

Phenomenological Considerations on Love and Jealousy in Junichiro Tanizaki's "The Key"

José Henrique Sousa Luz

Abstract

The novel "The Key", by Japanese writer Junichiro Tanizaki, offers elements that allow for a thought-provoking reflection on the relationship between sexuality and phenomenology. Tanizaki tells the story of a couple in which the husband and wife write their respective diaries separately, initially without revealing the content to their partner, expressing intense confessions of an erotic nature within the pages. However, at a certain point, both suspect that they are secretly being read by each other. From then on, the reader is uncertain whether what is reported in the diaries corresponds to truth or to fabricated experiences and feelings, intended for one partner to intentionally confuse the other. Thus, the narrative reveals a dynamic in which the encounter with the other is replaced by games of manipulation and staging. In light of the chapter "The Body as a Sexed Being" from Merleau-Ponty's "Phenomenology of Perception", it is possible to identify distortions of the erotic condition in the plot. For the philosopher, sexuality is an original mode of presence in the world, a means of accessing the other as a subject. In Tanizaki, however, this dimension is corrupted: the gaze is not permeated by reciprocity, and the other's body is reduced to a fetishized object. Where there could be courtship, as a bodily expression of love, jealousy and betrayal emerge as artifices to sustain arousal. Thus, "The Key" exposes experiences in which sexuality, instead of a language of reciprocity, becomes a field of manipulation that denies the other's otherness.

Key-words: Love; Jealousy; Sexuality; Phenomenology; Body.

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Considerações fenomenológicas sobre o amor e o ciúme em “A chave”, de Junichiro Tanizaki

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Resumo

O romance “A chave”, do escritor japonês Junichiro Tanizaki, concede elementos que permitem uma instigante possibilidade de reflexão sobre a relação entre sexualidade e fenomenologia. Tanizaki conta a história de um casal em que marido e esposa escrevem separadamente seus respectivos diários, a princípio sem revelar o conteúdo ao parceiro, expressando nas páginas intensas confissões de caráter erótico. Entretanto, em determinado momento, ambos suspeitam que são lidos um pelo outro às escondidas. A partir de então, o leitor da obra não sabe se o que é relatado nos diários corresponde a verdades ou a experiências e sentimentos forjados, com o objetivo de que um parceiro intencionalmente confunda o outro. Assim, a narrativa revela uma dinâmica em que o encontro com o outro é substituído por jogos de manipulação e encenação. À luz do capítulo “O corpo como ser sexuado”, da “Fenomenologia da percepção” de Merleau-Ponty, é possível identificar, na trama, distorções da condição erótica. Para o filósofo, a sexualidade é um modo originário de presença no mundo, uma via de acesso ao outro enquanto sujeito. Em Tanizaki, entretanto, essa dimensão encontra-se corrompida: o olhar não é permeado pela reciprocidade, e o corpo do outro é reduzido a objeto fetichizado. Onde poderia haver cortejo, enquanto expressão corporal do amor, surgem o ciúme e a traição como artifícios para sustentar a excitação. Assim, “A chave” expõe experiências em que a sexualidade, em vez de linguagem de reciprocidade, converte-se em um campo de manipulações que negam a alteridade do outro.

Palavras-chave: Amor; Ciúme; Sexualidade; Fenomenologia; Corpo.

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There¹ are literary works that harbor promising possibilities for investigation into human existence. Through complex and intriguing elements, the book “The Key”, by Japanese writer Junichiro Tanizaki, published in 1956, is one of those literary compositions that foster an interesting articulation between phenomenology and sexuality. Tanizaki presents the story of a couple in which husband and wife write their respective diaries separately, initially in secret, flooding the pages with intense confessions of an erotic nature. However, at a certain point, both suspect that they are secretly being read by each other. From then on, the reader does not know whether what comes to be reported in the diaries corresponds to truths or to fabricated experiences and feelings, intended for one partner to intentionally confuse the other. In both of them, there are simultaneous desires to conceal and reveal their intimacies, composing a slippery game that perpetuates itself throughout the entire plot.

The husband, 56 years old and whose name is not revealed in the work, decides to write about the couple’s sexual life, even while suspecting that Ikuko, his wife, may be reading in a surreptitious manner. He strives to conceal his entries, to weave an atmosphere of mystery, further fueling his wife’s curiosity. Ikuko, a 45-year-old woman born into a traditional family, presents herself as imbued with an introspective disposition of which she is proud, since she judges such a characteristic to be a feminine virtue. However, the husband attributes to this temperament his desire to write about the couple’s intimacy. In his diary, the husband declares about

¹ **Translator’s Note:** This translation was produced with the assistance of artificial intelligence, specifically ChatGPT, model GPT-5.5 Thinking, developed by OpenAI. The model belongs to the family of large language models and has advanced capabilities in natural language understanding and generation, with particular proficiency in academic, technical, and humanistic registers across multiple languages.

