

Garbage and Social Context: Tawada Yōko’s “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away”[†]

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Author’s Statement

As educational environments become increasingly diversified with the spread of ICT and digital technologies, instruction in contemporary Japanese literature must help students become aware of how they acquire the meanings of the words necessary for reading comprehension. This need becomes particularly evident in the case of Tawada Yōko’s “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away.” While this work is closely connected to the real waste disposal problems of Japanese society at the time of its publication (the late 1990s), between then and now (2020 onward), for learners, there exists a considerable difference in awareness—in meaning—even with regard to something as simple as “paper waste.” I wrote this article with the view that interpretation of the story should attend to the historical and social background of garbage, while also taking regional differences and related factors into account.

I. Garbage in Textbooks

“**S**ince the Everyday Waste Disposal Act was revised, my life has changed considerably.” This is the opening sentence of Tawada Yōko’s 多和田葉子 “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away.”¹ The narrator—a writer—recalls

[†] This article is a translation of Anzai Shinji 安西晋二, “Gomi” no akuchuariti: Tawada Yōko ‘Sutenai onna’ o torimaku shakai jokyō 「ゴミ」のアクチュアリティー—多和田葉子「捨てない女」を取り巻く社会状況—, *Kokugakuin daigaku kyōikugaku kenkyūshitsu kiyō* 國學院大學教育学研究室紀要 58 (2024), pp. 19–31. Translated by Dylan L. Tōda.

¹ Published as “Sutenai onna” 捨てない女, *Tokyo shinbun* 東京新聞, 27 November 1999. All translations of the story in this paper are based on the Japanese text as it appears in Tawada, *Hikari to zerachin no Raipuchibbi*.

that she used to be able to bundle up botched drafts and take them to the neighborhood garbage collection point each Monday as “burnable trash.” After the revision of the disposal law, however, she hesitates to throw anything away once she learns that “even the smallest piece of garbage costs one hundred yen per one hundred grams to dispose of.” Since the “garbage” in question consists primarily of paper—specifically, her drafts—what is at stake in the choice of whether to discard or keep it is the words on those pages. At the most basic level, then, “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away” can be understood as a narrative that articulates a writer’s feelings toward words.

This work was included in textbooks issued in the 2023 academic year, including *Bungaku kokugo* 文学国語 (Chikuma Shobō, January 2023) and *Seisen bungaku kokugo* 精選文学国語 (Sanseidō, March 2023). In the case of the latter, the “Aims of the Unit” section in Teaching Materials II explains that “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away” is intended to have students “follow the development of the narrative in order to understand the narrator’s emotions, while also paying attention to the distinctive features of diction and expression, and to consider the issues that the work’s fictional world poses to the contemporary moment.” The “distinctive features of diction and expression” here likely refer to discourse related to the act of writing as consciously reflected upon by the writer-narrator, as well as to the playful, word-centered discourse scattered throughout the text. Teaching Materials II pays particular attention to these aspects, and the questions included in *Seisen bungaku kokugo* likewise appear to focus largely on the narrator’s emotions and on language within the short story.² Accordingly, the “issues that the work’s fictional world poses to the contemporary moment” concern the impact that the writer-narrator’s emotions and the short story’s distinctive use of language have on

² In Sanseidō’s *Seisen bungaku kokugo*, p. 179, the “Task A” questions accompanying the story are as follows:

- (1) The narrator says, “I’ve never been able to like the word ‘disposal’ (*shori* 処理)” (p. 174, lower, line 1). Why is that? Think about it.
- (2) The text states, “Even to write a single short story” (174, bottom, line 2). What kinds of garbage are produced in the process of writing a short story, and what methods does the narrator come up with to avoid putting out garbage? Organize your thoughts on each.
- (3) What does the narrator think is necessary in order to improve “the quality of a short story”? Consider this using the following expressions as clues.
 - “If you put out garbage, you’re a worthless novelist.” (p. 176, lower, line 14)
 - “If no garbage comes out, I can’t keep thinking.” (p. 177, lower, line 9)
- (4) The passage reads, “I brought a large curry pot to a boil ... When spring comes, what kind of flowers would bloom if I sowed seeds here?” (p. 178, lower, lines 1–9). What kind of feelings on the part of the narrator are expressed here? Discuss.

In addition, “Task B” asks: “In ‘The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away,’ words and characters themselves play an important role in the development of the short story. Identify expressions that left an impression on you, and discuss their function.” This question strongly foregrounds the “distinctive features of diction and expression” emphasized in the “Aims of the Unit” (p. 179).

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readers (students), or more broadly, the relationship between words and people. Given that Teaching Materials II also suggests an awareness of and a dismantling of what it calls the "institutional" dimensions surrounding language,³ it is clear that "distinctive features of diction and expression" are treated, from a textbook perspective, as the most important issue to be emphasized.

