

# The Depiction of Love in Shounen ai and Its Appeal to Japanese Women

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## Abstract:

This phenomenon of female favour in Shounen ai works, may show people a way to understand contemporary Japanese society. This article focuses on analyzing the reason why Japanese females are attracted to Shounen ai. The analysis will mainly focus on the emotional appeal for female readers in Shounen ai works, thereby explaining its attraction. The answer comes from research on the shaping of protagonists and story plots in Shounen ai works. This female desire to seek idealization in comics reflects how Japanese women are unsatisfied with the traditional gender role that they used to follow. The hypothesis that this article give out will be how idealized gender role, romantic relationship is the reason why Shounen ai works are attractive to female audiences. The gender role is idealized by shaping the main protagonists to have both male and female characteristics not only at outlooks, but also at innermost beings. This depiction brings satisfaction to female readers by free them from cultural traditional requirements, like jobs of reproduction. The romantic relationship is depicted with equality and other characteristics like precious, which are what female seeking for.

**Keywords:** Shounen ai, female favour, Japanese society, Japanese subculture, gender relation

## 1. Introduction

In mid-20th century Japan, a new genre of comics rose and the popularity of this genre continues till today. The name of this genre is Shounen ai or Yaoi. This genre focuses on portraying the love between two male figures. It is also part of the Shojo genre, which was created especially for teenage girls audience. According to the research done by Akiko Mizoguchi "Dividing the history of Yaoi into three

periods is helpful." [1]. Accordingly, the start of Shounen ai work in Japan is Koibitotachi no mori (The Lovers' Forest) by Mori Mari. Still, the genre of Shounen ai became popular a few years after that, but Mori Mari's works do have a big influence over other Shounen ai works [2]. For example, The Lovers' Forest has a tragic ending and the tragic ending becomes one characteristic of Shounen ai works. By analyzing the characteristics of works about Shounen ai, it is possible to find the answer to the reason why

Japanese women choose to read Shounen ai works. The characteristics of Shounen ai is idealized gender role and romantic relationships, which is lack in real world Japan. Female audiences choose to read these works are because they get satisfaction from the depiction of love and gender in Shounen ai works.

## 2. Female Audience can be Detached from Shounen ai Stories

The first hypothesis is how female audiences get satisfaction from being mere viewers when they are reading Shounen ai works. It is an advantage for readers to be mere viewers sometimes. One trait of Shounen ai work is ending with tragedy. As Mizoguchi said, “impossible” and “perfect” love ends in the tragic death of one or both of them” [1]. That is indeed very emotional for the female audience to feel like they experience the tragedy, but also being out of the role can protect them from possible hidden trauma that the tragic ending may cause. The fact that Shounen ai works are about love stories between two boys can show how female readers can drag themselves out of the story as there is still a boundary between two different sexes.

## 3. The Idealized Gender Role in Shounen ai Works

The first thing to note about Shounen ai is that the author chooses to use two boys as the protagonists of the work, which is not only about romantic relationships but its target also focuses on teenage girls. There must be a reason why teenage girls are satisfied with the fact that the story they are reading is about boys rather than girls. To answer this question, it is necessary that we dig into the protagonists in Shounen ai works.

The first thing is how the protagonists look pretty since the outlook of the character is a choice of the author, and this choice must have a reason behind it. One of the reasons will be, of course, to sell them out. The cover that follows popular aesthetics will be more likely to be sold. The reading of comics or novels is a way to get entertained, so it is easy to understand why readers will choose the cover that they believe is pretty. The other reason for choosing to make the protagonists look pretty in McLelland’s words is be “female readership sees itself depicted in these stories.” [3]. Still, there is a problem: if female readers want to see themselves depicted in these stories, why didn’t they choose to read the comics that depict love between males and females? Doesn’t that help them play the role in the story more easily, as it is more makes sense

that females empathy easier with females?

The answer is how male protagonists in the Shounen ai story are idealized. This means that the character has been idealized for female readership in some ways. “One of the ways is how the character look pretty. they are always beautiful, depicted with the big eyes and flowing hair which often characterizes female figures in men’s comics.” [3]. The outlook of the protagonists is not the traditional gender aspect of males. They are not masculine. Their outlook makes them step into an area that is not traditionally boy or girl. More importantly, they are different from the comics that are created for male readers. This not-boy or girl’s physical body does bring satisfaction to the female readership.

