Kenji’s children’s stories, as opposed to his poetry, have been comparatively overlooked in English-language research and translation. Within the fifteen volumes of Kenji’s complete works, nearly five volumes are devoted to his children’s tales (dōwa). During his short life, he wrote about one hundred and thirty stories.1 Despite steadily increasing interest in Kenji and his relative prominence among translated Japanese literature, there are still relatively few translations of his tales available. To date, only about thirty have been translated into English, the majority of these by John Bester.2 More recently though, a picture book series of ten of Kenji’s stories has been published in English, and RIC Publications are in the process of publishing another picture book series in English (with illustrations by Satō Kunio).3 With regard to English-language research into Kenji’s tales, there is a similar situation. In contrast to research into Kenji’s poetry, reference to Kenji’s children’s stories has been limited to the occasional mention in doctoral dissertations and within articles about his life or his poetry. Most study has focussed on Kenji’s most representative tale, the epic fantasy, ‘Night on the Milky Way Railroad’ (Ginga Tetsudō no Yoru), which has been made into an animated film and translated into English by several translators.4 Sarah Strong’s study guide and Hagiwara’s thesis represent the major scholarly works in English on this particular story.5 Much of the examination into Kenji’s own essays about life, art and literature has provided the basis for research into his poetry,6 rather than his children’s tales, with the notable exceptions of Takao Hagiwara’s examination of ‘innocence’ in his tales,7 and Kerstin Vidaeus’s research into the characters in his tales.8 More recently, David Golley has offered important insight into the relationship between realism, science and ecology in both Kenji’s poetry and tales within the context of Japan’s aesthetic movement of high modernism.9

This paucity of research into Kenji’s children’s stories is, however, in no way indicative of the situation in Japan, where both popular and scholarly interest in all his work is thriving, although there has been a tendency towards hagiography. The Kenji boom perhaps reached its zenith in 1996 with the centenary celebrations of his birth that saw many television programmes and various activities revolving around his life and work. Many picture books were also published or reissued in this year, to say nothing of the advent of new ‘Kenji’ tomes, journals and periodicals for both general and academic audiences. A theme park was built in Hanamaki which aimed at “familiarising children with

---

I

The Significance of Miyazawa Kenji’s Ideals in (Post-) Modern Japanese Children’s Literature

---

1 Itō Wataru (1921–); p. 35; Kenjū Kōenrin; Kaiseisha, 1987. Detail of fig. 73.
the writer’s work,” exemplifying much of the hype and publicity surrounding Kenji’s life and work. Research continues to expand, and at least two Japanese organisations and two online sites are devoted to him.

There are many reasons for the enduring popularity and significance of Kenji’s work. In a 1993 newspaper article, Miyazawa Yūzō, the then Director of the Miyazawa Kenji Commemorative Museum in Japan, propounded several possible explanations, not the least of which was Kenji’s concern for nature and the environment, a topical issue of the fin de siècle which still endures. The same article also mentions the fact that Kenji is known in Japan by one or more of his many facets: as the poet who wrote the now-famous Ame nimo makezu, Kaze nimo makezu (Undaunted by the Rain, Undaunted by the Wind); by his ‘masterwork,’ Ginga Tetsudō no Yoru (Night on the Milky Way Railroad); as an agriculturalist and teacher; as a scientist who tried to elaborate on Einstein’s fourth dimension; or as a practical person who tried to help suffering farmers. The newspaper article suggests, however, that it is Kenji’s anticipation of a society where people and all living things can live together peacefully which is the universally attractive aspect of many of his stories. It is, Miyazawa Yūzō feels, Kenji’s foresight about this point which will continue to increase the significance of his tales world-wide. As Makoto Ueda points out, Kenji, in his work, was urging people to reflect seriously upon any doctrines which centre solely upon either humanity or on an omnipotent science. Kenji believed that religion had been replaced by a cold modern science and that art had been degraded and lost a necessary critical spirit. He did not want his literature to follow suit.

Much of the research on Kenji has been hagiographic or biographical in content and theme, tending to explain his work in terms of his life and art. As eminent scholars like Hara Shirō have pointed out, amidst the mid-1990s there were few thorough studies into the works themselves. Hara points out that scholars often critique, for instance, the author himself, his religious leanings, or concentrate more on how a work is made instead of on the work itself. Even Hara’s recommended style of criticism, in seeking to accept certain ‘fashionable’ versions of Kenji’s work (like animated manga), is rather monologic because it calls for an understanding of Kenji’s original meaning.

This investigation concentrates on the works themselves, or more specifically, the visual representation of Kenji’s tales, taking a more intertextual approach in the later analysis of picture books. Although the purpose of this project is not biographical, a brief sketch of Kenji’s life is important, not because of a monologic need to understand Kenji or his intended meanings, but because the works’ underlying significances or ideologies may otherwise be missed. Some detail of Kenji’s life in light of his beliefs not only provides the historically different socio-cultural context from which the tales arose, but also helps draw out issues related to holistic constructions of self and subjectivity, providing a deeper appreciation of some of the codes intrinsic to the representations under analysis.

Given that Kenji’s stories are generally seen as Buddhist parables or spiritual metaphors, explanation of Buddhist elements operating in the tales provides the basis for the later analysis. Both cultural and artistic traditions that form the basis of cultural coding have implications for how the picture books will be read in both verbal and pictorial representation. Before going further, however, it will be helpful to briefly acknowledge the cultural nature of reading signs.

People learn to distinguish uses of signs, and the attitudes and emotional positions which are signified by these signs, “by living in the culture which produces them.” Although this highlights a rather controversial dialectic inherent in this research, that of an outsider ‘speaking for the other’, an exploration of cultural and artistic coding is an attempt to allay the pitfalls, constraints and dilemmas of such a project. Space prevents this issue being dealt with in depth here, but it is necessary to acknowledge the dangers of assuming an