Although the influence of such "institutional" aspects of language is enormous, it is not easily recognized in everyday life. Reading with an awareness of this influence can certainly be framed as one of the "issues that the work's fictional world poses to the contemporary moment." It is also a legitimate learning aim when teaching "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away." I have no objection whatsoever to a lesson plan for the story that involves close reading with an awareness of how the short story is written or narrated.

Turning to textbooks published by Chikuma Shobō, "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away" has been continuously included from *Gendaibun B* 現代文B (January 2014), through *Gendaibun B kaiteiban* 現代文B 改訂版 (January 2018), to *Bungaku kokugo*. In contrast to the Sanseidō textbook, in the accompanying teacher's manual, entitled *Gakushū shidō no kenkyū* 学習指導の研究, lesson introductions consistently mention the need to consider the issue of garbage in a concrete, real-world sense. The "Points for Instruction" section of the manual asks about the nature of the "Everyday Waste Disposal Act" mentioned at the beginning of the short story. The explanation adds, "We should note that the starting point for the excessive growth of imagination in this work is imagining what would happen if the current situation—where garbage disposal incurs costs—were taken to more extreme lengths."⁴ In Chikuma Shobō's textbooks, then, garbage in the real-world, generally accepted social sense is strongly foregrounded as a lens through which to read this story. Practical issues such as "the current situation—where garbage disposal incurs costs" are also deeply connected to the "issues that the work's fictional world poses to the contemporary moment" discussed in Sanseidō's Teaching Materials II. Indeed, many students may feel the problem of garbage disposal is a more

³ In the section "Considerations Surrounding the Work" in Teaching Materials II (p. 193), it is stated that "the short story 'The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away' unfolds around the extremely real-world problem of how to deal with the 'garbage'—spoiled drafts—that arises in the process of writing fiction." The relationship between "institutional" structures and "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away" is explained as follows:

We readers who live within institutional structures (that is, we who are habituated to viewing language as a means of transmission) constantly seek something central—meaning or value—within words. As a result, we do not hear the voices of what is hidden behind that meaning or value. Precisely for this reason, the narrator ("I") of "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away" covers over the "central thing" (the finished work), and by covering it over, renders visible the splendor of words hidden in its shadow and the lively presence of the "characters" that dissolve in the pot (p. 194).

⁴ The quotation is from Shimizu Yoshinori's 清水良典 discussion of the story in *Gakushū shidō no kenkyū*, p. 112.

immediate contemporary issue than questions about language itself.

That said, it is understandable that some might raise doubts about an instructional policy like that of Chikuma Shobō's textbooks. While "there is certainly value in having students think about social problems," one might argue that "the essential task in reading fiction is first to grasp the expressions of the text itself carefully, and that what one can think about after reading the short story should come at a later stage."⁵ In Japanese language classes, it is indeed important to begin with a close reading of the short story itself. At the same time, however, contemporary classrooms increasingly involve students learning while consulting devices, making it easy to look up word meanings in external sources. The aforementioned textbooks position the "Everyday Waste Disposal Act" as a "fictional" law.⁶ Readers (students) might quickly look up Japan's actual "Act on Waste Management and Public Cleaning" (*Haikibutsu no shori oyobi seisō ni kansuru hōritsu* 廃棄物の処理及び清掃に関する法律; commonly known as the "Waste Disposal Act" or *Haikibutsu shori hō* 廃棄物処理法) and begin to wonder what, precisely, is meant by calling the law in the short story "fictional." From there, it would take little time to arrive at the issue of costs in real-world garbage disposal. In a situation where elements that can easily disrupt close reading of the short story itself are present, a lesson plan like that found in Chikuma Shobō's textbooks—one that begins by asking students about real-world garbage and then has them attend to the differences and distance between that reality and the "garbage" within the short story—can hardly be called unnatural. Even within Sanseidō's instructional approach, which emphasizes the "institutional" dimensions surrounding language, such questioning ought to be treated as important.

The concrete realities of garbage and its disposal differ by country or region (the municipality the reader belongs to), and the meanings that emerge from them will likewise vary. Garbage, like language, is an entity that is part of everyone's daily life. Precisely for that reason, there is significance in reading the discourses surrounding garbage in "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away" while keeping in view real-world, socially shared understandings of garbage and garbage disposal.

II. Garbage in Historical Context

At the beginning of "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away," the revision of the "Everyday Waste Disposal Act" is explained as follows:

⁵ Inoue, "Tawada Yōko 'Sutenai onna' no kōzōteki dokkai," pp. 51-60.

⁶ With regard to the "Everyday Waste Disposal Act" and its "revision," *Seisen bungaku kokugo* identifies it as a "fictional law" (p. 175). Likewise, the *Gakushū shidō no kenkyū* for Chikuma Shobō's textbooks from *Gendaibun B* onward explain in the "Points for Instruction" that it is "a fictional law" (p. 112). Inoue, "Tawada Yōko 'Sutenai onna' no kōzōteki dokkai"—based on *Gendaibun B kaiteiban*—also states that "as the teacher's guide indicates, this revision is fictional" (p. 53).

