

The Symbolization of Violence Aesthetic and Cultural Integration in One Piece: A Case Study of the Thriller Bark Chapter

Siyuan Lu^{1,a,*}

¹University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, 200093, China

a. 3452664919@qq.com

*corresponding author

Abstract: Postmodernism in the 20th century gradually developed "violence" into an artistic aesthetic, and due to different understandings of "violence" in various countries, it has spawned a variety of branches. In order to disseminate its works to audiences from different cultural backgrounds, *One Piece* combines Japanese indigenous violence aesthetics with the violent cultures of various cultures, making it a successful example of cross-cultural communication on a global scale. To understand the process of symbolic re-encoding of Japanese native violence aesthetics and British violence aesthetics in *One Piece*, as well as the way in which values are integrated, this study selects the Thriller Bark Chapter (episodes 337 to 380) in *One Piece* as a case for analysis. The study extracts references to British culture and Japanese native culture within the text as "cultural symbols," a unit of visual analysis, and further divides them into four major categories: natural symbols, artificial symbols, character symbols, and language symbols. Statistical analysis reveals that, due to the close relationship between British horror violence culture and the development of its Gothic literature, the author has incorporated a large number of Gothic cultural symbols in the Thriller Bark Chapter. Meanwhile, the work consistently upholds the fundamental principles of Japanese native culture while also revitalizing its own cultural identity.

Keywords: *One Piece*, violence aesthetics, symbolization, intercultural.

1. Introduction

Violent cultural products originated from people's fear and opposition to historical wars and conflicts. After the mid-20th century, postmodernism gradually developed the depiction and representation of violent acts in literary, cinematic, and dramatic forms of art as a form of art that challenges traditionalist thought and values[1]. In the history of the development of Japanese violent aesthetics, animation is an important branch of development[2]. Japanese animation has not only successfully stylized the Japanese violent aesthetic, but also has a wide dissemination range internationally.

One Piece is a comic work by the famous Japanese manga artist Eiichiro Oda. In the work, the author draws on cultural elements from multiple countries including China, the United Kingdom, Italy, Oceania, etc., to build a grand and rich "*One Piece*" worldview for the protagonist group led by Luffy. The depiction of violent content in the *One Piece* animation serves to illustrate the protagonist group's resistance against powerful political forces and hegemony. This element is crucial in

reflecting the ongoing struggle against oppressive power dynamics. Due to the cultural, historical, and cognitive differences among countries, Eiichiro Oda incorporated Japanese violent aesthetics with those of other cultures, re-encoding process aimed to create a cross-cultural work for global dissemination. Currently, "*One Piece*" has been officially recognized by Guinness World Records as the "comic series with the highest circulation created by a single author in the world." [3]

To understand the integration process of Japanese native violent aesthetics and the violent aesthetics of various countries in "*One Piece*," it is necessary to refine the references to the cultures of various countries in the creative content into the visual unit of "cultural symbols" for analysis. "Cultural symbols" are the classic representative images formed by the accumulation of history and culture, encompassing categories such as language and script, myths and legends, and values and beliefs [4]. Animation is also a cultural product composed of "cultural symbols". The integration and dissemination of cultural symbols can effectively avoid the issues of cultural misinterpretation and cultural discount that may arise from the dissemination of single cultural symbols [4]. This paper takes the Thriller Bark Chapter (episodes 337-380) in *One Piece* as a case study for analysis, classifying the cultural symbols in the work into four major categories: natural symbols, artificial symbols, character symbols, and language symbols [4]. The article delves into the process of symbolically re-encoding violent elements from British culture and integrating them with the values of Japanese native violent aesthetics in *One Piece*.

2. The British cultural symbols in the Thriller Bark chapter

Samovar points out that due to the sense of security brought about by cultural proximity, the historical background and values depicted in cultural products are often more readily received and chosen by audiences who already have similar experiences [5]. The British horror violence culture is inextricably linked to the prosperity of its Gothic culture, which has been selected and utilized by the author of *One Piece* in the Thriller Bark chapter.

