidly.” (VIII.66) Then, RENGOKU smiles and passes away peacefully.

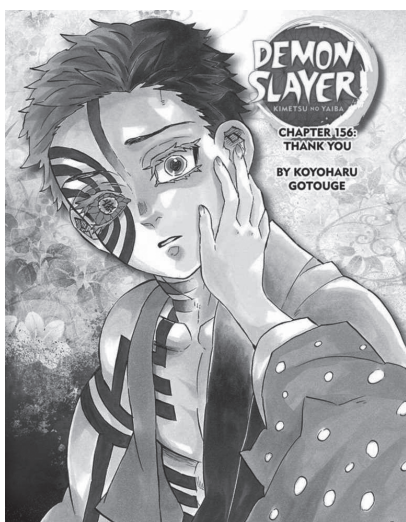
RENGOKU is an honorable warrior who adheres to his code of moral principles which he inherited from his mother: a moral value that those who were born strong have a duty to protect the weak. He has retained his faith to the end, with no wavering. In the battle against AKAZA, RENGOKU is not just fighting against the opponent, but, while fighting, he is also protecting the lives of Tanjiro and the train passengers. RENGOKU doesn't mind risking his life to save the lives of others.

It may be possible to read the Christian ethical message in his death. John the Evangelist says the supreme manifestation of love is self-sacrifice, which spares not even one's own life. “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (*Jn.* 15:13). The followers of Jesus have been commanded to practice love, *agape*. “We ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (*1Jn.* 3:16). More than that, however, RENGOKU's death teaches what true strength is. The strong must become a shield for weaker ones, using their strength to protect them. It is no other than altruism. Altruism is an antithesis against bloated ego, and it is the most sublime state of mind worthy for the dead RENGOKU. It is highly unlikely that Ruka knows anything of Christianity or *noblesse oblige*. Her lesson may have come from Taoism, a Chinese philosophy based on the writings of Lao-tzu, advocating humility and religious piety. In chapter 52 of *Tao Te Ching* one reads: “To hold fast to the submissive is called strength.” (Lao Tzu 113)

Another woman who sways the destiny of a boy is Koyuki. She is Hakuji's fiancée. Due to her sickness, Koyuki spends most of her time bedridden while being cared by Hakuji. During the battle against Tanjiro, AKAZA clearly recollects the days when he was Hakuji and all of his shortcomings in those days when he couldn't protect those he cared about. He openly admits that the person he really wanted to kill all

along was his weak “self.” In the flashback, as AKAZA remembers his dead father and his dead master, AKAZA gradually changes into Hakuji. However, suddenly KIBUTSUJI emerges out of nowhere and taunts AKAZA. “Didn’t you want to be strong? Is this the end for you? AKAZA.” The moment he hears KIBUTSUJI’s taunting and provocative words, he regains energy and his identity as AKAZA again, and he stands up as a demon. “That’s right. I’m going to be strong. I want to be strong. So what if he cut off my head? Losing doesn’t matter. I’ll kill them all. I can still be stronger. I must fulfill my promise” (XVIII.156). To such an extent, KIBUTSUJI’s savage curse is strong. However, the power of love is far greater than that of curse. When AKAZA tries to regenerate himself as a demon, the phantom of a girl, Koyuki, appears again as if to overcome the influence of KIBUTSUJI. Here, Koyuki’s final appearance is worthy of notice as the redeeming power of a woman’s love. She addresses and embraces him. “Thank you, Hakuji. You’ve done enough. Enough. Enough.” Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that: *amor vincit omnia* (lit. “love conquers all”). Touched and embraced by Koyuki, he again undergoes the transformation from AKAZA the demon into Hakuji the human. To Hakuji, Koyuki says, “I’m glad you remembered us. I’m glad you returned to your original self. Welcome home. My love.” (XVIII.156) In the cover design of “Chapter 156: Thank you” [Fig. 5] we gain insight in the true nature of Hakuji and AKAZA: his oscillation between humanity and demonism. It depicts the moment of his final transformation from AKAZA into Hakuji by the tender touch of a girl’s hand. He is torn by two forces: his beastly devotion to KIBUTSUJI and his unblinking devotion to Koyuki. The final solution is in the destruction of his shadowy character AKAZA the demon by HAKUJI the human. This is the moment when love outweighs nihilism. It depicts the moment of his final transformation from AKAZA into Hakuji.