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Over the last ten years, garbage has increased too much, and disposal costs have reached the point where they can no longer be covered by tax revenue alone. As a result, not only bulky waste but even the smallest piece of garbage must be collected in exchange for a disposal fee of one hundred yen per one hundred grams.

The name of the aforementioned real-world Japanese law does not include the word *seikatsu* 生活, translated here as “everyday.” Moreover, the “revision” of the “Everyday Waste Disposal Act” in the story entails a pay-per-weight system—“one hundred yen per one hundred grams”—for disposing garbage. Needless to say, in contemporary Japan, ordinary household garbage does not incur such a cost. These discrepancies in both the law’s name and the costs are likely why textbooks such as *Seisen bungaku kokugo* treat the law as fictional. Describing the law as “fictitious” presupposes the reality of contemporary Japanese society. From the standpoint of the reader’s everyday experience, of course, a legal revision that imposes such disposal fees can only be described as fictional. Yet the question of the gap between this fictional scenario and real-world garbage disposal is not one to be dismissed lightly.

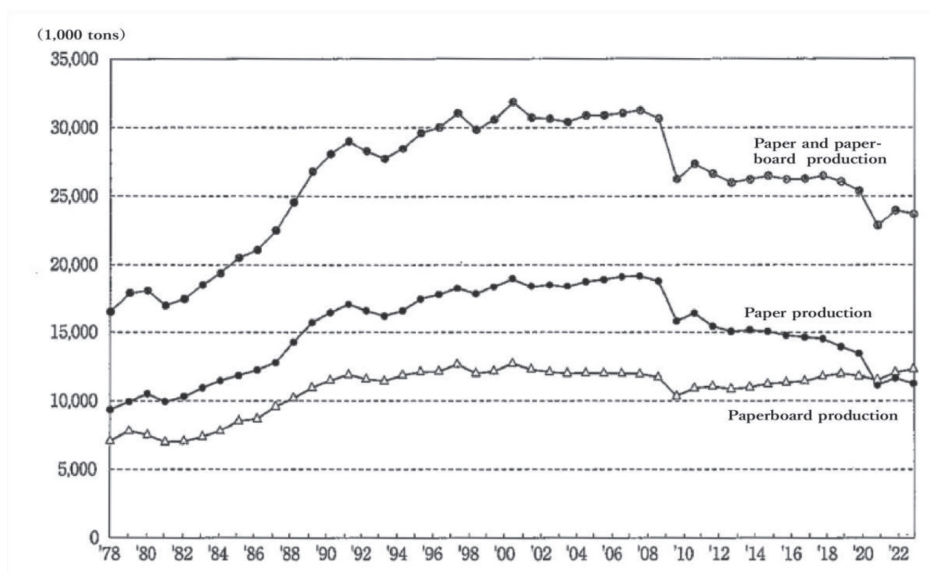


Figure 1. Trends in Paper and Paperboard Production (graph)

For example, if we count backward from 1999, the year the story was published, the “last ten years” in which “garbage has increased too much” corresponds to the late 1980s onward. The late 1980s were the years of Japan’s bubble economy and a period of

population growth, and garbage did indeed increase. At the time, Ōsawa Masaaki 大澤 正明 notes, there was both a shortage of incineration facilities and a sharp rise in paper consumption.⁷ As **Figure 1**⁸ shows, per capita it rose steeply from around 1986 through 1991; after peaking around 2000, by 2022 it had returned to a level not dramatically different from the pre-increase period. As paper consumption increases, so does paper waste. The phrase “the last ten years” in the story appears to correspond to precisely this real-world situation. Yet contemporary readers (students), living at a time when paper use itself is on the decline in tandem with the proliferation of digital media, may well have difficulty imagining paper waste when they encounter the line “Over the last ten years, garbage has increased too much”—even if they readily call to mind bulky waste or plastic waste. To ignore this gap in historical context and simply subsume the issue under the single label of a “fictional” legal revision seems somewhat heavy-handed.

It is also worth recalling that the “Act on Waste Management and Public Cleaning” was first enacted in 1970, as a sweeping revision of the earlier Cleaning Act (*Seisō hō* 清掃法). Since then, the law has been revised repeatedly up to the present. Changes in society and people’s lifestyles are directly connected to waste disposal, making repeated revisions inevitable. Tokyo, for instance, first introduced fee-based semi-transparent garbage bags in 1993.⁹ At the time, the semi-transparency raised privacy concerns, and the fact that the bags were not free also provoked substantial backlash among Tokyo residents. Yet today, paid garbage bags have become the norm in many municipalities. Even before “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away” was published, the disposal of not only

⁷ While noting that “during the ten years of the high economic growth period, per-capita daily waste increased by as much as 533 grams, in contrast to only 139 grams around the bubble era, he states the following about increase during the latter period:

During the high economic growth period, incineration facilities had not yet been sufficiently developed, so a simple logic prevailed: if garbage increased, one could simply build more incinerators. At that time, opposition movements against incinerator construction were not yet significant. By contrast, during the bubble era, incineration infrastructure had largely been completed, making it difficult to imagine simply building another facility in response to increased waste. Opposition movements against incinerator construction also grew serious, and this was around the time when the term “NIMBY” (Not in My Backyard) began to be heard. Even more troubling was the sharp rise in the cost of constructing incineration facilities during the bubble era. ...