Gothic literature originated in the mid-18th century, characterized by a strong sense of repression, sorrow, and silence, and its prosperity was due to the bloody dictatorship during the French Revolution [6]. Centuries of warfare have brought indescribable pain to Britain, with scenes of brutal and bloody massacres everywhere. Meanwhile, the excessive repression of religious ethics also keeps people in a long-term atmosphere of suppression [6]. Gothic literature derives inspiration from the literary works of predecessors, folk tales, the *Bible*, and Christian legends. It utilizes the backdrop of ruins, wilderness, castles, and churches from the past to set the stage for its narratives. It depicts bizarre and inexplicable supernatural plotlines, along with the repressed and confused psychological activities of the characters, to explore human nature and morality [7].

In the Thriller Bark chapter, the author draws on numerous British Gothic cultural symbols for the scene setting and creates many significant characters that draw on classic images from British history. This creative approach not only makes it easier for British audiences to remember but also endows the work with a tangible sense of historical depth, laying an important foundation for the cross-cultural dissemination of Japanese anime around the world.

Table 1: The British cultural symbols in the Thriller Bark chapter

| Symbol type | Concrete symbol | |
|-------------------|--|--|
| Natural symbol | Overcast sky, heavy rain, dense fog, midwood, spider | |
| Artificial symbol | Artifact symbol | English tea cup, walking stick, top hat, stand-up collar cape, carriage, fur marten cape, coffin, salt |

Table 1: (continued).

| | | |
|------------------|--|--|
| | Artificial architectural symbol | Derelict ship, abandoned castle, graveyard, fireplace, frescoes, underground laboratory, arena |
| | Folk symbol of life | Ghost, mysterious disappearance, rise from the dead, hell, zombie, midnight, plague |
| | Artistic symbol | Piano, violin, <i>Binks's Wine</i> (The Song That Connects the Past and the Present) |
| Character symbol | Brook (a mobile skeleton with the image of a British gentleman musician), Cerberus (Guardian Hound of the Underworld), Hilton (inspired by vampires), Ho Gu Barker (The doctor who experimented with zombies), Cindry (A maid zombie who enters the body of a dead stage actor to test the rich man's heart), Gekko Moria (Inspired by Dracula, capable of stealing others' shadows), Perona (Princess Mononoke who can manipulate ghosts), Stronger | |
| Language symbol | People, once their shadows are taken away, will turn to ashes when exposed directly to sunlight; Believing that manipulating life and death goes against the divine way; The entire story takes place on an isolated island; Being passed through by a ghost can make one become negative; Recording the performance with a conch shell before dying in a maritime disaster (inspired by the movie Titanic); | |

2.1. Gothic use of natural symbol

As shown in Table 1 of the natural symbol category, at the beginning of the Thriller Bark chapter, the sky becomes gloomy, and the sea is covered by a dense fog that never dissipates all year round. In the plot setting, this place is known as the Phantom Sea area, where ships disappear all year round. The natural cultural symbol of "dense fog" has a particular historical significance in the UK, often depicted as a malevolent presence associated with crime and horror. This is due to the fact that London, known as the "fog capital" in reality, has suffered greatly from air pollution in history [8]. The dense fog had a severe impact on the lives of London residents, causing a sharp increase in the mortality rate of Londoners at that time, with deaths caused by heart failure, pneumonia, lung cancer, influenza, and other respiratory diseases multiplying. Therefore, by using the natural cultural symbol of "dense fog" throughout the story, it can better resonate with the British audience's feelings towards "death" and "horror." Subsequently, natural symbols such as heavy rain, midwood, and spiders further accentuate this atmosphere, permeating throughout the entire chapter.

