

# The Politics of *One Piece*: Political Critique in Oda's *Water Seven*

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**Abstract** *One Piece* is a long-running shōnen manga series that deals with many political themes. Shōnen manga is typically defined as manga for boys, but people of all ages and genders frequently read it. Shōnen manga is therefore analyzed in terms of its key themes, identified as hard work, victory, and friendship. *One Piece* uses these themes in a basic formula in which the heroic pirate crew faces off against a series of increasingly powerful villains. Each member of the crew represents specific values, and the enemies represent the antithesis of these values. Combat is ideological, with the heroes victory reaffirming the primacy of the values represented by the thesis. The arc Water Seven is investigated, as is its use of characters to explore the relationships between the individual and the state in terms of national security. In *One Piece*, it is found unacceptable to sacrifice individual rights of the innocent for a perceived improvement in the security of other people.

**Key words** Oda Eiichiro; *One Piece*; Water Seven; political critique

2010 was a banner year for the Japanese comic series ワンピース (*One Piece*). The series, written and illustrated by creator Oda Eiichiro, has been serialized in ジャンプ (Shūkan Shōnen Jump, *Weekly Boys' Jump*) since August 4, 1997. *One Piece* has been popular in Japan throughout its serialization, but in the last year, the signs of its cultural and economic success have become impossible to ignore. In the year alone, *One Piece* sold 20 million volumes (“*One Piece* sells”), bringing the total number of volumes in print to a total of more than 200 million (“*One Piece* manga has”). *One Piece* also has extremely popular spin-offs in the form of a weekly television show, ten movies, several soundtracks, and countless varieties of merchandise. However, it would be a mistake to assume that it only a success as a children's multimedia franchise; *One Piece* has become so established in Japanese pop culture consciousness that its characters are considered sought-after spokespersons for Nissan's new Serena minivan (“*One Piece*, Nissan collaborate”) and working women are being asked by marketing firms which male *One Piece* character would make the best boyfriend (“Working women polled”). Despite *One Piece*'s ubiquity in Japanese popular culture, very little has been written on the manga (comics) series that has grown so popular over the preceding thirteen years and some sixty paperback volumes of printed comics. It is my intention in this article to argue that *One Piece* uses the structure of shōnen manga to express political arguments. First, I will introduce the genre of comics to which *One Piece* belongs, shōnen manga, (boys' comics). I will

then explore the narrative themes common to shōnen manga, and how *One Piece* uses these themes to introduce and advance political statements. Finally, I will analyze a single important arc in *One Piece*'s story, known as the Water 7 arc, and discuss the stance on individual rights that Oda makes within this arc.

### Shōnen Manga as a Genre

While manga series are divided into genres based on subject matter, they are also divided into categories based upon intended audience. The four primary divisions are shōnen(boys'), shōjo(girls'), seinen(men's) and josei(women's). Of these, it is shōnen series that produce the majority of internationally licensed properties for manga, and their anime and video game, and other multimedia adaptations (Thompson 33). Popular series *Dragonball Z*, *Naruto*, *Death Note*, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, and *Bleach* are also shōnen titles. According to Thompson, "modern day shōnen manga have vast diversity, ranging from comedy to sports, romance to hobby/occupational stories, detective stories to battle manga" (33). Shōnen manga is defined as manga specifically aimed at an audience of young and teenage boys, but in actuality, shōnen manga is read by people of all ages and genders. In fact, of the girls polled by marketing firm Oricon, a majority reported that *Weekly Shōnen Jump* was their favorite manga magazine ("Oricon"). If shōnen cannot truly be defined in terms of specific subject matter or intended audience, it is necessary to define other distinctive traits in order to discuss the structures and tropes of shōnen manga.