For example, the body of boys frees girls from the job of reproduction job. According to Onna Daigaku by Kaibara Ekken, infertility is one of the reasons that the husband should raise divorce. This shows how bringing a new life to this world is a job for women in Japan. According to McLelland, “Women’s sexuality is always troubled by anxieties about pregnancy” [3]. It must be stressful, and running away from stress is an understandable action. Female readers play the role in the story as they can enjoy a boy’s body which also means no need to carry the responsibility of giving birth. There is a paradox here, as the female readership reads the story on wishing to escape the traditional reproduction job that Japanese females job while also seeking traditional aesthetic requirements, such as a skinny body, big eyes, and white skin.

The combination of the need to follow and outbreaking the traditional expectations of women can be seen in the protagonists. In some way, it can be said that this represents the struggles females faced during that time period. As the article mentioned, the genre of Shounen ai rose during the 1970s. It is also an important age for the Japanese feminism movement. In the first period of Shounen ai history, there is a group called as “the 1949 gang”. Quoted from Mizoguchi, “the 1949 gang” (nijūyo-nen gumi ) for their year of birth, a few years after the end of World War II.” [1]. Feminism in Japan highly developed after WWII (World War II). As Mizoguchi mentioned, these authors are very likely experiencing the rise of feminism, and they may be influenced by these movements. Women start their journey to reach gender equality and reading Shounen ai work may be a way for people to read out their needs.

The gender role in the Shounen ai stories shows how women want to escape the traditional “wife job”. In the story, they are not boys or girls. They are just teenagers who seek love. The action of choosing can be analyzed as a way for them to rebel against the traditional social norm. As Ueno Chizuko said, “These beautiful boys are ‘the

idealized self-image' of girls, and they are neither male nor female. They belong to a 'third sex'". [1]. Therefore, being this "third sex" outside of traditional gender roles allows women to get away from gender restriction, and put down the burden of being a good wife or mother. The life experience as the "third sex" is what women seek.

#### **4. The Idealized Romantic Relationship in Shounen ai**

A story needs not only characters but also connections between the characters is an important part of the story. This is very significant in romantic stories, as the romantic relationship is a big part of the story. The romantic relationship in Shounen ai has its characteristics. The biggest difference in romantic relationships between the genre of Shounen ai and novels and comics about heterosexual relationships is how love is between two persons of the same gender. How the author sets two protagonists as the same gender does give the story a very different taste. The target readers of Shounen ai works are female, so there must be some reasons why female readers are also enjoying the romantic relationships that are depicted in the stories.

The one reason will be how two partners in the relationship are equal to each other. As McLelland claims, "Heterosexual sex is rarely presented as an equitable exchange in men's comics" [3]. It is very interesting how he points out that unequal relationships are more depicted in comics that are created for males. The male is the dominator in the relationship. What about the male in Shounen ai? They are both male and same-sex, so there is no need for competition on who is the dominator in the relationship. There is a sense of equality. This is what female readers may seek: a romantic relationship with equality between two persons.

#### **5. Why Same-sex Relationship**

Still, there is a question of why choose to make two persons with same-sex, rather than choose to depict an equal relationship in a heterosexual relationship. The stories are created by authors. They are based on the authors' imaginations. Limitations shouldn't exist in the human imagination, but there are limitations on manga or novels as a medium, making imagination vivid to others. The novel or comics are all products of imagination. They are created with a wish to let readers follow the eyes of protagonists and experience the worlds that authors created. It is easier to play a role in a fake world than a world that is half real. The reason is that reader reading a half-fake world will

always compare this with their real experience. For example, when a girl reads a comic about heterosexual love in modern Japan and she also has the same experience of being part of a heterosexual romantic relationship, she will likely compare her real experience with the fake story. It is hard for her to believe that there is a real equal romantic relationship in a heterosexual relationship when she is experiencing or used to experiencing a heterosexual relationship that is not equal. The reader, in half the real world, can't build a connection with it, which is not what storytellers wish to achieve. Homosexual relationships are pretty new to readers, so it can be said as a "totally fake world".

Another evidence of showing the storytellers want to create a new world for the reader is how the background of the story is "often among the European upper classes" [1]. For example, *Kaze to ki no uta* (The Song of the Wind and the Tree), by Takemiya Keiko, is a very popular Shounen ai comic during the 1970s [4]. The story of this work has a background in France during the 19th century, which is an alien, and therefore romanticized, place for the Japanese reader.