2.2. Gothic use of artificial symbol

The second plot scene of the Thriller Bark chapter shifts to a huge abandoned three-masted sailing ship. As shown in the category of artificial symbols in Table 1, the protagonist passed through a dark cemetery, encountered an attack by zombies crawling out of the cemetery, and fled to an abandoned ancient castle. The interior of the castle is a classic British design, filled with zombies, ghosts, a gloomy underground laboratory, and a bloody arena. Each of these scene designs invariably references the classic artificial cultural symbols from British Gothic culture.

In the classification of life and folk custom symbols, "plague" is also the source of horror in Gothic literature [6], and this symbol is also used in the plot. The musician Brook, wandering in the Sea of Shadows, has had his shadow taken away and cannot be exposed to direct sunlight. He has been adrift in the Sea of Shadows for 50 years, showing signs of mental disorder. Prior to this, the pirate crew

that Brook was part of also experienced a plague, which ultimately resulted in the death of their captain.

2.3. Gothic use of character symbol

As indicated in the category of character symbols in Table 1, the first character to appear in the Thriller Bark chapter is the wandering musician Brook in the haunted sea area, whose image of wearing a British-style cape, holding a cane and teacup is filled with Gothic cultural symbols. Subsequently, the character Hilton's image as a sharp-eared bat, along with Gekko Moria, who slicks back his hair, has sharp teeth, and wears a black stand-up collar cape, allowed the audience to accurately identify the "vampire" as a British cultural symbol derived from their own cultural accumulation.

The term "vampire" has its origins in the religious conflicts of Eastern Europe. Count Dracula, who ruled over Transylvania, gained notoriety for his harsh treatment of a large number of civilians, leading to his brutal reputation as the archetype of a vampire. In the writings of authors, vampires sustain their supernatural abilities by feeding on the blood of humans, much like a ruthless count maintains his authority through murder and bloodshed. [6]. The term was later brought to England by immigrants [9], and it flourished with the rise of Romanticism. Initially, the cultural symbol of "vampires" was used to express resistance to the predatory actions of the nobility and Jews. Subsequently, the "vampire" gradually evolved into a cultural symbol associated with love and individualism [10]. In *One Piece*, the author selects the early connotations of the cultural symbol "vampire" to enhance the sense of oppression and gloom of the story's background.

Additionally, the prototype of the physician Ho Gu Barker, who is keen on zombie resurrection experiments, is believed to be Dr. Moreau, the protagonist in H.G. Wells's novel *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. As listed in Table 1, characters such as Cerberus, the guardian of the underworld, Persephone, the ghost princess capable of manipulating spirits, and the maid who enters the body of a stage actor to become a zombie in order to test the sincerity of a wealthy individual, all other main characters are imbued with the character colors of Gothic literature.

2.4. Gothic use of language symbol

Linguistic symbols demonstrate in Table 1, the author's process of re-encoding language, deepening the narrative core of British Gothic culture within the text. In the plot, after Brook and his companions died, due to the magic of the Revive-Revive Fruit, his soul returned from the underworld to his skeletal body, allowing him to be resurrected from the dead. Before his death, Brook and his companions recorded a song together using a conch shell, titled *Bink's Wine*. This plot draws on the scene before the maritime disaster in the classic British film, *Titanic*.

In addition, the main character, Gekko Moria, has the ability to steal people's shadows to gain energy. People who have had their shadows taken will turn to ash when exposed to direct sunlight and can only live in the perennially gloomy Phantom Sea area. This plot is a re-encoding of the traditional vampire novel's storyline, imposing the curse that vampires suffer upon numerous victims, which implicitly contains a deep-seated fear of "inability to return to society." The smallpox of the 18th century in England was repeatedly depicted in Gothic works, precisely because patients who had suffered from smallpox, due to their repulsive scars, were despised by others and unable to reintegrate into society, only able to wander like ghosts.[6] The fear of loneliness contributes to the adaptation of this plot, aligning it with the horrorcore elements found in Gothic novels.

