

# A Comparative Analysis of the Two Major Characters in the Zen Story, Muddy Road

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**Abstract-** This paper does a comparative analysis of the two major characters in the story, Muddy Road. On a higher note, it endeavors to expound truths in life that the two characters represent. More so, it seeks to determine the values drawn from the truths the story communicates to the readers. Detailed discussion focuses on the similarities and differences exhibited by the two monks through their actions as well as their speech. Tanzan and Ekido are both monks belonging to the same religious order who are confronted with a situation that puts to the test their being such. As their law provides, they are prohibited from coming in contact with people, especially women. In the story, Tanzan helps a pretty girl in silk kimono cross a muddy road, by so doing, he breaks their law. A closer look at Tanzan's character shows him to be the type of person who could extend genuine kindness to people who need it even if it goes to the extent of breaking their law. Ekido's character on the other hand is seen as the epitome of hypocrisy and malice. Outwardly, he did keep their law by not extending a helping hand to the girl. Inwardly, however, he lusted for the girl.

**Index Terms-** Characters, Symbols, Truths and Values.

## I. INTRODUCTION

What accounts for the excitement one derives from reading a work of fiction such as the short story is the element of character (Pelayo, 2020). In this literary genre, character is seen as the one that gives life to the story. Characters are the ones who move, act, think, and feel towards the resolution of the conflict that eventually brings the story to its final outcome, otherwise known also as the story's conclusion. A knowledge of the classifications characters fall under could aid the readers in getting a good grasp of what the story is communicating. According to Tomeldan (1986), characters could be protagonists and antagonists, round or flat, dynamic or static. Also, they could be caricatures, stereotypes, confidants or foils. According to Maramba (1990), "*Literature has resulted in an almost exhausting and exhaustive psychological analysis of characters, of symbols and images.*" Eugenio (1982) adds that literature is a reflection of a peoples' values.

In most stories, the major action could focus on the conflict between the protagonist and the antagonist. Master Class (2020) writes that, "*The conflict between a protagonist and an antagonist—a story's two most essential characters—is an age-old storytelling trope.*" The former is the type of character who is given the major focus in the story. All actions revolve on him. The latter, on the other hand, is the type whose interest always

goes against the interest of the protagonist. Most often the struggle between the two could be representative of certain truths in life that could translate to values readers could acquire. This is most true of all serious works of art that bear social significance. The story, Muddy Road, is one such example.

This paper takes an in-depth look at the characters of Tanzan (the protagonist) and Ekido (the antagonist) as they are placed in a situation where their respective actions towards said situation provides readers with valuable insights to life.

This study purports to compare and contrast the two characters in the story. Through this comparison, it is also desired that what the characters stand for could lead to some revelations about life's truths. Hopefully, said truths could translate into positive values readers could acquire.

Muddy Road is a Zen story. The parable in the story is also known as a Zen koan (study.com.Humanities>Buddhism) – a paradoxical riddle. For first time readers of the story, a full text of the same is supplied.

## II. MUDDY ROAD

### A Zen Story

Two monks were on their way home to their monastery. A heavy rain had just stopped, leaving the road they were travelling on muddy. Along the way, they came upon a pretty girl in silk kimono finding difficulty crossing the muddy road. One of the monks, Tanzan, helped the girl cross it by carrying her on his shoulder. With the girl safely across, the two monks continued their journey towards home. When Ekido could no longer contain what he was feeling, he confronted Tanzan by saying, "We monks have our law that says we should not come in physical contact with people, especially women. You have deliberately disobeyed our law." Tanzan replied, "I left the girl there, are you still carrying her with you?"

## III. THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN TANZAN AND EKIDO

**3.3.** Tanzan and Ekido are monks of the same order. As such they are sworn to abide by the laws of their monastery. They are both keenly aware that one such law they have to obey was for them to avoid physical contact with people, especially women.

**3.4.** Both monks are in a hurry to go home to their monastery. They are trudging the same difficult muddy road that is causing an unnecessary delay for them.

3.5. They are confronted with the same situation, that is, of the pretty girl in silk kimono who is finding difficulty getting across the other side of the muddy road.