The translation was carried out from Brazilian Portuguese into English, following a section-by-section methodology, with systematic review of terminological consistency, preservation of the author’s stylistic choices, and faithful maintenance of the conceptual vocabulary used in the original text. Every effort was made neither to omit nor to add ideas to the source text, while respecting, as far as possible, its argumentative organization, linguistic style, and conceptual density.

The quotations incorporated into the body of the text were translated from the version of the article provided for this translation activity, without independent consultation of source texts or alternative editions of the cited works.

The AI-assisted translation was carried out on May 23, 2026, and supervised by Fábio Luiz Socreppa da Fonseca. The final version was subsequently submitted to the author for review on June 1, 2026, and was approved by the author following his comments and revisions.

Readers are advised that, although every effort was made to ensure accuracy and fidelity to the original text, AI-assisted translations may present limitations in grasping expressions that are highly context-dependent, stylistic nuances, or culturally situated meanings. Any questions regarding the translation may be addressed to the translation supervisor.

his wife:

It was her extreme circumspection that led me to want to make these notes. Even bedroom conversations between the couple cause her such shame that, when I begin a somewhat indecent story, she immediately covers her ears. Her pretended decency, her hypocritical femininity, and her affected taste for refinement are the cause of everything. Together for twenty years and with a daughter already of marriageable age, even so, when we go to bed, we still fulfill our obligation in silence, without even thinking of exchanging loving words. Can we be called a couple? (Tanizaki, 2000, p. 9)

Even so, the husband states that he loves her intensely. However, he is concerned about being unable to maintain physical vigor during sexual relations. As a husband, he finds it inconceivable not to be able to sufficiently fulfill his obligations and imagines that, if she tried to compensate for this deficiency with another man, he would not tolerate it. He finds himself disturbed by jealousy merely by imagining such a possibility. Although this feeling proves to be uncomfortable, it will also be crucial to the unfolding of the plot, for, at the same time that he suffers when thinking of a possible betrayal, jealousy reveals itself as an extraordinary enhancer of his sexual performance.

At a given moment, the wife finds the key to the drawer where the husband keeps the diary and soon suspects that it was left there intentionally, so that she would read it. Nevertheless, she states that she will not read it, since she would not like to invade such intimacies of her husband. In general, Ikuko places herself in a position of passivity within the conjugal context. She considers that there might perhaps have been a more suitable and interesting companion for her, but, since her husband was the man chosen by her family, she thinks she must endure him. However, Ikuko does not refrain from reporting that, since the wedding night, she has felt nausea and repugnance when her gaze meets that of her husband, which makes her turn off the light during sex, despite her husband's demand to leave it on.

In this scenario, Kimura then appears, the prospective fiancé of Toshiko, the couple's daughter. Ikuko grows quite close to this man, who frequently offers her alcoholic drinks during his visits, with the husband's condescension. It is perceptible to the husband that Ikuko acts as if she felt attracted to Kimura and, consequently, he begins to experience a prominent jealousy. However, he questions himself as to whether he might not be secretly deriving pleasure from this jealousy, for it is precisely when he is jealous that he feels most libidinous. As a result, jealousy becomes an indispensable element for him to feel sexually excited. And it was at the expense of the influence of this feeling that he was able, after a long period of

dissatisfaction, to achieve an uncommon erotic pleasure with his wife. The husband records in his diary: “I realize that, from now on, Kimura’s existence is the indispensable stimulant for satisfying our sexual life as a couple. I want to be jealous until my senses go mad” (Tanizaki, 2000, p. 20).

During one of Kimura’s visits to the family, Ikuko drank so much alcohol that she lost consciousness. Later, but still on the same night, the husband took advantage of the fact that his wife had surrendered to a deep sleep caused by drunkenness and, after fully undressing her, began to observe her under the intense light of a lamp. Thus, he was able to admire his wife’s naked body for the first time in his life. He found himself greatly excited by such a sight, which was intensified by the suspicion that Ikuko might be simulating her state of drowsiness. At a certain moment, Ikuko partially emerged from sleep and uttered Kimura’s name, which triggered a peak of excitement in the husband, stimulating in him the desire to facilitate more situations in which his partner could become drunk, something that indeed occurred routinely for several days.

