

Voices  
from the  
Gaps*The Heart of Hyacinth*  
by Onoto Watanna

Concealing her identity with a pen name, Lillie Winnifred Eaton's novels were thought by the public to be the production of an aristocratic woman named Onoto Watanna. Although of Chinese descent, Eaton wrote her literary works under the guise of a Japanese pen name. Eaton was one of fourteen children born to an Englishman and a Chinese woman in Canada during the year of 1875. Throughout the time of Eaton's career, the Chinese were considered to be an inferior race by many North Americans. Thus, it was advantageous for her to pose as a Japanese writer, gradually becoming a best-selling author beginning with the novel *Miss Nume of Japan*.

Eaton wrote many novels set in Japan, such as *A Japanese Nightingale* and *A Japanese Blossom*. Another work by Eaton, *The Heart of Hyacinth*, is a story about a girl in Japan struggling with tensions involving her identity and religious beliefs. Throughout the story, Eaton subtly weaves in her own personal experiences.

A serene sunrise in the city of Sendai begins *The Heart of Hyacinth*. The picturesque depiction of Sendai city and Matsushima bay creates a tranquil tone that lingers throughout the book; issues of conflict are presented delicately, almost poetically. Essentially, the novel is a coming-of-age story of a young girl, Hyacinth, born in Japan of an American woman. The mother dies soon after childbirth, and a Japanese woman, Aoi, decides to care for the child. As Hyacinth ages, she is not told of her true heritage and believes that she is Japanese. However, the truth finds a way to be known, and as a young adult, Hyacinth struggles with her personhood: her forgotten American father comes to retrieve her, and the Japanese aristocrat to whom she is betrothed despises her Caucasian descent.

Thus, the most apparent issue presented during the story is that of Hyacinth's battle with her identity, a battle that Eaton possibly experienced herself as implied by her use of a pen name. Hyacinth's identity difficulties are illustrated when she is shocked to see herself for the first time looking into a mirror.



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# *The Heart of Hyacinth* by Onoto Watanna

*“Certainly. Is not the little girl in the glass you?”*

*“No!” Her dilated eyes strained at the glass, then looked behind it and about her. “That’s not me. No!” (p. 74-5)*

Hyacinth does not possess the physical features characteristic of the other Japanese girls. Hyacinth must decipher to what extent biology versus the environment affects who she is is she Japanese or American? As a younger child she did not seem to fit into the Japanese culture, as can be noticed in the following excerpt:

*Unlike the average Japanese child, the little girl was restless and lacked all sense of repose, an inherent instinct with Japanese children. (p. 36)*

However, as Hyacinth learns more about her American heritage she tends more towards the Japanese culture.

*With drooping head, Hyacinth softly entered the room. At first glance she seemed no different from any other Japanese girl, save that she was somewhat taller. (p. 232)*

Another tribulation Hyacinth experiences is that of religion. Due to the settlement of missionaries in Japan, Hyacinth is exposed to the Christian religion. This experience parallels that of Eaton’s Chinese mother, who was raised by English missionaries. Hyacinth must discover a healthy compromise between Christianity and the traditional Japanese polytheism. More particularly, the foster mother of Hyacinth, Aoi, struggles with these conflicting beliefs.

*“Thank you,” she murmured, gratefully. “You are so good the gods will bless you.” Thus, even within the house of the new religion, poor Aoi let slip from her lips that almost unconscious faith in the gods of her childhood. (p. 52-3)*

Struggling to discover one’s true identity is a journey that all humans undergo. Throughout the novel, Eaton portrays her own struggles through Hyacinth. Ultimately, Eaton’s novel engages the reader to take part in the voyage of a young girl striving to comprehend who she truly is.

*Reviewed by Marysia Shudy*