#### IV. THE CONTRASTS BETWEEN THE TWO MONKS

4.1 Tanzan helps the girl out of a sincere desire to extend kindness to someone who needed help. But the help extended is at the expense of breaking their law. His action contained no malice or dirty thoughts, given that the girl in silk kimono is pretty, when he carries her on his shoulder. Outwardly, he breaks the law; inwardly, though, he has not.

4.2 Ekido sticks to their law of not coming in physical contact with people, especially women by not extending a helping hand to the girl. Outwardly, he obeys their law. But inwardly, Ekido has ironically violated their law. In his mind, Ekido is carrying the girl and is feeling the softness of the girl's body on his shoulder. This is the meaning of Tanzan's response, "I left the girl there, are you still carrying her?"

#### V. WHAT THE TWO CHARACTERS STAND FOR

5.1 Tanzan's action stood for a character who believed in his heart that extending human kindness to somebody who needs it transcends any man-made laws. For this monk, anyone, regardless of who he or she is, is important. The girl's pretty countenance was definitely not what motivated him to lend a helping hand. This is given emphasis by an unknown author who said that "*Kindness is showing someone they matter* (www.inc.com>peter-economy)." Tanzan's kind action validates this. According to American journalist Dennis Prager (2019), "Goodness is about character – integrity, honesty, kindness, generosity, **moral courage** (underscoring supplied), and the like. People who are kind spontaneously do acts of charity without much thought for norms or standards (even laws) which have the tendencies to limit these kind gestures. RAKtivist ([www.randomactsofkindness.org](http://www.randomactsofkindness.org) kindness-quotes) states that "*Kindness is the ability to know what the right thing to do is and having the courage to do it.*" Defying the monks laws was not a light thing to do. It takes somebody with a strong, brave, and determined heart (Pelayo, 2019) to do it no matter what the consequences may be. Tanzan was moral courage personified.

5.2 Ekido was the epitome of hypocrisy and malice. Outwardly, and in the eyes of those who knew he did not help the girl, he did not disobey their law of not coming into physical contact with people. Inwardly, though, he had grossly violated their laws. Tanzan saw this in his fellow monk when he stated, "I left the girl there, are you still carrying her?" These words strongly suggested that in Ekido's mind, he lusted for the girl. The detail of the girl being pretty reinforces this idea. In his mind, Ekido was carrying the girl, feeling her soft and tender body on his shoulder. The Bible calls this adultery. Matthew chapter 5:27-28 states that, "You shall not commit adultery;" but I tell you that everyone who gazes at a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart." Again, Prager (2019) posits that "The biggest obstacle to people becoming better is that you have to really want to be a good person in order to be a better person, and most people would rather be other things."

#### VI. VI. TRUTHS IN LIFE THAT COULD BE DRAWN FROM THE STORY

6.1 From the character of Tanzan, we arrive at a truth in life that kindness wherever and whatever the situation is will always find its expression. It freely and spontaneously flows out of a pure heart and is gladly received by people who needed it.

6.2 In life, there are people who thrive on pretenses. They look morally right on the outside but are rotten inside. The book of Matthew in 7:15 calls these kind of people as wolves in sheep's' clothing.

6.3 Man-made laws are flawed (Pelayo, 2020). When they reduce people to insensitivity and apathy, they need to be revisited, and if need be, corrected so that they serve the greater good.

#### VII. VALUES IMPRESSED

Values are those that people hold as important in their lives (Pelayo, 2020). They are exhibited in the way they talk, feel, think, act and relate with others. They could be positive or negative. Regardless of what they are, people manifest them consciously or subconsciously.

7.1. On a positive note, the values that the character of Tanzan impresses on the readers was the act of genuine kindness that man, monk, or anybody should and must extend to the rest of humanity.

7.2. The negative value that Ekido's character portrays is that of people who thrive in pretenses that outwardly make them appear good, but inwardly show them as wickedly evil.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

In its brevity, Muddy Road is packed with valuable insights to life everyone could learn from regardless of sex, stature, race or culture. For one, it underscores the need for us to be humane in our dealings with people. The act itself is sufficient to give one the moral courage to stand against laws that are morally flawed. For another, it warns and prepares us for the other kind of people who lead lives of contradictions and pretenses for a particular selfish gain.

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