It becomes increasingly evident that the husband associates the vigor of his excitement with the effects of jealousy, a feeling that hurls him to the brink of madness and lays bare a disturbing ambivalence: at the same time that he is transported by so much pleasure, he suffers with the idea that his wife desires another man. For her part, in the writing of her diary, Ikuko says that she vaguely recalls that, during sleep, she was immersed in an erotic dream about Kimura, feeling a pleasure that her husband had never provided her. Moreover, she records that, upon awakening and seeing that it was her husband who was with her at that moment, she experienced fury and shame for having been used by her husband while she slept, as well as inwardly lamenting the fact that her husband was not like her daughter’s suitor.

Following a suggestion from Kimura, the husband obtains a photographic camera and uses it to capture photos of his undressed wife, in the most diverse positions, while she “pretends” to sleep. By observing her in this way and maneuvering her body according to his voluptuous will, he feels extreme pleasure. Making the plot even more delicate, the husband delegates to Kimura the task of developing the photos of Ikuko, for, to him, it is insufficient for him himself to gaze at and photograph his wife’s body while imagining that she desires Kimura; it becomes

necessary for him to feel jealousy, even if he runs increasingly greater risks.

The photos of Ikuko naked are found by Toshiko in her fiancé's house. Taken by indignation, the daughter reveals this event to her mother and warns her that she may be the target of abuse by her father. Resignedly, Ikuko says that she cannot hate her husband and that, if this is one of his desires, she must comply with it. In the unfolding of the plot, it is observed that, through Ikuko's own manipulations, Toshiko becomes a fundamental piece in creating the occasions on which the mother becomes drunk and also in allowing her to be alone with Kimura. Thus, the four characters act with the purpose of favoring and maintaining such situations. On this matter, the husband notes in his diary:

It astonishes me to see four people thus gathered together, striving to deceive one another in the pursuit of a goal. In short, each one has an idea of their own, but all come together and, united, make an effort to see the objective of corrupting my wife realized (Tanizaki, 2000, p. 71).

The sequence of events and the outcome of the work are striking examples of how the erotic condition can be marked by phenomena of distortion that forcefully unsettle sexual being. It is interesting to point out how the very writing of the diaries becomes a means that replaces the experience of direct contact, substantially disturbing experiences mediated by the spoken word, by touch, and by the penetrance of the gaze. What could have been a space of genuinely private confession is transfigured into a field of strategies, manipulations, and carefully orchestrated stagings, permeated by calculated acts intended to ignite in the other an intimately imagined response.

Merleau-Ponty, in the chapter "The Body as a Sexed Being" of his work "Phenomenology of Perception", says: "We shall try to see how an object or a being begins to exist for us through desire or love, and through this we shall better understand how objects and beings can in general exist" (Merleau-Ponty, 2018, p. 213). Thus, he offers a complex conceptual framework that can shed light on the understanding of some phenomena presented by the book "The Key", which touch upon the amorous and sexual dimensions of the human being. For Merleau-Ponty, sexuality is not an isolated instinct nor a mere physiological impulse, but an original dimension of existence. Sexuality, as an instance that holds an existential significance, is a way of signifying the world and of gaining access to the other (Merleau-Ponty, 2018). On this matter, he adds:

It is sexuality that makes a man have a history. If the sexual history of a man offers the key to his

life, it is because in man's sexuality his manner of being with regard to the world is projected, that is, with regard to time and with regard to other men (Merleau-Ponty, 2018, p. 219).

Considering such perspectives, it is possible to identify, in the story of the book, significant obstacles to the genuine experience of the subject as a sexual being, as well as to the unique opportunity of truly being with the other. For example, when the husband photographs the sleeping body of his wife without her consent and summons his daughter's fiancé to develop the photos, he seems to be manipulating characters and scenarios, as if operating as the playwright and director of a theatrical play, rather than directly implicating himself in the sexual experience. In this context, the privileged place of the gaze can be observed. Yet it is a gaze that does not look at the wife as a subject, but as an object devoid of subjectivity. Regarding the dimension of the gaze, Merleau-Ponty says:

Therefore, modesty and immodesty take place within a dialectic of the self and the other, which is that of master and slave: insofar as I have a body, under the gaze of the other I can be reduced to an object and no longer count for him as a person, or else, on the contrary, I can become his master and in turn look at him, but this mastery is an impasse, since, at the moment when my value is recognized by the desire of the other, the other is no longer the person by whom I desired to be recognized; he is a fascinated being, without freedom, and as such no longer counts for me. To say that I have a body is therefore a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I seek to be seen as a subject, that the other can be my master or my slave, so that modesty and immodesty express the dialectic of the plurality of consciousnesses and indeed have a metaphysical significance (Merleau-Ponty, 2018, pp. 230-231).

