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The World of ‘S’ and the World of ‘L’: Lesbian Influences on Class S Fiction

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Abstract

In this paper, I will analyze the interconnections between Class S and lesbian identity as exemplified by Yoshiya Nobuko’s early writings with the goal of reconciling two schools of thought—that Class S is inherently lesbian fiction, or that it does not depict lesbians at all. To do so, I will be examining “Yellow Rose” through the lens of biographical criticism in order to illuminate the inherent connection between the themes present in Yoshiya Nobuko’s writings and her lived experience as a same-sex attracted woman.
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Introduction

A new student transfers to a prestigious all-girls high school and, despite her plainness, catches the eye of the most popular girl in school. The relationship between the two girls is deeply intimate and emotional, and is allowed to flourish in the secluded, almost dream-like world of the all-girls school. This setting, however, also makes implicit the eventual end of the relationship upon graduation, when the girls are expected to leave behind their childish love in order to enter into respectable heterosexual marriage — the basic premise of many, if not most, yuri manga. Yuri is a genre of fiction described as showing “intense emotional connection, romantic love or physical desire between women . . . in short, yuri is any story with lesbian themes.” (Friedman).

Perhaps surprisingly, the set of tropes that codify the genre do not spring from the anime series *Maria-sama ga Miteru* that inspired countless spin-offs and derivative works in the 2000s, or even from the Year 24 Group in the 1970s, known for works such as *Rose of Versailles* and *From Eroica with Love*—yuri is a genre that stands on the shoulders of giants, with a pedigree stretching back all the way to Class S in the 1910s. Class S is a genre of literature depicting platonic or romantic relationships between schoolgirls, and arguments can be made for the ‘S’ standing for anything from “sister” to shōjo, schön or “escape”.

In this paper, I aim to examine the ties between Class S and lesbian identity; specifically, how the social circumstances of women and perceptions of female sexuality have affected depictions of same-sex attracted women in Japanese literature both on a wider societal scale and on a more personal level, i.e. in the life of Yoshiya Nobuko. To do so, I will be examining Yoshiya Nobuko’s “Yellow Rose” through the lens of biographical criticism in order to illuminate the inherent connection between the themes present in Yoshiya’s writings and her lived experience as a same-sex attracted woman.

Through this paper, I intend to connect lesbian identity to the S-kankei of prewar Japan—to give voice to the myriad ways in which it is possible for women to experience same-sex attraction, and to further legitimize lesbian identity in Japan by setting it in historical context.
Research questions

While the literature depicting female same-sex relationships (nowadays known as *yuri*) has never enjoyed the near-mainstream popularity of its male equivalent *yaoi*, *yuri* and its forerunner Class S have nonetheless played an important part in the Japanese literary canon for more than a century. From Yoshiya Nobuko’s *Hanamonogatari*, published serially from 1916 to 1924 in a magazine aimed at grade school girls, to the semi-autobiographical *Yaneura no nishojo* (Two Virgins in the Attic) that follows the relationship of two women students at a teachers’ training college (1919), Class S has variously been considered to depict lesbians, platonic and spiritual love between girls, fantasy, and mundanity.

As a genre from the very early 20th century, Class S has its roots in an era where understanding of human sexuality was still in its infancy, therefore muddling the distinction between lesbianism and platonic love. Viewed through a 21st century Occidental lens, it might seem self-evident to some that literature depicting “intense emotional connection, romantic love or physical desire between women” (Friedman), especially in a homosocial environment such as an all-girls school, is by its own admission lesbian fiction. However, cautions Deborah Shamoon, the reader must resist the temptation of mapping “a contemporary lesbian ideology onto [Yoshiya Nobuko’s] writing” (“Passionate friendship” 71). According to Welker, however, it is Yoshiya Nobuko and several contemporaneous female writers that the lesbian community in Japan has claimed as their *rezubian senpai* (lesbian foresisters) (124).

It is these two viewpoints—that Class S is inherently lesbian fiction, or that it does not depict lesbians at all—that I will attempt to reconcile in this paper. To do so, I intend to focus on Yoshiya Nobuko’s “Yellow Rose” to show the extent to which Yoshiya’s personal life and experience influenced her writing. Furthermore, that as a self-identified same-sex attracted woman, the women and girls depicted in her literature express Yoshiya’s ideas on same-sex love between women and can be considered as depictions of practitioners of such.

By answering these questions, I intend to illuminate the interconnectedness of Class S, *shōjo*, and lesbian identity, and the mutual influences between fiction
and reality—the ways in which the women’s experience has been reflected in literature, and how that literature has come to affect the conceptualization of female same-sex relationships.

**Previous research**

**Background**

While substantial research on *shōjo manga* exists in both English and Japanese, Anglophone academic writing on *yuri* literature, much less early 20th century Class S, is thin on the ground, and largely the domain of a handful of dedicated *yuri* fans. Although *shōjo* and *yuri* are inexorably linked, existing research on *shōjo* is mostly focused on literary analysis and, particularly in English-language publications, critique via the lens of feminism and gender theory. Scholars touching upon the homoerotic sub-genres of manga aimed at girls have mostly focused on boys’ love and *yaoi*. Class S and female sexuality in prewar Japan, however, have been the subject of increased academic interest in recent history; the sources cited in this paper are largely from the past ten years.

**Controversy**

At the hands of scholars such as Shamoon and Suzuki, the topic of Class S has been the subject of literary criticism that ignores or minimizes its connection to lesbianism, contemporaneous or otherwise. Other scholars such as Fujimoto and Nakagawa take a more nuanced view—while not necessarily agreeing that the schoolgirls depicted in pre-war Class S fiction were lesbians in the sense that they were exclusively romantically attracted to women, they argue that Class S is a depiction of female same-sex love regardless.