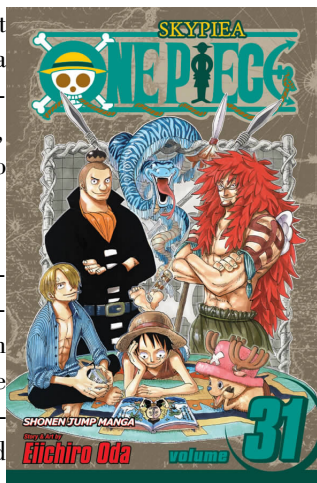
One of the most popular shōnen magazines is the previously mentioned *Weekly Shōnen Jump*, in which *One Piece* is serialized. While the magazine's sales peaked in the mid 1990s, it is still sells 3 million copies per week, and is considered an important trendsetter and cultural institution. (Thompson 339). *Jump*, founded in 1968, originally found it difficult to attract talented artists, most of whom worked with more established manga magazines that dated back to the postwar period (Schodt, "Dreamland" 89). According to Schodt, *Jump* "located newer, younger [artists], helped them develop their own identity, and contracted with them so they would continue with the magazine, even if they later became successful" ("Dreamland" 89). Due to this hands-on influence from editorial, *Shonen Jump* "contains some of the most individualistic art styles and most formulaic stories" (Thompson 338).

There is, in fact, an editorial policy that requires three specific themes of all works serialized in the magazine. This policy, which has inspired many imitators, was developed from a survey sent out soon after the magazine's launch. Readers were asked three questions, which Frederick Schodt translates as "What word warms your heart most?", "What do you feel is most important?", and "What makes you the happiest?" ("Dreamland" 89). The three answers they received, respectively, were yūjō (friendship), doryoku("hard work"), and shōri(victory). These three themes are required in all *Shōnen Jump* titles, including *One Piece*. Additionally, because *Shōnen Jump*'s massive sales and popularity sets standards for the rest of shōnen manga, these three elements work as an excellent starting point for defining the thematic structure of shōnen manga.

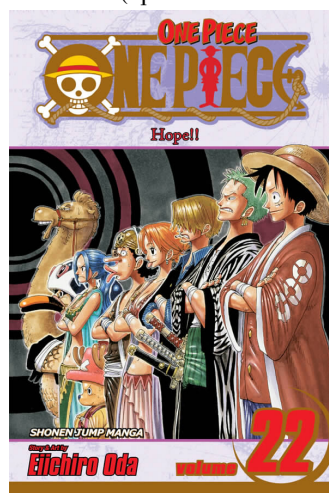
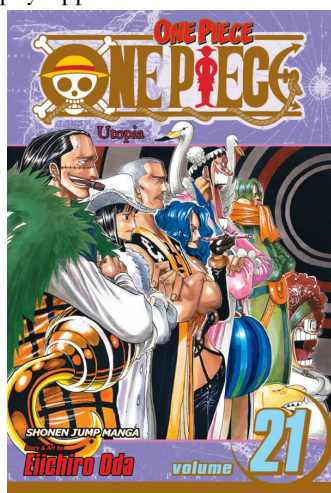
Let us first consider doryoku, or "hard work," the purpose of which in shōnen

manga is the accomplishment of a goal or dream. Most shōnen manga focus on the hero's struggle to achieve a goal he sets for himself early on in the narrative. Referring to Joseph Campbell's idea of the heroic journey, Drummond-Matthews contrasts American style superhero comics with their shōnen counterparts:

Unlike American comic heroes, shōnen manga heroes spend the bulk of their narrative time in the initiation phase of the hero's journey, while American heroes spend most of their time in the return phase of the journey... American heroes are often self-made; they are heroes not because they learned and grew and overcame difficulty. They are either born heroes, or, at least, the reader's first encounter with them is as the heroes they are. (73)



Superman doesn't spend the majority of the narrative wishing he were a superhero and working toward this goal; his goal is to exercise his already-existing powers. In contrast, a shōnen hero often wants to become a hero, or to excel in his field, and he must expend a great deal of effort and overcome countless obstacles to achieve this goal. *Shōnen Jump* editor Hiroki Gotō describes the publication's philosophy as, "If you work hard, you can accomplish anything. That's what our stories are saying. And that philosophy appeals to both adults and children" (qtd. in Gravett 59).