Even though the increase was only a little over 100 grams, why did waste increase during this period? Most likely because paper consumption rose sharply.

Ōsawa further points to “the increase in cardboard due to the spread of home delivery services” and “the spread of copy machines” as major factors behind the rise in paper consumption. Ōsawa Masaaki, *Kyōkasho de wa wakaranai gomi no sengo-shi*, pp. 149-151.

⁸ Figure 1 is based on Koshi Saisei Sokushin Sentā, *Koshi handobukku 2023*, p. 37.

⁹ In November 1993, the Tokyo metropolitan wards introduced a designated garbage bag system (paid garbage disposal). See Table 5 on major waste disposal systems and garbage policies since the enactment of the waste disposal act in Taguchi, *Gomi shakaigaku kenkyū*, p. 185.

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bulky waste but also other general household waste (such as "trash to be burned") was not free. While some municipalities in Japan still do not charge households for the cost of doing so, this may simply reflect the fact that costs have not (yet) risen to the level of "one hundred yen per one hundred grams." One might also recall the recent shift to paid plastic shopping bags at supermarkets and convenience stores as part of efforts to reduce plastic waste. Items that were once free (or inexpensive) become paid services (or expensive), provoking backlash—a scenario we have witnessed repeatedly in reality. As stated in Chikuma Shobō's aforementioned teaching manual, "one hundred yen per one hundred grams" does represent imagining what would happen if "the current situation were taken to more extreme lengths." However, there is no guarantee that the costs of real-world waste disposal will not increase in the future. Even if "one hundred yen per one hundred grams" is a radical idea, it may nevertheless be one possible future. The society depicted in "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away" can be read not simply as a "fictitious" world, but as a possible present that might have been, and a possible future that could yet come to pass, in relation to waste disposal.

The opening section of "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away" has been analyzed in teaching guides and pedagogical discussions as focusing on the narrator's emotions and linguistic sensibility—her observation that the term "burnable trash" seems to express "the burning passion of those being discarded," her dislike of the word "disposal," and her desire to burn up "as garbage" her "life force" and "continue to drift through the air as a fireball even after death." These passages cannot be overlooked in deepening our understanding of both the narrator's inner life and the acts of writing and language use. They also relate to the narrator's attitude and emotions toward writing fiction that continue throughout the story. At the same time, the writer-narrator states that after the legal revision imposing "one hundred yen per one hundred grams," she "can no longer casually change the plot of a short story." The narrator, who perceives "the burning passion of those being discarded" in "burnable trash" and rejects the "bland" quality of the repeated act of "disposal" in everyday life, comes to find value in the writing mistakes (i.e., "garbage") that arise in the process of writing fiction. Yet even so, "one hundred yen per one hundred grams is expensive." The problem of garbage disposal becomes inseparable from the narrator's imagination and the act of writing fiction. Creative work is also the foundation that supports the narrator's livelihood as a writer. Consequently, the legal revision that raises disposal fees becomes a pressure on the narrator's life. This situation evokes for readers not only the contemporary circumstances of the story's publication year, but also the social conditions surrounding waste disposal that have persisted to the present day. In other words, the very real issue of garbage disposal that exists in the background to describing the setting as "fictional" presses heavily upon the act of reading as well.

III. “Not Throwing Away” = Reducing Garbage

The second paragraph of the story describes the narrator’s stance and feelings toward writing fiction. Even when “writing a single short story,” the narrator explains, “jotting down ideas” and “doing research at the library” means “using up about thirty sheets of paper,” and “writing one piece as a warm-up” produces “another thirty sheets of garbage.” Furthermore, “writing one preliminary prevention draft” creates “another thirty sheets of garbage,” and “then when I write the real thing all at once, it rarely works out well on the first or second try.” The creative process of writing fiction (or rather, the method of creation) is inseparable from generating “garbage.” This second paragraph begins with the sentence: “Even so, one hundred yen per one hundred grams is expensive.” The production of such “garbage” that accompanies the act of writing thus suggests the narrator’s feeling that, because the cost is high, she can no longer “casually change the plot” (or “casually” throw things away).