Although writing more broadly on early *shōjo* culture rather than Class S in specific, Shamoon seems to both deny that Class S depicts romantic love between girls and that similar relationships between girls in real life could have been romantic, as these relationships, called *S-kankei*, cannot be considered fully functional romantic relationships, but rather represent a “a transitional state between the social roles of child and wife or mother” (“Passionate friendship” 9). However, she also defines the partnership of author Yoshiya Nobuko and Monma Chiyo as
“S-kankei” (2009)—in reality, a romantic and sexual relationship that was begun when both parties were past adolescence and which did not transition into heterosexual marriage and motherhood (Robertson “Yoshiya Nobuko” 202). Further, in “Becoming Modern Women: Love and Female Identity in Prewar Japanese Literature and Culture” Suzuki claims that "Yoshiya represented adult same-sex love not as an alternative to heterosexuality but as a kind of sisterhood, an integral part of female identity that complements heterosexuality. Here the love between women is a pure and permanent bond that can be sustained throughout the female life” (60, italics in original).

I believe the focus on literary criticism of Yoshiya’s work and the lack of analysis of Yoshiya’s writings against the autobiographical details of her life to be an oversight on the part of scholars writing on Class S and pre-war women’s literature in Japan—an oversight that does not allow for a full understanding of Yoshiya’s canon of work, which is only partly rectified by Robertson’s “Yoshiya Nobuko: Out and Outspoken in Practice and Prose” and, to some extent “Dying to Tell: Sexuality and Suicide in Imperial Japan”, also from the same author, the former being especially significant for its reliance on Yoshiya Nobuko’s own non-fiction writings: essays, biographies and private letters, exhaustively collected by Yoshitake in Nyonin Yoshiya Nobuko. It is by examining the autobiography of the writer herself, as well as the demographics of her audience and the social mores of the time that one is best able to gain an accurate understanding of the context of her writings.

Method

Terminology

Shōjo, the Japanese word for “girl”, is utilized in this text to refer to both the genre of literature and manga aimed at girls and the depiction of girls found therein. While shōjo as a genre is easily defined, shōjo as an identity is much less so. I will be relying on Nakagawa’s definition of the concept: according to her, shōjo is a constructed image, which offers a relatable identity to contemporary girls, but is safely ensconced in a fictional world, which offers shelter from the unpleasant
realities of girlhood, such as being looked upon by men (194). In other words, shōjo is a romanticized depiction of girls.

Throughout this text, female same-sex relationships will be referred to as lesbianism when speaking of the concept in general. While refraining from using the word in contexts where it would be ahistorical, I believe it to be useful terminology in places for its ease of understanding to modern audiences, rather than utilizing more figurative and less specific terms. However, I agree with Butler that identity categories such as “lesbian” or “heterosexual” are “never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary” (15-16). To that end, phrases such as “female same-sex relationship” and “women-loving women” will be utilized to describe the relationships of real, historical women to avoid assigning an identity that its subject did not ascribe to herself, and in order to respect the nature of female relationships that cannot be easily categorized as romantic or platonic, spiritual or sexual.

**Material and method**

With regards to the selection criteria for sources, I have selected “Yellow Rose” for in-depth analysis due to it being part of the Hanamonogatari, the most enduringly popular and influential of Yoshiya’s works, and for its publication date of April to September 1923—in the context of Yoshiya’s life, just at the start of her life-long relationship with Monma Chiyo. Additionally, “Yellow Rose” the only story of Yoshiya’s translated to English, thereby allowing an English-speaking reader to read the story itself. My analysis will be based off the original Japanese text, with the English translation being utilized for the translator’s notes and foreword as well as in-text quotations. I will be examining the story through the lens of biographical criticism, with details of Yoshiya’s personal life and circumstances largely provided from her diary entries as well as letters to her paramours Kikuchi Yukie and Monma Chiyo, which have been collected by Yoshitake Teruko in Nyonin Yoshiya Nobuko. Other works of Yoshiya’s as well as Class S literature will be cited to the extent that it is necessary for the reader to develop a basic understanding of the characteristics of this genre, and in order to draw parallels between fiction and the society reflected in it.
Otherwise, I will be giving preference to academically published sources in Japanese when possible, owing to Class S being a genre specific to Japan. However, to keep the bibliography accessible to an English-speaking audience and to provide further clarification, sources in English will be utilized where appropriate. This text will occasionally draw on sources perpendicular to Class S and the history of lesbians: sexology and female sexuality in Japan, girls’ culture, shōjo, and the manga and magazine industry.

The origins of Class S – 1899 to 1935

In Yoshiya Nobuko’s time, all-girls schools were a place of refuge before marriage, and marriage was something forced on girls by their parents, whether they liked it or not. Therefore, in the limited time before marriage, girls were seeking the only love that they could freely choose for themselves – the fantasy of love between girls, which they savored. (Fujimoto 26)

Sexological discourse

Although women-loving women had certainly always existed, it was not until the creation of the schoolgirl as a social class that such practices, then called S-kankei (S-relationship), entered public discourse within Japanese society (Suzuki “Becoming Modern Women” 23-26).