The second theme characteristic of shōnen manga is shōri, or victory. To have a victor, the narrative must contain competition, and nearly all shōnen manga deal with conflict and competition. Many series feature physical competition in the form of fighting, whether it be with fists, swords, magic, or some combination thereof. Sports manga featuring tournaments for baseball, soccer, kendo, and boxing have been popular since the 1950s (Gravett 54). Some series focus on games such as go

or *shōgi*, or battles of wits between detectives and criminals. Others still center on romantic conquests, and competition between suitors for the most attractive date. Rather than a series of random episodes featuring conflict, almost all *shōnen* manga are long form “story-comics” focusing on the character’s growth (Schodt “Manga”, 12). Drummond-Mathews describes *shōnen* manga in terms of a series of obstacles: “Each obstacle is greater than the next, but they build on each other in a stepwise fashion rather than randomly—which is to say that each is related to the other, proceeds from characters’ attempts to achieve their goals, and relates directly, not tangentially, to the characters’ goals” (72). Rather than focus on competition between a set selection of rivals or villains, *shōnen* series feature a series of temporary rivals, each stronger than the last. The hero is at first taken aback by his rival’s strength, cunning, or charms. By learning from his mistakes and working hard, the hero learns to overcome his rival, gaining strength or knowledge in the process. The hero might exult in his victory for a brief time, but the reader knows that in the next chapter, the hero will be challenged by an even deadlier foe or much more clever opponent.

Sometimes the defeated foe will learn the error of his or her ways, or learn of an even greater opponent, and join the hero on his quest. The befriending of formal rivals is a staple of *shōnen* manga (Thompson 338) and an excellent demonstration of the ideal of *yūjō*, or friendship. While on a quest, *shōnen* heroes build a team of like-minded comrades: some may start the quest in competition with the hero, and others will join as the journey progresses. As competition gets more severe, and the price of victory grows ever higher, the hero requires a powerful group of friends to assist him.

Thus most *shōnen* series feature a potentially endless iterative cycle: the hero progresses on his quest to achieve his dream, and encounters a rival. He bests his rival in competition, and the rival joins the hero in his quest to achieve his dream. The two friends then encounter a newer, more powerful rival, and the two must work together to best this new foe. Once this new foe is defeated, a third companion might join the group. This cycle will continue, with both allies and enemies growing in power, until the hero’s dream is accomplished. While this description may at first seem overly reductive, this basic formula is used, and embraced, by Oda in his writing for *One Piece*. I will now consider how *One Piece* itself fits in with these three themes. Before discussing the story in detail, however, I will note that there is some controversy about the proper translation or Romanization of character and place names. For the sake of clarity and consistency, I will be using the Romanized versions of names and places provided by the Viz Media English translation of the manga.



### The Formula of *One Piece*

Gold Roger, the notorious pirate, “had achieved it all. Wealth, fame, and power had all been his” (Oda v1, 5). The so-called “King of the Pirates” had been humbled, captured by the Navy of the World Government. His public execution was held in his hometown, and was intended to demonstrate the power and authority of the World Government, and to act as a deterrent to would be pirates. In a great reversal of expectations, Gold Roger manages to ignite a wave of lawlessness across the seas of the world from his execution scaffold: “My treasure,” he says, “why, it’s right where I left it. It’s yours if you can find it, but you’ll have to search the whole world” (Oda v1, 6). The search of Gold Roger’s fabled “One Piece” treasure begins what is to be known as “The Great Age of Piracy.” Twenty years later, in the midst of this new age, we follow the adventures of seventeen-year-old Monkey D. Luffy in his quest to find the *One Piece* and become the new King of the Pirates.

Luffy’s goal and dream is clearly spelled out in the narrative: it is to become the new king of the pirates. As often as this is said in the narrative, however, it is an oddly ambiguous goal. One of the great ironies of the series is the fact that Luffy is actually quite a poor pirate. He rarely finds treasure, never raids other ships, and never attacks the vulnerable. This is not done to make the series appropriate for a young audience, as the majority of pirates in the series are shown killing innocents and looting cities. The goofy, spirited Luffy seems to care more about food than riches, so it’s unusual to see his devotion to his quest to find the *One Piece*. A fascinating clue to his motivations can be found in volume 52 of the series, when Luffy meets Gold Roger’s first mate. With Luffy and his crew on the cusp of the “New World,” the First Mate warns Luffy that “the New World surpasses even your wildest imagination. The enemies there will be strong, too. Do you think you can conquer such powerful oceans?” Luffy responds, “I’m not going to conquer anything. The one who is most free is the Pirate King” (Oda v52, 97). Oda has yet to spell out the exact nature of what the Pirate King represents, but Luffy’s desire for freedom, and Roger’s challenge to the World Government suggest that the title of Pirate King is given to a figure of resistance against established authority. As *One Piece* progresses, we begin to see Luffy in conflict with corrupt and unjust sources of authority, culminating in opposition to the World Government itself.