The life of AKAZA has been a life of remorse. For his whole life, more than a hundred years, he has been suffering from self-hatred, and a keen regret that he couldn’t protect his important people. When his transformation is complete at last, he explodes by surefire method of assassination in the end. AKAZA



[Fig. 5] AKAZA / Hakuji: Half Demon and Half Human

stops regenerating his body, but he attacks himself. In the whole series of *Kimetsu* AKAZA is the only demon who chooses the way to self-destruction. It is because he can no longer stand his own actions as the demon. AKAZA's body, which has been regenerating, collapses and dies. AKAZA no longer exists. He comes back as Hakuji. The episode of Koyuki and Hakuji is an inspirational episode of true love that conquers their tragic life. Feminine love unleashes one's true strength. After returning to original Hakuji, he express his blissful state. "I'm home, Father. I'm back. Master. Koyuki. I'm home." (XVIII.157) Hakuji returns to his original self from AKAZA that symbolizes everything selfish, savage and profane. Hakuji's return as a human serves as a prophesy of Nezuko's return later in the series.

CONCLUSION

Before his death RENGOKU has a final chat with Tanjiro, Inosuke, and Zenitsu. They sit around RENGOKU with tears streaming down their faces, as the dying Hashira encourages them to live with their chests held high, unburdened by the fear of failure and death. RENGOKU kindles sacred flames of love in the three boys' heart.

"Stand tall and be proud. No matter how weak or unworthy you feel, keep your heart burning, grit your teeth and move forward. If you just curl up in a ball and hide, time will pass you by. It won't stop for you while you wallow in grief." (VIII.66)

RENGOKU's way of fighting is so intense that his final words continue to burn in Tanjiro's heart. RENGOKU's message is what he inherited from his mother, Ruka. Realizing her own approaching death, she leaves her last words as a testament. Like his mother, what RENGOKU leaves on the verge of his death becomes the everlasting support for Tanjiro and his friends. Even in the structure of the whole series, this episode is a vital episode because it not only points out the real threat of the Upper Rank demons, but also the spiritual growth of the main characters.

In his battle against Tanjiro, AKAZA was hit with a fist by Tanjiro, and he suddenly recalls the day when he was hit by his master, Keizo. Then, AKAZA realizes an important fact. Now known as AKAZA, Hakuji has been killing humans to become much stronger, but he doesn't even know why he does it. AKAZA realizes what he had to kill has been his mental weakness. He has been weak because he gave into desperation and tainted his master's fighting style. He has been weak, so he cannot fulfill his father's last wishes. The weaknesses that AKAZA thinks of are all about mental weakness. This is linked to what RENGOKU pointed out in his battle against AKAZA: "Strength is not a word that means much in regard to the flesh." (VIII.63) Even after becoming a demon AKAZA has retained his mental weakness, and has only pursued the strength of his flesh, which is the most vulnerable point RENGOKU attacked. On the verge of his death, however, Hakuji is addressed and embraced by Koyuki. By the fire of love and his soul is purified. In this way, the demon called AKAZA finally evaporates. Hakuji's battle is over. Indeed it is the fierce battle against the demon slayers. However, it is also a battle he fights within himself as well. That is to say, though the battle between Tanjiro and AKAZA is one between a human and a demon, it is also the battle between good and evil within. Hakuji is fighting against AKAZA. The last scene of chapter

156 where Koyuki and Hakuji hug each other is one of the most impressive scenes in *Kimetsu*. In the end he uses the annihilation technique against himself.

The author of *Kimetsu* is, in fact, a philosophical writer. AKAZA is a good example of who not to be. He is a teacher by negative example, as it were. By depicting the villain's pursuit of false strength and his tragic story as an object lesson to the hero, the author reveals the reading public the meaning of hero's pursuit of true strength. In the last analysis, love and compassion found in women unleashes the capacity for true strength.

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