This discourse became especially intense in 1911, when two high school graduates committed double suicide, as their love for each other was not allowed to continue in the heterosexual world outside of school. The love suicide prompted fierce scrutiny of the S-kankei phenomenon from the media, furthered by the increase in translated works of Western sexologists, in which female same-sex love was extensively discussed. The attempts to analyze female-female relationships led to the conclusion that there were two types of this relationship: the “normal” relationship, which is the natural result of girls expressing their emotional and affectionate nature in a homosocial environment – as female virgins were thought to have no sexual desires of their own until incited by a man, S-kankei were viewed as spiritual rather than sexual. Therefore, this type of connection between girls was seen as non-threatening to the patriarchal society and perhaps even a necessary rite of passage in preparation for heterosexual marriage and motherhood.
S-kankei, however, could potentially “go too far” if its participants refused to end it upon graduation, after which their “normal” relationship was turned into “abnormal same-sex love” (hentai douseiai) (27). “Abnormal” relationships were considered a threat to the prevailing social order and to the very nation itself, not only because the two women involved would not become wives and mothers, but also because they imitated the sexual dynamics of a heterosexual relationship: one side taking the aggressive and masculine role, and the other, the submissive and feminine. While recognizable to modern Western audiences as the butch-femme dichotomy, a woman “passing” as a man presented a considerable threat to Japanese society, which was deeply premised on a sexual division of labor. Wearing masculine dress and affecting masculine manners was not seen as a matter of practicality for a woman seeking employment, but as a manifestation of deviancy and a sign of social disorder, especially condemned by the increasingly militarized society, which drew a sharp divide between the sexes (Robertson “Dying to Tell” 10-11).

Schoolgirls

The secluded world of girls’ boarding schools was created by the Meiji government in an effort to modernize and standardize the education system, with the Girls’ High School Act in 1899 that required prefectures to have at least one girls’ high school being particularly instrumental in making secondary education accessible to girls (Mackie 25). As female education was strictly separated from that of boys’—indeed, from all male contact—educational institutions for girls became microcosms, where one’s teachers, classmates, friends, rivals, and potential lovers were all female.

In comparison to the heavy condemnation heaped upon female-female relationships by society at large, the landscape of all-girls schools of early 20th century Japan may seem a sort of a Sapphic wonderland, where schoolgirls led carefree lives that revolved around their venerable relationships with each other. In reality, girls’ schools were the prime staging ground for enforcing the ideology of the “good wife, wise mother” (ryousai kenbo), as schools were in the best position to use their nationally standardized curriculum to replace superstitions and regional idiosyncrasies with a scientific set of standards for female behavior (Wellington 9).
The pressure to live up to the ideal of *ryousai kenbo* was keenly felt by the schoolgirls, and as publicly expressing female anxiety was not considered socially acceptable, these feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy were instead channelled into a subculture that allowed them to be voiced—the incipient *shōjo* culture of girls’ books and magazines (Abbott 14).

**Girls’ magazines**

As the number of female students increased along with literacy rates, a new demographic for print media was born. Books and magazines, written for girls in the girls’ own language, and, as extensive space was given to reader-submitted content in magazines, by the girls themselves, further contributed to the construction of *shōjo* culture as a “closed, homosocial world” (Shamoon 29). It was precisely this world that in turn created and fed *shōjo* culture. The contradiction inherent in expanding education and literacy to the masses is thus: on the one hand, it became possible to disseminate culturally prescribed ideas such as normative gender roles to a large audience, whereas on the other, it also provided an avenue for alternate views to spread, with women themselves making their opinions known in print media (Mackie 27).

The girls and women contributing to such magazines were not required to be paid and published authors—indeed, girls’ magazines devoted significant space to amateur columnists who wrote in with their own compositions. The space soon became an intimate network of sorts where girls shared love confessions, lamentations and secret joys that blurred the line between fantasy and reality—all under fanciful, flowery pennames. In this way, girls’ magazines allowed for a coded, anonymous communication between girls to express their love for each other. This space for girls was allowed to flourish so long as authority figures approved of it—a young woman writing in to a magazine gushes about how happy her parents were to find out that their daughter’s girl romance story was selected for publication (Yoshiya [2016]). Such approval was unlikely to be given had the girl written a story about a girl and a boy rather than two girls—perhaps strange to a modern perspective which would be more inclined to see heterosexual romantic imaginings as a natural part of growing up, while a same-sex story of a similar genre might be viewed as a troubling signifier with regards to the author’s own sexuality. At that time, however,
unchaperoned mingling between girls and boys was cause for scandal and could potentially ruin a girl’s prospects for marriage, even if any “scandal” was merely a figment of her imagination set to paper, and not based in reality whatsoever. That is not to say all parents approved of their daughters’ literary accomplishments even in the socially acceptable realm of girls’ magazines—Yoshiya Nobuko’s mother thought it unseemly for a woman to write literature and ordered her daughter to bed when she caught her writing manuscripts late in the night (Yoshitake 61).

According to Nakagawa, girls were believed to be untarnished so long as they had never been the object of a man’s affections and, as the beauty of girls was desired by men, impropriety had to be avoided by the total separation of the sexes (66). Therefore, the girls who existed in the liminal spaces between fantasy and reality in the homosocial world of shōjo magazines did so solely for the enjoyment of themselves and other girls, as the lack of male presence was considered appropriate for untarnished girls (69). In other words, girls were not bound by the realities of an anxious future, but were rather shōjo, who were “created only to be admired and gazed at by girls” (Tsuchiya Dollase 733).

Eventually, however, Shōjo no tomo, a girls’ magazine that enjoyed wide circulation at the time, made the decision to axe their readers’ column in January 1912, owing to pressure from educators, and Shōjo kurabu, a girls’ magazine with a more conservative bent, did not allow reader submissions from the start of its publication. While the phenomenon of “girls’ collective fantasy” (62-65) was considered ended by the Taisho era, it continued to exist in the works of female authors who had once been girls contributing to the “fantasy”.