As Luffy sails from island to island, he meets a series of friends and rivals. Luffy will first meet a companion, who is then threatened by a villain who is the companion’s exact antithesis in character and values. Based on his or her actions and words, it can be determined that Luffy’s companion represents an idea of how a moral life should be lived, or a country should be governed. The rival is a threat to the existence of practice of the thesis. Though combat is carried out in the narrative via brute force and supernatural powers, the actual conflict between the heroes and villains is ideological. Through the vices of the villain, we come to understand the virtues of the hero, and through the villain’s triumphs, we come to understand the seductive appeal of his or her amoral ideals. When Luffy and his friends triumph at the end of a story arc, it is a victory not only for Luffy, but a reaffirmation of the read-

ers' own hopes and values. Oda makes his intent clear when asked by a reader why Luffy and his crew never kill the vanquished foes:

The reason Luffy doesn't kill is this: In his era, men live by their beliefs and risk their lives to defend them. Luffy shatters the beliefs of his enemies by defeating them. For them to suffer defeat and to have their beliefs destroyed is as bad as death. Killing their bodies is beside the point. (v4, 90)

Though rudimentary, the first story arc of *One Piece* serves as an excellent illustration of his formula. After leaving his home village, Luffy comes across a swordsman named Zoro, who is characterized by his integrity and the lengths to which he will go to keep his word. In a flashback, we see a young Zoro making a promise to a village girl that one day, either he or she will become the world's greatest swordsman. She is later killed in an accident, but Zoro insists on keeping his word, and sets out to the seas in an attempt to work hard and achieve his own dream. Things don't go as planned, and Luffy first meets him chained to a post outside of the island's Navy base. Luffy soon discovers Zoro is being punished for killing a Navy guard dog, despite the fact that it was threatening a young girl. Zoro tells Luffy to leave him be, as while Zoro is in a great deal of pain, the Navy captain promised Zoro that were he to remain standing for two weeks, he would be set free. Luffy decides to leave Zoro be, and decides to explore the nearby village. There, he learns that the Navy captain is a petty tyrant who terrorizes the villagers, and intends on killing Zoro anyway. He is a thoroughly dishonest man who even lied to gain his position in the Navy to begin with. Luffy tells Zoro of the planned execution, but agrees to set Zoro free only on the condition that he joins Luffy's pirate crew. Zoro gives his word to Luffy, and the two face off against the captain, who is easily defeated by their teamwork. The honorable swordsman finds his antithesis in the wicked, deceitful Navy captain, and Luffy is able to defeat him because Zoro keeps his promise.

A few islands later, Luffy's crew comes across an oceangoing restaurant inside a giant ship. Here, Luffy decides to look for a ship's cook who can provide food for the crew on their upcoming journey. Luffy decides that sous chef Sanji is the man for the job, but Sanji refuses to leave the restaurant. We learn that as a boy, Sanji found himself stranded on a desert island with the restaurant's head chef Zeff. Zeff gave up all of his food to prevent the young Sanji from dying of starvation. Sanji owes his life to this act of kindness, and struggles with the burden of his debt. Sanji has sworn that he will never betray Zeff, but he also feels obligated to feed the hungry to prevent others from suffering as he once did. His antithesis arrives in the form of "Don" Krieg, a ruthless pirate who takes advantage of others' kindness to achieve money and status. The Don has returned from a dangerous sea voyage, and his crew is starving. Krieg promises the restaurant that he will not attack if they show mercy and agree to feed him and his crew. The other chefs see through the obvious ruse, but Zeff and Sanji refuse to turn away anyone who is hungry. Unsurprisingly, once "Don" Krieg and his crew have returned to their full strength, Krieg's pirates attack the ship in an attempt to loot it. Sanji is enraged that the one that has so burdened him

was dismissed so easily by Krieg, and he fights back to defend the restaurant. Some of Krieg's men are moved by Sanji's sacrifices, and decide they cannot in good conscience continue with the attack. Once Krieg's forces are divided, Luffy and his crew are able to drive them off easily. Sanji's devotion to helping others helps to drive off his antithesis, in the form of the ungrateful pirate Krieg.