It is in this context, where the issue of disposal fees increasingly comes to the fore alongside the narrator’s creative method, that the story continues with the episode: “Along with a letter, an advertisement for a big furniture sale arrives. ... This single sheet of advertisement paper is already going to become garbage. So I took out scissors and tried cutting out photographs of chairs, tables, chests of drawers, cupboards, and so on.” The development may feel somewhat abrupt, but because it is narrated within the same paragraph, the narrator’s writing method, furniture, and advertisement paper are treated as continuous elements in the problem of how to deal with the high cost of trash disposal—the pressing issue for her. Furniture, too, “becomes bulky garbage once it gets old,” at which point one has no choice but to pay expensive disposal fees. The narrator goes so far as to cut out the advertisement photos, “line them up on the table,” and “cut out two women wearing aprons from the same advertisement.” Here, the narrator says that “it’s no fun playing alone.” So she “invites the sisters from next door, the Kawamoto family,” to play. Cutting out and arranging advertisement photos is a kind of play akin to playing house. The narrator says, moreover, “I was secretly pleased that garbage had become a toy.” In other words, the advertisement, which would otherwise have been garbage destined for disposal, is regenerated into a toy for playing with children. The narrator devises ways to reduce garbage and recycles the advertisement as a new resource. In Japan, “government administration-led waste reduction and recycling began to be developed in earnest only after the collapse of the bubble economy, from the 1990s onward.”¹⁰ The Basic Act on Establishing a Sound Material-Cycle Society (*Junkangata shakai keisei suishin kihonhō* 循環型社会形成推進基本法)—which introduced the priority

¹⁰ Kojima, *Gomi no hyakka jiten*, p. 61. This encyclopedia summarizes early 1990s waste reduction and recycling campaigns as follows (pp. 61-62):

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ordering of the so-called 3Rs (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle)—was promulgated in 2000. If we situate "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away"—where the likes of writing and wrapping paper are the primary forms of garbage—in this context, it is also significant that the Container and Packaging Recycling Act (*Yōki hōsō risaikuru hō* 容器包装リサイクル法), which governs the recycling of paper-based waste such as cardboard boxes, paper boxes, and paper packaging, was enacted and reached full implementation in the period from 1995 through 2000.¹¹ The "last ten years" leading up to 1999—the year the story was published—was thus also a period in which issues surrounding garbage disposal advanced with particular intensity. Whatever one might think about the desirability of such legal revisions in reality, the succession of "recycling laws," including the Container and Packaging Recycling Act, can be regarded as a defining feature of the 1990s.¹² Since the narrator's actions resemble reducing and recycling—undertaken with the intention of reducing garbage—this historical background cannot be ignored. It becomes possible to say that the narrator, who must confront high disposal fees, is also articulating an intensely real-world problem: how to reduce garbage, alongside the question of how to write fiction.

The mother who comes to pick up the sisters can be positioned in the same context. When she hands the narrator "a box about the size of a pillow wrapped in department

Against the backdrop of heightened concern for global environmental issues following the 1992 Earth Summit and the worsening waste problem, the 1991 revision of the Waste Disposal Act and the enactment of recycling laws gave momentum to government-led waste reduction and recycling initiatives. Municipalities across Japan launched a wide range of campaigns focusing on the likes of not using product packaging, bringing one's own shopping bags, the 3Rs (reducing, reusing, recycling), reducing trash by 10% or 100g per person per day, and not creating, not buying, and not putting out trash. In September 1992, under the leadership of the Ministry of Health and Welfare (Kōseishō 厚生省) and the Japan Waste Management Association (Zenkoku toshi seisō kaigi 全国都市清掃会議), the National Association for the Promotion of Waste Reduction (Gomi genryōka suishin kokumin kaigi ごみ減量化推進国民会議) was established in order to promote waste reduction and recycling through cooperation among citizens, businesses, and government, leading to nationwide campaigns.

¹¹ The Ministry of the Environment's webpage "What Is the Container and Packaging Recycling Act?" explains its implementation history as follows: "In 1995, the government enacted the Container and Packaging Recycling Act (officially, the Act on the Promotion of Sorted Collection and Recycling of Containers and Packaging [*Yōki hōsō ni kakaru bumbetsu shūshū oyobi saishōhinka no sokushin tō ni kansuru hōritsu* 容器包装に係る分別収集及び再商品化の促進等に関する法律]) to construct a general waste recycling system for container and packaging waste from households. This system was partially implemented in 1997 and fully implemented in 2000" (Kankyōshō, "Yōki hōsō risaikuru hō to wa").