Yoshiya Nobuko

Prominent among the female authors speaking to girls was Yoshiya Nobuko—“a girl novelist writing about girls to girls” (Nakagawa 63), whose writing is considered seminal to the canon of Japanese lesbian texts.

One of the works that Yoshiya is known for today is her first full-length novel Yaneura no nishojo (Two Virgins in the Attic), published in 1919. It is a departure from her usual depictions of S-kankei in that the main character, as well as her female love interest, are both adults. Drawing heavily from her own experience of living in a YWCA dorm in Tokyo, where she began a relationship
with her roommate, Kikuchi Yukie, *Two Virgins in the Attic* is the story of Akiko, an unhappy, immature girl attending a teachers’ school (Robertson “Yoshiya Nobuko” 199). She spends her time in her small attic room, daydreaming of her assertive and beautiful classmate, Miss Akitsu, and when her feelings are reciprocated, the two start a relationship. Yoshiya emphasizes the sexual aspect of their love: Akiko and Miss Akitsu move into one room together and share a bed, the quiet intimacy of which she evocatively describes in the following passage:

“…Miss Akitsu’s linen nightgown had a faint fragrance like magnolias…eventually, this fragrance transferred itself to the sleeves of Akiko’s flannel nightwear…thus in the night, the bed fragrant with a scent reminiscent of magnolias…their arms were entwined…their breasts enfolding softly beating hearts also pressed close…as if their souls disappeared together into a sweet dream with no beginning or end…soft, supple touches…kisses like dewy, red petals that tremble and melt together…slow undulating waves that softly and gently flow, sink and float, disappear, melt together and overflow….” (qtd. in Suzuki “Becoming Modern Women” 47; ellipses in original)

Akiko and Miss Akitsu eventually graduate and, in an unusual turn, do not tearfully say their goodbyes, but instead leave the dorm hand-in-hand, determined to pursue their destiny together. Not only does Yoshiya depict female same-sex love as an integral part of self-discovery, she makes it a positive force in her protagonist’s life: Akiko is able to grow out of her immaturity and realize her happiness through her love for Miss Akitsu—a characterization of female-female relationships not found in Japanese literature until then (Suzuki “Becoming Modern Women” 49).

Yoshiya’s own relationship with her paramour Kikuchi ended on a less than positive note, as Kikuchi’s possessiveness drove the two women apart. In January 1923, however, Yoshiya was introduced to Monma Chiyo, who became her lifelong partner. Their relationship started almost immediately, and they corresponded extensively when separated due to work; in her letters addressed to “Chiyo-chan”, Yoshiya writes extensively of craving her lips and wishing to marry her. Monma in turn plaintively replies to Yoshiya:
If you were a man, we could be together even if we wanted to do so immediately, because it’s allowed if it’s a man and a woman, but it’s absolutely forbidden when it’s between two women. Why is the shape of love decided not by its quality but by the form it takes? (Yoshitake 193)

In her reply, Yoshiya writes that she intends to “publish an adoption announcement the same way one would announce a wedding” (194)—indeed, in 1957, when her hopes of the postwar constitution recognizing same-sex partnership faded, Yoshiya adopted Monma as her daughter, as adoption was the only available recourse at the time for same-sex couples to be legally recognized as family (Robertson “Yoshiya Nobuko” 202-203).

As Yoshiya Nobuko was a woman from an era when scientific understanding of human sexuality was still in its infancy, ascribing any lesbian meanings to her works may seem ahistorical. This is the opinion of Shamoon as demonstrated earlier; however, female same-sex relations were “important areas of sexological inquiry” (Suzuki “Writing Same-Sex Love” 576), exemplified by the wide circulation of works from Western sexologists, translated by Japanese sexologists as well as feminists from the Bluestocking Society, published in the Bluestocking journal. By dint of being a member of the Bluestocking Society, Yoshiya was not only familiar with the sexological discourse around female same-sex desire, she utilized its vocabulary in her writing: the female protagonist in *Aru orokashiki mono no hanashi* (A Tale of a Certain Foolish Person) rues falling in love with women and admonishes herself to stop dreaming “strange “abnormal” dreams [“abnormal” na yume]” (qtd. in Suzuki “Writing Same-Sex Love” 588). It is the use of the English word “abnormal” that signifies Yoshiya’s familiarity with contemporaneous sexological theory—in “Same-Sex Love Between Women” (translated in Japanese in 1914), Havelock Ellis categorizes female same-sex love as “normal”, i.e. transitory relationships between girls not impedimental to heterosexuality, and “abnormal” i.e. relationships where the parties involved are exclusively attracted to women and reject men.
While the discourse in Yoshiya’s time may have lacked the nuance of the well-established vocabulary employed in modern studies of human sexuality (homosexual attraction is no longer defined as “normal” and “abnormal”), it does not follow that Yoshiya would have been unaware of the concept of lesbianism or unable to relate her own identity to it. Akiko, the aforementioned protagonist of “A Tale of a Certain Foolish Person” identifies herself as being “abnormal” and her passion for women as “unnatural”—however, she acknowledges that “to force herself to love men would be even more unnatural”. By presenting Akiko’s “abnormality” as an intrinsic and permanent part of herself, Yoshiya legitimizes her sexuality as her natural state, instead of a selfish choice that taints not only Akiko, but the women she falls in love with. This may be taken as a criticism of the discourse that paints exclusive female same-sex attraction as “abnormal”—for Yoshiya, her romantic relationships with women were certainly no abnormality, but rather the norm.