However, what we notice in the book is the frailty of the reversibility of the gaze — the gaze, as a possibility for the expression of desire, does not return; the other becomes an object aimed at as a thing, and not as a body animated by a consciousness. The other is not lived as a sensible subject, but as an instrument for obtaining certain satisfactions. Considering the dynamic of the positions of master and slave, the wife is fixed in the place of object, not being taken into consideration as a person.

Thus, in the narrative woven by Tanizaki, there seems to be no encounter between fully present beings. What there is, in fact, are experiences traversed by calculations and stratagems, in which the wife's body becomes a fetishized object of observation. The photographs, the induced drunkenness — all of this points to the replacement of reciprocity by a logic traversed by a voyeuristic perspective that excludes the subjectivity of the other. Where there could be courtship, as a form of bodily realization of love (Becher, 2024), jealousy and the fantasy of betrayal emerge as artifices sustaining sexual excitement. Under the influence of jealousy, the husband claims to reach the apex of pleasure:

At that moment I felt as if I had entered the world of the fourth dimension. Suddenly I saw myself rising higher and higher, up to the peak of the seventh heaven. The entire past was a mere illusion: true existence was here. My wife and I were solidly entwined. I could have died at that hour, but the moment I was living was eternal (Tanizaki, 2000, pp. 60-61).

From these experiences, the husband believes he has reached the highest magnitude of erotic ecstasy. However, it is notable that this instant is not shared with his wife; pleasure is concentrated in himself, in such a way that the character of the husband finds himself transfixed not by consideration of the encounter with alterity, but by the excitement that jealousy itself produces through the objectification of the other. It is a radically solitary orgasm, unlike what Becher and Bremberger (2023) point out in the following fragment:

The sexual aim, therefore, is reciprocity, the experience of the extinction of any and all boundaries of the material body toward the infinite space of intimate openness to the other, who penetrates and who also welcomes. The orgasm, the apothotic sexual moment, is the hedonic concretization of the full encounter, in which bodies and existences converge, in the ephemerality of an instant and in the condensation of the space of intersection. (...) Sexual experience is, therefore, an inherent face of man's interactive and bodily life, and may suffer, as this section has sought to make explicit, in relation to the different ways in which the individual disposes himself toward himself, his body, and his world of relations (Becher and Bremberger, 2023, pp. 593-594).

From phenomenological references, it is apprehended that the body of the other, when truly desired, is desired as an incarnate presence, as a free consciousness. However, in the universe described by Tanizaki, what becomes apparent is that the husband intends to elide this dimension of the other's consciousness, turning his wife into a passive receptacle of his gaze, like an object harassed by covetousness and possession. In turn, the wife, in her own way and traversed by the social and moral bonds that constrain her, makes efforts to exert some influence over the conjuncture of which she is part: she seduces, pretends to sleep, deliberately exposes herself to certain situations, and involves her daughter in her intentions. The body, thus, is abandoned as an instance that could enable a rich and plural encounter of subjectivities, converting itself into a stage for mere performances. All of this reveals forms of existence in which sexuality ceases to be a potency of encounter and transmutes into a mechanism of distortion of the living structure of the erotic body.

In "The Key", one finds representations of distortions of the existential significance of sexuality that illustrate the disfigurement of what Merleau-Ponty indicates concerning sexuality as a mode of being in the world: instead of an erotic structure prevailing that enables the sexual signification of the encounter, symptoms

are installed that inhibit the capacity to see the complexity of the other as a subject. There, the experiences of the body, of love, and of jealousy do not lead to sharing or to transcendence, but to a game of domination, an artifice that aims to be a vehement defense against the vulnerability inherent to the encounter.

It is important to emphasize that such lived experiences cannot be reduced to the conception of behavioral deviations or to a simplistic and reductionist view of a sexual pathology, but reveal something laden with multiple nuances: they demonstrate modes of being that attempt to abolish the essential ambiguity of sexual experience. In this nebulous scenario, where desire is pulverized into shifting strategies and the other becomes a mere object, sexual being no longer shows itself permeable to the mystery of presence, but becomes entangled in an astonishing aridity. Thus, the possibility is lost of experiencing an eroticism capable of sustaining encounters built with authenticity and with a sharing of meaning. To recognize such categories of manifestations means to apprehend something beyond apparent symptoms. With this, the relevance is imposed of detecting the structure underlying experiences in which sexuality ceases to be a fruitful field of encounter and becomes only a terrain of sterile manipulations.

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