¹² Taguchi, *Gomi shakaigaku kenkyū*, p. 184, states the following regarding the succession of recycling laws in the 1990s:

As evidenced by the frequent revisions of the Waste Disposal Act after 1990, the enactment of the Recycling Act (*Risaikuru hō* リサイクル法) in 1991, the Container and Packaging Recycling Act in 1995, the Home Appliance Recycling Act (*Kaden risaikuru hō* 家電リサイクル法) in 1998, and the Food Recycling Act (*Shokuhin risaikuru hō* 食品リサイクル法) and Construction Recycling Act (*Kensetsu risaikuru hō* 建設リサイクル法) in 2000, as well as the October 2000 enactment of the Basic Act for Establishing a Sound Material-Cycle Society, the waste-related legal system after 1990 stands in sharp contrast to the relatively simple system that existed prior to that decade.

store wrapping paper,” the narrator says, “Oh no, I thought—but it was too late.” Sweets nearing their expiration date are nothing more than objects on the verge of becoming garbage. When the narrator opens the wrapped box, “wrapping paper from a Japanese confectionery shop appears,” and inside that there is even “a square tin” (“metal garbage”). The narrator, who cannot take the mother’s act as a simple courtesy, surmises that she “must have been secretly waiting for a chance to shove this garbage onto someone else.” Since it is garbage, a disposal fee will be incurred. To avoid this, the narrator comes up with the idea of eating the sweets and “cutting the two outer layers of wrapping paper into postcard-sized pieces, and writing sentences on each one.” She then explains the solution: once she eats “one rice cracker and its small bag is empty,” she will “fold one sheet of paper with writing on it and slip it in, then put the bag back in the tin.” After placing writing in every small bag, she closes “the lid with the silica gel still inside so the papers won’t go stale,” attaches a title, and brings it to the publisher, thinking to herself, “Since this is not garbage but a fine short story, surely they won’t say they don’t want to take it.”

Wrapping paper, tin (and, for that matter, silica gel)—everything that would have become garbage—is regenerated into a new value (resource): a short story. The narrator’s thought can thus be read as a continuation of recycling ideas aimed at reducing garbage, beginning with the advertisement episode. The third paragraph then begins: “If you put out garbage, you’re the dregs of a novelist. What accumulates are ideas, fragments, memories, garbage.” The first “garbage” here is something that, if one “puts it out,” makes one “the dregs of a novelist.” That is, it is garbage for which there is no path other than disposal. The narrator, however, refuses—or refuses to try—to put out such garbage. In that sense, the narrator is not “the dregs of a novelist.” The second “garbage,” by contrast, is listed among what accumulates alongside “ideas, fragments, memories.” This garbage is presented as a value (resource) indispensable for writing fiction. Although the same word “garbage” is used in both cases, the meanings are markedly different. Given that the context is grounded in fiction writing, both instances of the word perhaps could be replaced with “words” or “characters.” Yet the first “garbage,” which would produce “the dregs of a novelist,” has no path other than disposal. In seeking to avoid that outcome, the narrator converts garbage into something valuable—something that stands alongside “ideas, fragments, memories.” The third paragraph vividly expresses precisely this stance:

If you put out garbage, you’re the dregs of a novelist. What accumulates are ideas, fragments, memories, garbage. What accumulates is what has value. Rather than polishing rusty things (*sabi-ta mono* 錆びたもの), you build an aesthetics of rust-like imperfection (*sabi no bigaku* サビの美学); with mold (*kabi* カビ), you make it bold splendor (*kabi* 華美); you gather together dirt, collapse, dust, oxidized things, and draw the face of the world.

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Through this wordplay-driven prose that uses homophones, the narrator effects a striking transformation of value not only for garbage but also for things like rust and mold, which would ordinarily be destined only for disposal. What is more, she proposes to “draw the face of the world” (the center or symbol of society) using “dirt,” “collapse,” “dust,” and “oxidation”—things that society generally shuns. Here, then, the narrator’s stance is vividly on display: in order “not to throw things away,” she generates new value. The fourth paragraph, too, begins with value-shifting homophones: “Speaking of garbage (*gomi* ゴミ), one thinks of the five tastes (*gomi* 五味) the tongue perceives—and within the phrase ‘bulky garbage’ (*sodai gomi* 粗大ゴミ) is contained the word ‘supreme pleasure’ (*dai-gomi* 醍醐味). Furthermore, exploring new possibilities of value, the narrator remarks that things normally disposed of as waste—“carrot peels,” “pepper stems,” “potato sprouts,” “onion skins,” “pumpkin seeds,” “green bean strings”—could produce striking photographs by “noticing their colors, varied like flowers” and using those colors “to create negatives.” The third and fourth paragraphs describe this flexible thinking about how to rescue garbage from the “bland” practice of disposal and give it value and meaning so as to “not throw it away.” When we read with garbage as the focus, the short story’s overall structure becomes clearer. The narrator is trying to transform garbage that must be disposed of into something with different value and meaning.

The fifth paragraph introduces “Stardust,” a program that “collects only the sentences discarded while writing a short story and then reorganizes them.” From the perspective of waste reduction, this too is a form of reuse. The narrator is then encouraged by a friend to write using a word processor, but says, “I tried it, but I can’t get the work to move along. If no garbage comes out, I can’t keep thinking.” With the creation and deletion of data, the narrator cannot write fiction as she wishes. As she has already said in the second paragraph, for her, writing fiction and producing garbage (in the material sense) remain inseparable.