Therefore, it seems ahistorical for contemporary readers to interpret Yoshiya’s works solely through the lens of literary criticism while disregarding biographical analysis—after reading both Yoshiya’s love letters to Monma Chiyo and her depiction of the decidedly romantic and sexual love between Akiko and Miss Akitsu, it seems counterintuitive to conclude that Yoshiya’s life did not significantly influence her writing. Further, one cannot deny the importance her writing, and indeed, her very life, holds for the lesbian community in Japan – both in the sense of her cultural impact on Class S and yuri, and in the meaning of her existence, and the existence of her writing, to contemporary lesbians looking for their roots. It is Yoshiya Nobuko and several contemporaneous female writers that the lesbian community in Japan has claimed as their rezubian senpai (lesbian foresisters) (Welker 124). Yoshiya’s work must therefore be viewed in the context of her life, as well as the yuri and lesbian writing it inspired.

Yellow Rose

The many flowers that bloom / in the dream of a young girl’s days / that will never return, / these I send to you, my beloveds. (Yoshiya Nobuko, qtd. in Suzuki "Writing Same-Sex Love” 583)
Hanamonogatari, a series of un-connected short stories published from 1916 to 1924 in Shōjo Gahou, launched Yoshiya’s career as a professional author and established much of the genre-defining tropes of shōjo fiction: the flower symbolism, intense emotional relationships between girls, and the school setting, depicted in a soft, sentimental tone (Yoshiya [2016], Tsuchiya Dollase 728).

While Hanamonogatari has been a continuous influence on the shōjo genre since its first publication and a subject of renewed interest with a manga adaptation published in 2014, only one story has been translated to English as of 2019—Kibara (Yellow Rose), translated by Sarah Frederick. The story of “Yellow Rose” is from the midpoint of Hanamonogatari with Yoshiya’s characteristic flowery style and focus on the emotional life of her protagonist, as well as the aforementioned shōjo tropes fully present in the prose.

“Yellow Rose” is the story of Katsuragi, a fresh English Language Academy graduate who bemoans her fate of becoming a teacher at a prefectural girls’ school, the location of which is coyly hinted as being close enough to Tokyo that “one could board a train at Tokyo in the morning and disembark at three in the afternoon” (Yoshiya [2016]). Yoshiya herself was raised in nearby Tochigi prefecture, going up to Tokyo shortly after graduating a prefectural girls’ high school much like the one to which she sends her heroine. Katsuragi is well aware of her unsuitability to become a teacher—she feels that her inability to look happy on command or compromise on her ideals as well as her lack of ambition towards her profession would make her a poor educator.

Although Yoshiya refrains from making any outright political statements in her work, there is a subtle truth behind Katsuragi’s career choice: she may not want to become a teacher, but she wants to get married even less, and amongst the limited options allowed for women to remain single at the time, she makes the choice to become a teacher. Yoshiya herself briefly worked as a substitute teacher before committing herself fully to writing, while her lifelong partner Monma Chiyo was a mathematics teacher by trade, thus giving Yoshiya personal insight into the lives of women teachers. Nonetheless, at the time, an increasing number of women were seeking employment as office workers, typists, sales clerks, telephone operators or nurses (Sato 116, Nakagawa 72)—as a genteel, well-educated woman in Tokyo, Katsuragi would have presumably been able to secure one of such white-collar
positions available in the city. However, in choosing to become a teacher, Katsuragi expresses her intent to not only escape marriage, but her latent desire to remain in the homosocial environment of female education—not out of a wish to cling to her childhood, but as a mode of self-actualization as a woman who loves women. Katsuragi’s assignment at the prefectural school is therefore unapologetically referred to by her classmates as her “refuge from marriage” (Yoshiya [2016]).

As Katsuragi prepares to depart from Tokyo, her attention is caught by a beautiful young girl running to catch the same train as Katsuragi, while carrying a bouquet of yellow roses in her right hand. The eponymous yellow roses are what capture Katsuragi’s imagination and provide the catalyst for her romance with one of her students: Urakami, the girl who was carrying the roses.

During a lesson, Katsuragi notices a vase with a single yellow rose in it set on an extra student desk—while being unable to remember where she had recently seen a rose, Katsuragi is convinced that it made a big impression of her. Perhaps significant is the fact that Katsuragi’s attention is not caught by the girl she saw carrying the roses (indeed, Miss Urakami will not be introduced by name for several pages), but rather the yellow rose itself, despite the fact that Urakami is certainly present for the class. This conflation of the rose with the girl can be found in the first scene in which Katsuragi sees Urakami:

Perhaps because she had been running so fast her little chest beat wildly, sending the profusion of flowers in that single hand all a-tremble, and this quivering of the yellow rose bouquet moved in unison with the fluttering of the girls’ sleeves—it was a beautiful scene—(Yoshiya [2016])

This signifies that in the fantastic space of the novel, a girl is not merely a girl but a shōjo, whose purity of being is symbolized by a rose—a reconstruction of identity emblematic of the shōjo genre, which allows girls to be “set free from their realistic “women’s bodies” (qtd. in Tsuchiya Dollase 732).