It is also easier for an author to create a fake world that readers are unfamiliar with. It is easy that the story has real-world background have logic problems. In the purpose of making readers enjoy the stories better, it is understandable that the author uses a background that readers are unfamiliar with. A homosexual relationship is also part of the author's plan to help the reader enjoy the story without considering escaping from real-world matters. The satisfaction didn't stop at equality between partners.

#### **6. Caring and Curing Between Two Protagonists**

As McLelland said, "The boys are not only represented as feminine but are also inscribed in typically female situations" [3]. In the previous part, there is a conclusion that the male protagonists have characteristics of female characters. The protagonists in romantic stories are mostly sensitive. This is also true in Shounen ai works. Characters are emotionally connected with their partners. It is mostly a girl's job to sense the emotion of their partners, but in Shounen ai, it is different. Both partners are emotional in Shounen ai. Quoted from Ágnes Zsila and Zsolt Demetrovics "Same-sex relationships are portrayed as particularly deep and honest, and the partners are shown to be unconditionally supportive" [5]. The support is for curing. The curing is needed emotionally on protagonists. *Kaze to ki no uta* has this scene as one of the protagonists is a victim of rape. After knowing this, his partner gives

support and wishes to cure him. Being a victim of rape can be considered as one female situation.

How the story depicts a supportive environment in a romantic relationship may represent female needs in a relationship. Females need support after getting harmed. The romantic relationship that they seek is the one that is beneficial in helping them get away from trauma caused by sexual violence. The women who used to experience the same trauma can also get cured as they play the role in the story. They can also receive unconditional support from the fake romantic relationship.

## 7. Pure and Precious Love in Romantic Relationship

Another reason why this is idealized is how the love in a romantic relationship is depicted as pure and precious. The action of choosing to read Shounen ai works can be seen as an action of rebellion over traditional social norms. This can be seen not only in gender roles but also in the romantic relationships in Shounen ai works. The idea here is how women are unsatisfied with the old-style social sex structure.

The old romantic relationship about heterosexual love in stories is influenced by old thoughts that women should be the weak ones, the following and the stupid ones [6]. This is the reason why some females move to read Shounen ai. The old rule brings dissatisfaction, then there is no reason to choose to read the story with the old rule. In tradition, love is behind traditional etiquette. In Shounen ai, protagonists have the dare to challenge traditional etiquette. The female who chooses to read Shounen ai is seeking “love beyond the constraining roles imposed by the marriage and family system” [3]. The protagonists are attracted to each other because of their characteristics rather than their ability to give descendants or family glory. The love between them is pure.

The love between them is also precious. Star-crossed lovers’ love is a lot of their effort to fight with traditional social norms. As the previous part mentions, Shounen ai work usually ends with tragedy. The love, in Mizoguchi’s words “is “frozen” as an eternal dream”, which somehow relates to what Donald Keene says about Japanese aesthetic style [7]. The ideals of impermanence are also shown in the characteristics of Shouenn ai works. The tragic ending attracts people by giving the ending have endless aftertaste. The tragic ending lets their love end at the point when the two partners have the highest passion for their love. After many years, when characters or even readers recall the story, the love is still at its highest point. The tragic ending can be caused by punishment from society

or just a simple accident like a hurricane. The fact that there is an end to their love, makes the time they stay together more precious, the same as their love. This endless, passionate love can be what women wish for.

## 8. Conclusion

Shounen ai is a very interesting genre that is created for females. Its unique characteristics make it attractive to some female audiences. These unique characteristics include idealized gender roles and romantic relationships. Those things can also be used to understand the needs of the female audience who read Shounen ai in Japan. The influence of the feminist movement encourages women to think more about their role in society, which makes females want new gender roles and forms of romantic relationships. They are seeking to be free from traditional gender roles and romantic relationships that are supportive and love that is pure and precious. The action of reading these stories is to fulfill their desire on need for these things. In the same way, it also shows how Japanese society lacks the things that females seek, which causes them to seek them in fictional works.

It is a study about sub-culture, so it doesn’t represent all women in Japan. It just may represent a female audience who read Shounen ai works. The information here used is not updated and may not represent what is happening today. It also only focuses on the emotional expressions in the works. The research still failed to find what females need in a romantic relationship. It is a very complex question to answer. Also, this research cannot answer whether women are more likely to wish to take on the role or be just mere audiences.

It is better that future research focus more on current Shounen ai works. The research that has been done till now is mostly about the Shounen ai works that were created decades ago. Shounen ai is still a kind of popular culture, which means it has developed a lot in a short time.

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