The narrator produces garbage and transforms it into something valuable (a new resource). This is also her creative method, which a word processor is not compatible with. She continues: “Because I can’t pay the garbage disposal fees, this is illegal, but yesterday I secretly burned last week’s spoiled drafts in the backyard.” In the real world as well, open-air burning of waste is prohibited.¹³ The narrator’s emotions here, however, derive less from illegality than from an Okinawan Obon お盆 custom (*uchikabi*) rooted

¹³ According to Kojima, *Gomi no hyakka jiten*, p. 104, “Household incineration of waste was once common, but due to dioxins becoming a social problem, such practices have been discouraged or prohibited. Open-air burning using the ground or drums is prohibited under the Act on Special Measures Against Dioxins (*Daiokishinrui taisaku tokubetsu sochi hō* ダイオキシン類対策特別措置法).” This act was enacted and promulgated in July 1999 and came into force in January 2000. An article from January 2000 notes that bans on open-air burning prompted by dioxins and foul odors were implemented by prefectures such as Hiroshima and Miyazaki as early as March 1999

in the idea that “burned paper goes to the other world,” and that “paper money is burned and sent so that the dead won’t have trouble with money in the next world.” The narrator imagines: “That means the dead are reading my botched drafts. I don’t want the dead to read such failures.” This appears to be why she feels it left “a bad aftertaste.” The narrator’s botched drafts, i.e., garbage, are burned and imagined as being read by the dead; this is similar to reuse. Since she is attending more to the dead (the story’s readers) over the legal status of her actions, the narrator even says she might “burn and send a finished book” to them. In other words, even if the physical manuscript paper or books undergo a material transformation by being burned and going to the other world, the narrator still desires that her work be read by others (that it be reused).

In the final scene, the narrator describes a method she learned from “a friend who does botanical dyeing”: “If you simmer spoiled manuscript paper for about fifteen minutes in hot water with salt and vinegar, the characters dissolve into the water, and the manuscript paper turns white again. If you stick it on the wall and let it dry, you can use it again.” This is clearly a form of reuse of the paper used for her drafts. She boils the paper in a pot; hiragana, katakana, and kanji float up in the water; she “scoops them up with a ladle and tosses them out the kitchen window into the backyard.” The narrator then imagines: “The crumpled characters seeped into the soil and disappeared. When spring comes, what kind of flowers would bloom if I sowed seeds here?” The image of characters (words) sprouting into flowers (new life) suggests recycling.¹⁴ The act of conferring new value upon what has lost its value was also the narrator’s creative method. In that sense, “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away” can be read as a story that, against the background of the social conditions surrounding garbage in its own time, overlays the reduction of garbage with a method of writing fiction, and narrates these in figurative terms.

IV. Imagining Beyond the Classroom Through Garbage

Behind the narrator, who repeatedly speaks of waste reduction and recycling, we can discern the broader trends of the time and society surrounding waste disposal. Certainly,

(“Noyaki, chiiki o towazu kinshi: Akushū bōshi hō kaisei shi kisei kyōka, bassoku mo kentō—Kankyōchō” 野焼き、地域を問わず禁止—悪臭防止法改正し規制強化、罰則も検討—環境庁, *Chihō gyōsei* 地方行政, 2000.1.31). Subsequently, outdoor burning of waste was prohibited nationwide through the September 2000 revision of the Waste Disposal Act, not the Offensive Odor Control Act (*Akushū bōshi hō* 悪臭防止法). It can thus be said that, following the emergence of the dioxin problem in the 1980s, the 1990s saw a clear shift toward discouraging and regulating the burning of garbage in private spaces such as gardens.

¹⁴ In Chikuma Shobō, *Gendaibun B: Gakushū shidō no kenkyū*, p. 118, the passage beginning “I scooped them up with a ladle and tossed them out the kitchen window into the backyard” is annotated as follows: “Characters are transformed into an image of living beings that constitute the source of rich flavor, and are further recycled as nutrients within the soil”; “the spoiled characters converge into an image as though they had been incorporated into the recycling of life in the natural world.” However, it can be argued that in this story, the 3Rs are embedded throughout the text, not only in this passage.

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close reading of the text is essential in Japanese language classes. Yet in the case of a work like this, turning one's attention to the social conditions that surround it should not be neglected either.