Katsuragi and Urakami first talk during a school field trip where Urakami gets a small soot particle in her eye and thus requires medical attention, with a private conversation taking place in the doctor’s office between teacher and student.
Embarrassed, Urakami admits after a bout of stammering that she was somehow pleased to recognize Katsuragi as the woman she had seen at Tokyo station that day—as Katsuragi noticed Urakami, so too did Urakami notice Katsuragi. The scene is underscored by an agitated tension on Katsuragi’s part as she is overwhelmed by the romanticism of the coincidences that brought her and Urakami together, expressed in ellipses and dashes, implying a certain incompleteness to the conversation, with the reader being free to fill the gaps with their own imagination. These blanks may also be used to highlight the fact that what is taking place cannot be represented—an absence of language may, paradoxically, “articulate what it cannot say” (Suzuki “Writing Same-Sex Love” 585), suggesting a hidden meaning laying in a conversation peppered with ellipses and dashes. As the story was first published in a girls’ magazine, Yoshiya’s model reader was certainly a schoolgirl, immersed in the S-kankei culture present at her school and in the network of girls connected through the magazine itself—and, as such, be able to interpret the hidden meaning implied by the text that the following scene is of great emotional significance for Katsuragi and Urakami:

“Um……Um……But……” feeling pressed in this way the girl hesitated even more, mumbling…… “But what?……” Miss Katsuragi asked attentively. At last, seeming to have worked up its nerve, a charming voice rose from the bed—with a fair degree of diffidence, “But, um, I was pleased too—somehow—pleased……” she broke off there. And, as if in embarrassment, the hand that had held the gauze fell away from her face. “Oh, don’t do that or the gauze will fall off,” said Miss Katsuragi kindly, and seeing that the gauze had slipped down from the shy girl’s eye, quickly reached out her arm to stop it and the beautiful child’s hand touched her own so……

………………(Yoshiya [2016]; ellipses in original)

The next scene between the two girls further elaborates on the depth of their relationship, which has passed the boundaries of teacher and student. Katsuragi and Urakami stroll the moonlit shores of Kiyomigata, a location rife with literary allusions: a love poem from the Shin kokinshū, Hagoromo, a Noh play set in nearby
Miho no Matsubara, and Takayama Chogyū, a writer buried at a nearby temple (Yoshiya nn 41-41 [2016]). These references all elude to love, especially spiritual and even celestial love that elevates the emotion beyond any implications of impurity. This creates a shadowed, private world for the girls, culminating in Katsuragi’s impassioned defense of the poet Sappho. The comparison between Sappho’s love for a woman and Katsuragi’s feelings for Urakami is made obvious through Yoshiya’s use of language: the passion (netsujou) that Sappho dedicates to her female lover is the also the passion (netsu) in Katsuragi’s eyes as “two shadows overlap”, as well as her passionate (atsuki omoi) internal plea to “kiss her!” By referencing Sappho and Chogyū, Katsuragi, as well as Yoshiya, attempts to understand and explain her sexuality via the framework of literature and thereby find a place for herself, a place where her desires can be voiced instead of silenced, as they must be in the mundane world.

As per Class S tradition, the mundane world intrudes on the love between Katsuragi and Urakami—Mrs. Urakami, the family matriarch, has come to plead with Katsuragi to persuade Urakami to enter into the marriage arranged for her after graduation. However, Urakami already has a different plan for her future: she secretly pledged to study at Katsuragi’s alma mater in Tokyo and go to an American college upon graduation together with Katsuragi. While Yoshiya was writing “Yellow Rose”, she and Monma hatched a similar plan to study at Sorbonne together; to that end, they even took French lessons at the Athénée Français (Yoshitake 141). With such a plan in mind, Urakami refuses to accept the arranged marriage, which causes no end of trouble to her family. It is at this point that Katsuragi’s courage deserts her: although she opposes arranged marriage and loves Urakami deeply, she realizes that their love cannot shield them from the societal and familial pressure placed on women to marry, and cannot defend their relationship when confronted with the chagrin of a parent who wishes for her child to attain that which is expected of her: marriage.

This sort of arranged marriage was common at the time—according to an ethics textbook aimed at female high school students, “the custom in our country is to discuss marriage with our parents and to comply with their wishes” (qtd. in Sato 158). Yoshiya herself escaped to Tokyo and the literary world to avoid complying with her parents’ wishes, more her mother’s than her father’s, of making a marriage
for her. Urakami was somewhat lucky in that her parents allowed her to complete high school before marrying her off—the opinion of Yoshiya’s mother, Masa, was that education was not only unnecessary for a married woman, but a detriment to her value as a housewife (Yoshitake 52). This point of contention between mother and daughter led to Masa disapproving of Yoshiya’s desire to become an author—she attempted to curb her daughter’s attempts at seeking further education by directing her to take up the shamisen until finally relenting and allowing Yoshiya to go up to Tokyo at age 19 to live with her older brother (61-63). Mrs. Urakami, much like Mrs. Yoshiya, is therefore made the agent of something greater than herself: the societal directive for a woman to marry a man.

This heteronormative prescript leads to an ultimately tragic end for Katsuragi: her only love is thus married to another, while she sets sail on the promised journey to America, alone. Although initially attending college in Boston with hopes of getting a degree, soon enough the goodwill of her uncle runs out and with it, monetary support for tuition (it is, after all, unseemly of Katsuragi to refuse to get married herself). Katsuragi drops out of contact with her family and friends, leaving behind nothing more than a line from Yeats: “For my dreams of your image that blossoms – a rose in the deeps of your heart” (quoted in the original English). Her final fate and the reason behind her desire to hide herself away remain a mystery to those who come to search for her; as the story concludes, “understanding lay solely in the heart of one sad, beautiful person!” (Yoshiya [2016]).

