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Response paper 1

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Throughout history, the general image of slavery was depicted by the slave trade in Africa and the harsh life of black slaves in America. Mori Ogai’s story, “Sansho the Steward”, shows the reader another different picture of slavery, one which took place in the feudal Japan. Prior to reading this story I did not know that practice of slavery was present in Japan as well. The cruel treatments that the family received, from the hair pulling to the branding of mark on forehead, were realistically written, and reading such details was very eye-opening experience.

The sailor, Yamaoka Tayu, looks “lean”, smiles innocently like “an ivory doll” and carries a Buddhist rosary. This portrays an image very different from that of a slave trader—often thought to be rough-looking and carrying a sinister smile. Mori Ogai’s description of Yamaoka Tayu not only tricks the children but the readers as well. However, the author does offer a hint that the poor mother misses but the audience are able to catch. Mori Ogai writes, “Yamaoka’s impassive face relaxed, then seemed touched with a shadow of joy” (5) at the story of a serving woman. This small detail foreshadows the trouble that the “nice stranger” will bring—ironically Yamaoka, who warned them of kidnappers, turns out to be the very slave trader himself. Ogai does a great job of using details and descriptions to keep the readers entertained and knowledgeable of the situations.

The story brought out frustration and anger. The children travel and live in a hostile area with no protection available. Instead of being benevolent rulers, the authority figures like Sansho and Saburo are villains who abuse the children. Despite my expectation of punishment set upon Sansho for his evil act, the ending was weak and mild in intensity. Sansho ended up prospering from abolishment of slavery. Zushio, after receiving an important rank, reunited with his mother but lost his father and Anju. The protagonist got a somewhat happy ending and the justice was not served since the villain had a happy ending as well. There are many Buddhist inferences in the story. Since Buddhism preaches on nonviolence and against revenge, I wonder if that is the reason why Sansho continue to live without punishment.