In the book *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Dr. Moreau conducts surgical transplantation experiments on a nameless island, altering the bodies and brains of animals so that they can speak. This plot coincides with the scenario where Ho Gu Barker places human shadows into the bodies of animals to

create talking animal zombies. The difference lies in the fact that the fear in the original book's plot comes from technology, which transfers anxiety and horror to a futuristic sci-fi gothic setting, while the plot re-encoded in the animation still attributes fear to the supernatural ability of the Devil Fruit.

3. Japanese Cultural Fusion in the Chapter "Thriller Bark"

As shown in Table 2, the Japanese cultural symbols featured in the Thriller Bark Chapter are quite limited, only reflected in the white boat floating in the sea that appears in the beginning, the Japanese exorcism items that the main characters bring out when facing ghosts, swordsman zombies infused with Brook 's shadow. However, in the cultural system, the dominant elements such as language, customs, architecture and so on belong to the surface part of culture, while the core part includes values, history and attitudes to time and space[11].

The use of Japanese language symbols enables "*One Piece*" to inject Japanese values into the "Thriller Bark" story. In a manner of speaking, in *One Piece*, the use of British cultural symbols sets the stage for the story to take place, and the action style in line with Japanese values displayed by the main characters represented by Monkey D Luffy promotes the development of the story, making it merge into a new story of the fusion of British and Japanese cultures.

Table 2: Japanese Cultural Symbols in the Chapter "Thriller Bark"

| Symbol type | Concrete symbols | |
|--------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Natural | | |
| Artificial symbols | Utensil symbol | Floating white boat |
| | Artificial architectural symbol | |
| | Life and folk symbol | Japanese exorcism props |
| | Artistic symbol | |
| Character symbol | Swordsman zombies infused with Brooke's shadow | |
| Language symbol | Keep promise: A pact between the skull and the whale and they wait for each other for 50 years; they are willing to die for each other and regard death as a kind of honor; spiritual victory | |

3.1. The Use of Universal Value

Different cultures have similar universal values[12]. The presentation of the universal value of Japanese culture in *One Piece* has increased the intercultural acceptance of audiences from different countries.

In *One Piece*, the youth theme focusing on dreams and growth sets the overall tone of inspiration and humor for the work, dispelling the fear of the unknown in traditional British Gothic literature. There are many humanized descriptions of the life details of ghosts and zombies in the chapter "Thriller Bark", such as the tree-shaped zombies sitting together to drink, ghost paper figures who are afraid of fire, and boar bride zombies who are forced to marry. Moreover, the unease and fear of the Gothic setting are diluted by Luffy's unafraid attitude toward supernatural phenomena, the protagonist group's teasing of Cerberus's appearance, and Brook's ever-cheerful attitude.

At the end of this chapter, the protagonist group successfully defeated the evil forces led by Gekko Moria; the universal value of the inevitable victory of good over evil is mentioned again: the protagonist group successfully dispelled the Gothic terror that adds misfortune to people through their own optimism and efforts, making the victims whose shadows have been taken away can live under

the sun again. At the end of the chapter, Brook plays "Bink's Sake" again with the new partners, symbolizing the connection between the past and the present and the new beginning.

3.2. Integration of Violence Aesthetics of Japanese Bushido

"The Chrysanthemum and the Sword" by Ruth Benedict provides a comprehensive overview of the core characteristics of Japanese culture, in which the "chrysanthemum" and the "sword" respectively represent the gentle and elegant temperament of the Japanese and the spirit of Bushido, reflecting the contradictory character of the Japanese people, which is rough and warm, low self-esteem and pride[13]. Bushido spirit is the core value of Japanese violence aesthetics. The Japanese advocate the aesthetics of *mono no aware*, and appreciate the aestheticism of "the moment of death is eternal", so the presentation of the spirit of Bushido in Japanese works has an aesthetic trend of "vanishing beauty"[14], and pays more attention to the emotional expression of violence.