A tragic fate for a heroine from the Hanamonogatari is not unusual: “Nashi no hana”, “Hyacinth”, “Tsuyukusa” and others end on a similarly melancholy note of love between girls never fully realized. Significantly, this unhappy end is always brought about by the society in which girls are required to become women who marry men—malicious rumors, arranged marriage, heterosexuality, suicide and the end of one’s school days are what separate female lovers from one another. While Yoshiya depicted female same-sex love itself as a positive experience—Katsuragi and Urakami forged a deep connection from which they both drew courage to dream of a future together—the sorrow of same-sex love in a society that condemns it is ever-present. This sorrow was not unknown to Yoshiya personally; although Yoshiya was able to avoid marriage to a man by becoming independently wealthy as a writer, neither was she able to marry the woman she loved.
Discussion

I am in love with a particular woman and baked a cake for her for Valentine's Day. But she thought I was just joking and merely said 'Thank you.' I'll cheer myself up by reading Yurihime, until she eventually realizes my true feelings. (Reader’s letter in Yurihime Vol. 4: 316, qtd. in Nagaike 2010)

As part of the culture of girls’ magazines that encouraged their schoolgirl readers to send in their own short stories, the Hanamonogatari blurred the lines between author and reader, reality and fiction. Certainly the amateur authors relied heavily on their own feelings and experiences in the homosocial environment prevalent at girls schools, which was desirable to the readership—as schoolgirls themselves, they were able to relate to and interact with these stories, thereby providing a new crop of submissions to the magazines. As Yoshiya herself was one of such reader-authors, her first professionally published stories such as “Yellow Rose” further illuminate the connection between the writer’s life and her body of work.

Yoshiya’s identification with her characters is also notable with Akiko, the heroine of the aforementioned “Two Virgins in the Attic”. After an argument with her YWCA paramour, Kikuchi, Yoshiya bitterly wrote in her diary that “her Miss Akitsu” would never be so greedy as to tell her to write a novel just for the prize money—in contrast to Monma, who refused Yoshiya’s offer of money and insisted upon working as a teacher until her contract was up and who, as posited by Yoshitake, personified the Miss Akitsu envisioned by Yoshiya (115, 171).

Yoshiya’s search for a relationship that reflected the purity found in her earlier works such as Hanamonogatari was expressed through her writing. She emphasized purity of heart and intention rather than sexual purity (i.e. chastity), which is exemplified by Katsuragi’s desire to kiss Urakami interwoven with references to pure, spiritual love. Further, the juxtaposition of poetically pure love and Sappho’s and Katsuragi’s love for a woman makes it clear that Yoshiya renders no judgement on romantically consummated female same-sex attraction as impure behavior. In her diary, Yoshiya wrote of her belief that while sex was a “natural human desire”, a typical man thought that sex granted him a right of ownership over his partner—a complaint that she also levelled at her then-partner, Kikuchi Yukie. While a sexual relationship between those bonded by a close mutual love
complimented the bond, sexual intercourse was no balm to a shoddy relationship (Yoshitake 122). Therefore, to Yoshiya, the purity of a romantic relationship between women lay not in physical chastity, but rather in the emotional bond created by mutual devotion.

To Yoshiya, such a bond could exist only between those of the same sex—more specifically, between women (Yoshitake 37). She believed that heterosexual love would always be cheapened by the steep hierarchical difference between men and women—a woman who went through life as a child obeying her father, a wife obeying her husband and a mother obeying her son could hardly forge an equal relationship with a man. Further, female relationships were vital to women precisely because all women understood this suffering specific to her sex; women were united, Yoshiya wrote, by a river of tears, which flows from every woman (109-110). Although her focus on female relationships in the Hanamonogatari was part and parcel of the Class S genre, Yoshiya’s own deep-seated belief in the importance of homosocial and homosexual relationships for women cannot be discounted in analyzing her works. Her life-long partner Monma summed up Yoshiya’s women-centered philosophy as such: “Because [Yoshiya] wished for women to remain pure in body and spirit, she did not concern herself with men even in her novels” (Yoshitake 201-202).

Such a belief, however, was difficult to live by in a society that upheld heterosexual marriage as not only the primary goal for women, but the pinnacle of ambition a woman could achieve. "Yellow Rose" is one such instance of Yoshiya’s grappling with this conflict: on the one hand, to love women was to stay pure and true to her own heart and feelings, as well as abide by the standards set for schoolgirls and thereby be granted some leeway in terms of social acceptance. On the other, to remain in a female same-sex relationship past the socially permitted time of adolescence was to not only draw disappointment and shame on herself, but on her partner as well, leading the novel to conclude with the unhappy parting of the female lovers.

For her part, Yoshiya was no stranger to disappointing her mother, and later in life found friendship and support among the literati. This association, as well as the financial independence won through her best-sellers, shielded her from much of the pressure to conform to standards of femininity. Her partner Monma, too, was
lucky not to suffer familial censure for her relationship with Yoshiya: Monma’s mother, Hatsu, nurtured her daughter’s brilliance, spending her days as a housewife and her nights seamstressing to pay her daughter’s school fees, and hoped for nothing more than Monma to perhaps one day matriculate as a mathematics undergraduate at Tohoku University (Yoshitake 133, 218). Both women had thereby won freedom from familial obligation to marry and were thus in the unique situation of arranging their own lives—although working women choosing to live together due to practical reasons was common at the time, by Yoshitake’s reckoning, Yoshiya and Monma were the only such case of co-habitation that lasted for the rest of their lives (130, 132).

Yoshiya’s royalties from the Hanamonogatari series as well as her award-winning novel Chi no hate made (To the Ends of the Earth) also granted her and Monma further freedom by means travel: in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake in 1923, the couple relocated to Nagasaki, a port city that saw its fair share of foreigners (Yoshitake 166). This provided the perfect environment for Yoshiya’s and Monma’s relationship to flourish in its early days—the locals, inured to the strangeness of foreigners, hardly cared to turn their gaze to the woman with the short bobbed hair in Western dress walking hand-in-hand with her female companion. In January 1924, however, the couple were forced to decamp to semi-rural Shimonoseki where Monma took up a position as a mathematics teacher in order to pay her brothers’ school fees in lieu of her ailing father. The relationship between the two women invited much curiosity from Monma’s co-workers, and as a scandal would have been detrimental to her continued employment, she was forced to hide her true relationship with Yoshiya under the guise that they were cousins. Yoshiya, unhappy and unable to keep up the charade, left for Tokyo in July (170-171).