According to data released by the Ministry of the Environment in March 2022, "as of March 2019, 63.5% of municipalities have user fees for household burnable waste (including municipalities that have introduced user fees only in some areas ...)."¹⁵ Year by year, the number of municipalities implementing paid garbage disposal has increased. At the same time, there are, of course, regions where this is not the case. Conversely, there are municipalities such as the town of Kamikatsu 上勝, in Katsura 勝浦 District, Tokushima Prefecture, which declared "zero waste"¹⁶ in 2003—the first in Japan to do so—and sorts garbage into forty-five categories, the most in the country. Attitudes toward garbage differ by region. In recent years, many municipalities have also shifted from writing "burnable trash" to "trash to be burned." If even the former phrase ceases to be taken for granted by readers, then disparities in interpretation—by region, and by time period—will only widen. By 2023, with ideas such as recycling widespread, the overall volume of garbage has been trending downward compared to the 1990s. Given these conditions, pedagogical questioning that annotates the social circumstances and historical developments connected to real-world garbage disposal will only become more necessary.

The historical background of "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away" includes the social situation in which the issue of waste disposal developed into the concept of recycling. This cannot be ignored when reading it in 2023 (and thereafter). Indeed, compared to 1999, it should be easier for contemporary readers to grasp the narrator's operating principle of reuse and recycling. If the idea of "zero waste" becomes even more widespread, readings that foreground resource recovery alongside real-world social conditions surrounding garbage may become more prevalent. In that case, the narrator's behavior could even be reevaluated as a resource-conscious stance aimed at eliminating waste. Both the time in which the story was published and the time in which it is read—and the social and historical backgrounds of each—serve as keys to unlocking "The Woman Who Doesn't Throw Things Away." Even though the setting is fictional, the story world remains closely in contact with real social conditions.

Speaking of "fictional," we must also return to the Stardust program, described as "a program ... that collects only the sentences discarded when writing a short story and then reorganizes them." In Sanseidō's *Seisen bungaku kokugo*, it is annotated as a

¹⁵ See the section 1.3 on the introduction of waste fees in Kankyōshō Kankyō Saisei Shigen Junkan-kyoku Haikibutsu Tekisei Shori Suishin-ka, "Ippan haikibutsu shori yūryōka no tebiki."

¹⁶ Teramoto, "Chiiki shakai no dezain to zero weisuto no keizaigaku," pp. 12-13, argues that "eliminating 'waste' is the origin of zero waste, not 'zero garbage,'" and explains that "zero waste does not simply treat outputs as unnecessary objects, but instead understands them as products or reproduced goods within biological and technological cycles."

“fictional computer program.” It is fictional in the sense that no program with such a name and function appears to be circulating in the real world. Yet for readers (students) encountering the story in 2023 and beyond, it is not necessarily something wholly outside their own reality. The emergence of generative AI, such as ChatGPT—systems that automatically generate text based on accumulated data—is recent enough to remain vivid in memory. AI that learns and generates not only text but also a wide range of content has capacities that exceed those of Stardust. Setting aside for the moment the question of whether generative AI is good or bad, or the quality of its writing, contemporary high school students would likely find it easy to understand Stardust by mapping it onto technologies that are currently in use. In 1999, when “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away” was published, smartphones were scarce in Japan, and the internet had only just begun to spread. The technology and social conditions surrounding readers today are thus profoundly different from those of that time. And yet, unintentionally, the story even depicted a future linked to reality. Of course, this is a perspective grounded in 1999. If one pays close attention to technological aspects, however, Stardust can no longer be said to be straightforwardly fictional. It bears a resemblance to present-day technologies. The disposal fee of “one hundred yen per one hundred grams,” “Stardust,” and content that calls to mind the 3Rs—this topical arrangement of discourse that takes garbage as a point of departure constitutes the core of this story. It becomes nearly impossible to interpret the story while bracketing out real-world conditions. This is precisely why, through “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away,” we ought to ask how the reality closely bound up with readers’ daily lives relates to the short story, and to demand a mode of thought that moves outward, beyond the space of reading.

As teaching guides and pedagogical discussions have already argued, this is a short story in which the narrator articulates powerful feelings toward words. The narrator’s will to never let go of words suggests her own method of writing fiction. Yet it would be a mistake to overlook the point that the narrator’s methodology of recycling words is linked to the very real waste disposal problems of the 1990s, including recycling. When viewed through the lens of real-world waste disposal problems, the story brings to the surface the narrator’s principle of transforming and regenerating the value of words and garbage.

Just as garbage issues change along with social conditions, the meanings evoked by the discourses surrounding garbage within the short story are not universal. Readings of “The Woman Who Doesn’t Throw Things Away” may shift along with time and with social circumstances. The same is true of Stardust. Interpreting the story requires a gaze directed both toward the 1990s, when the short story was published, and toward the contemporary moment in which it is read—toward each era and its social conditions. If we are to become more consciously aware of why we are reading it as educational material now, we require knowledge and imagination that widen our field of vision beyond the

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classroom. Readers, too, may come to recognize—like the narrator—the importance of transforming values and resources through practices of reducing, reusing, and recycling. Tawada's short story overflows with ideas that reject the conceptual habit of too easily declaring words and things to be unnecessary and that seek to regain new value and meaning.

(Translated by Dylan L. Toda)

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