Although *One Piece* is an entertaining and uplifting animated series, it always carries the spirit of Bushido and the aestheticism of "vanishing beauty". In the 43 episodes of the chapter "Thriller Bark", there is a fight in almost every episode. In the course of the fights, Luffy, Solon and other people have been wounded and even almost died. The physiological state of "near death" is used to interpret the unique "vanishing beauty" of Japanese Bushido. This is because in the Bushido spirit, death can wash away stigma and shame and is an act of protecting self-respect[14]. The pirates often regard death as an honor in the plots. At the end of the chapter "Thriller Bark", Shichibukai is about to execute Luffy, but both Sauron and Sanji are willing to die in his place, as shown in Table 2. Finally, Bushido's cultivation of thought with spiritual supremacy moves Shichibukai, so he lets go of the protagonist group.

The emphasis on commitment in the spirit of Bushido also runs through the whole chapter "Thriller Bark". In Table 2, Before leaving, Brook and the crew make an agreement with Raab, a whale who has always followed the ship, to meet five years later; but due to the death of the crew and the curse, they are unable to fulfill the agreement. To keep their promise, the crew insists on recording the music with conches before they die, and this music is kept by Brook. Brook and the whale Raab have always remembered this agreement, which has lasted for 50 years.

3.3. The Re-update of Traditional Japanese Values

Hofstede proposed four dimensions to measure cultural differences: the power gap attribute, the avoidance of uncertainty, the individualism or collectivism attribute, and the degree of masculinity and femininity[15]. It is the cultural differences of these four dimensions that lead to misreading and incompatibility in the process of cultural communication. For the sake of spreading the work around the world, *One Piece* has re-updated some traditional Japanese values in the creation process.

In the traditional Japanese family structure, men and the elderly wield more power than women or young people. It is also pointed out in Hofstede's research that Japan is a country with the highest degree of masculinity[15]. However, in the world of "*One Piece*", where power is determined by strength, there are numerous women who enjoy strength and power, and women's power is also valued. In this work, there are some female characters who deviate from the traditional image of women in Japanese culture where they typically adhere to societal expectations and prioritize family responsibilities, such as Nami, who is keen to avoid danger and lead the team to solve puzzles, and Robin, who is calm and the main force of the team.

Hofstede's research indicates that Japan promotes a collectivist culture, whereas many countries around the world, such as the United States and Britain, promote an individualistic culture.[15]. For the cross-culture communication, "*One Piece*" combines individualistic and collectivist modes of action. For instance, in the chapter "Thriller Bark", even powerful individuals need the assistance of

partners, which underscores the importance of collective strength. Nevertheless, the fighting scenes in the animation are always in the form of 1V1, advocating relying on individual strength to win. Each character of the protagonist group has its own distinctive personality and story, and individual freedom and choice are constantly mentioned.

4. Conclusion and Expectations

Cultural convergence is the invasion of a strong culture to a weak culture, while cultural fusion emphasizes the equal relationship between cultures. The absorption, transformation and renewal of different cultures promote the optimization and diversity of culture. *One Piece* provides a grand and diversified cultural stage for the story using cultural symbols of various countries. This work enables the audience to feel the novelty brought by cultural differences while minimizing cultural misreading through the selection of universal values and the spirit of Bushido in Japanese culture, and the re-update of its own culture. Based on the integration of the culture of various countries, the spirit of Japanese Bushido, and the Japanese violent aesthetics of "vanishing beauty", *One Piece* has prompted global audiences to contemplate deeply on the themes of humanity, morality and warfare.

This approach of intercultural communication incorporating local culture with cultures of other countries makes *One Piece* a classic work, which also serves as a successful reference for future cross-cultural communication of cultural products. This research solely examines the work through an analysis of plot symbols, and does not delve into the creative background and ideation process behind the work. In addition, the fusion process of Chinese, Italian and Oceanian cultures in other chapters of *One Piece* could be subject to future study.

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