It was during this period that Yoshiya began to seriously plan for a permanent residence for Monma and herself. With the Hanamonogatari series ending that year, Yoshiya needed a new source of revenue in order to accomplish this goal. In October 1924, she wrote to Monma of intending to publish her own pamphlet and the assurances of her publisher that such a pamphlet would sell at least enough for every Hanamonogatari reader (Yoshitake 28). Her decision to name the pamphlet Black Rose may also be considered a nod to the flower-themed
Hanamonogatari and perhaps a conscious decision to appeal to its readers who, along with Yoshiya, had matured from girls to women alongside the series. Yoshiya’s publisher certainly thought that to be the case as both the pamphlet and a re-print of “Two Virgins in the Attic” were greenlit due to her fame as the author of Hanamonogatari. It is therefore my belief that Black Rose may be considered a coda to the Hanamonogatari.

Reflecting the maturation of both reader and author, the contents of Black Rose are considerably more grounded in reality. The aforementioned “A Tale of a Certain Foolish Person” is of particular interest due to its plot, which resembles “Yellow Rose” but for its bleaker take on the realities of female same-sex attraction. Much like Katsuragi, the heroine Akiko is a young teacher at a girls’ school who falls in love with her student—unlike Katsuragi, however, Akiko refuses to allow the relationship to develop into anything deeper than friendship, despite Kazuko having fallen in love with her. This hesitation is caused by Akiko’s grappling with her own sexuality: while her “abnormal” desire for women causes her shame and distress, she recognizes that she cannot change herself to be any other way. Unlike “Yellow Rose”, however, the would-be lovers in “A Tale of a Certain Foolish Person” are not granted a poetically melancholy ending, but are rather parted abruptly and brutally: walking home alone after school, Kazuko is raped and murdered on the roadside. The titular “foolish person” is Akiko as the voice of God thunders down at her upon her hearing the news of Kazuko’s fate—whether she is foolish for falling in love with a woman or for not following her heart and staying with Kazuko instead of pushing her away is a matter of interpretation.

The story ran for all eight issues of Black Rose and proved to be more popular than expected. Despite its popularity (the pamphlet also included a readers’ corner), it is perhaps no wonder that Yoshiya chose to discontinue the pamphlet—its subject matter took a toll on her mental well-being, and her ever-increasing fame demanded she churn out manuscripts at a pace faster than was required to produce a labor of love such as Black Rose (Yoshitake 38). While never abandoning her women-centered philosophy, Yoshiya’s writing became more mainstream and grounded in reality as she outgrew the schoolgirl fantasy of Class S and found her path as an adult women-loving woman.
The freedom of Yoshiya and Monma to live relatively freely as a couple was won largely by the monetary means provided by Yoshiya’s early novels, which focused on women trying and often failing to find a place in the world to nurture their relationships with women. The main theme of “Yellow Rose”—the struggle of realizing female same-sex desire—was also something that Yoshiya was grappling with in her own life: at the start of her life-long relationship with Monma Chiyo, the difficulties of sustaining such a relationship must have been keenly felt by Yoshiya. With that in mind, her decision to include references to sexological discourse on same-sex attraction in what might have otherwise been a story of girls safely set in fantasy implies that such discourse was of personal interest to Yoshiya. Indeed, her diary and letters to Monma prove that it was: Yoshiya believed her love for Monma to be as natural for her as love for a man might be for another woman, and rued the circumstances that would not allow the two women to marry. Further, to Yoshiya, her novels were fantasy given form; a fantasy that she also hoped to manifest into reality—of Black Rose, Yoshiya wrote: “The two of us, living and loving in the house of the black rose [...] I want us to beautifully, beautifully let the black rose bloom! For the sake of dousei (same-sex or homosexuals) as well.” (Yoshitake 30). For Yoshiya, who found self-actualization through writing, literature was not only a path to a place where she could live her life freely, but the actual means by which to travel that path. It can be said that the home Yoshiya shared with Monma until the end of her life was indeed the house built by the Black Rose.

**Conclusion**

In my thesis, I have demonstrated the connections between Yoshiya’s “Yellow Rose” and her life against the cultural backdrop of girls’ culture in late Taisho-early Showa era Japan. As part of a girls’ culture in which the readers of Class S stories often became their authors, Yoshiya’s early writings are particularly ripe for biographical analysis and make plain the inherent parallels between a writer’s life and her words. Indeed, as her protagonist Katsuragi turns to literary examples in an attempt to find a framework for her sexuality, so did Yoshiya: although close female relationships define Class S, she chose to delve into sexological discourse and the life of Sappho, which passed the boundaries of female
friendship into female romance. This speaks of a deep personal interest on the part of the author—setting the story in a biographical context allows for a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the text. Considering Yoshiya’s personal life and correspondence which show her valuing of romantic bonds between women to the exclusion of heterosexuality, it is my belief that “Yellow Rose” reflects lesbian identity congruent with the time period and can therefore be considered lesbian fiction. Linking contemporary lesbian identity to that of the past is vital in providing a framework for same-sex attracted women to actualize and legitimize their sexuality, much as Yoshiya was able to do through her own writings. It is therefore my hope that the trend of renewed interest in Yoshiya’s life and writings will continue, and that future research will provide further analysis of her work—“Yellow Rose” and Hanamonogatari are, after all, part of a career that spanned nearly seven decades of writing and living openly as a women-loving woman.
Works cited