These earlier *One Piece* stories are trite morality tales. However, as Luffy's crew gets larger, and as the world of *One Piece* gets more fleshed out, the stories get increasingly sophisticated and political. I will advance to the Water Seven arc of *One Piece*, comprised of volumes 33 to 45, and analyze the political messages of this arc using the formula I have now established.

### **Water Seven: Individual Rights vs. Collective Security**

*Water Seven*, named after the city in which the arc takes place, is the longest single story arc of *One Piece* to date, at 13 volumes in length. Like all *One Piece* story arcs, it is also a conflict between the values represented by two characters. The character representing the individual is the archaeologist of Luffy's crew, a woman by the name of Nico Robin. Her antithesis, the man representing the national security state, is Spandam, the head of the World Government's secret police force, Cipher Pol 9.

Nico Robin is unique among the crew in *One Piece*, as well as shōnen manga as a whole. She is first introduced as a villain, and joins the crew after the plans of her former boss are foiled by Luffy. In a world of primarily happy and optimistic characters, she attempts suicide but is stopped by Luffy. Because Luffy did not allow her to die, she reasons, he owes her a position in his crew. Aloof and reserved, Robin keeps her distance from the other pirates. Oda draws her facial expressions in a realistic and restrained manner, in contrast to the other characters' often exaggerated and comical reactions. While female heroes, usually buxom and beautiful, are not rare in shōnen series, Robin is rare in both her age and occupation. At twenty-eight, she is long past the age when women are expected to be married in conservative Japanese society (Brinton 80). She is also a trained and accredited archaeologist in a country where women who pursue advanced degrees are considered unusual (Raymo 85). Her supernatural power is to sprout additional arms from her body, and she often appears in battle looking like Hindu warrior goddess Durgā, a fiercely independent and liminal deity (Kinsley 99). A character warns Luffy that Robin cannot be trusted as a member of his crew, as all organizations that Robin has belonged to have all collapsed: Nico Robin always survives, and she is always alone.

Robin's life is one filled with tragedy. She is of the sole survivor of a government



ordered massacre of her home island. This island, named Ohara, was the site of a five-thousand-year-old library, and the institutions of higher education that surrounded it. Above all else, Ohara was famed for its archaeologists, who sought to uncover the history of the world. However, some of Ohara's discoveries about the foundation of the World Government caused some in power to express concern. Ancient written records known as poneglyphs were scattered around the world, and they detailed the history of a great war using terrifying weapons of mass destruction. The people of the time were threatened by a ruthless and warlike kingdom whose rulers, it was discovered, later laid the foundation for the World Government. The poneglyphs also detailed the locations of the weapons of mass destruction, to act as a deterrent should the warlike kingdom, or its descendant, the World Government, become too powerful a threat. Using the pretext that the scholars of Ohara were researching these weapons of mass destruction, the government sent the Navy to the island. The five-thousand-year-old Ohara library was burned to destroy the information kept within. As the extent of Ohara's knowledge was learned, orders came down from the World Government to execute all of the scholars. To prevent any of the information from spreading, a few overzealous Navy men decided to collectively punish all of the islanders, and massacre all the people. A lone Navy official refuses to murder Nico Robin, at the time only eight years old, and secretly helps her escape. Unable to account for Robin's disappearance, the Navy places a huge bounty on her head. For the next twenty years of her life, Robin lives a solitary life, running from criminal gang to criminal gang, as law-abiding citizens refuse to have anything to do with her. When she is not betrayed, because of the risk she represents and the value of her bounty, Robin betrays others in order to stay alive. Only after finding Luffy and his crew has she found any kind of stability.

However, the threat posed by these weapons had not been forgotten by the World Government. The existence of these weapons meant the World Government did not have a monopoly on the use of force, threatening the world's balance of power. Seeking a deterrent, World Government intelligence agencies attempted to locate these weapons, with nothing to show for it for twenty years. As Luffy sails the seas in the Age of Piracy, a new cadre of leaders has taken control of the World Government. These new officials feel that controlling the weapons only as a deterrent unfairly ties the hands of government officials. First strike capability is considered desirable, as pirates who are attempting to follow in the footsteps of Gold Roger have destabilized the world's oceans. In a world without automobiles and airplanes, this is a major threat to trade, exploration, and mobility. Unfortunately for Nico Robin, a major intelligence operation is occurring in Water Seven just as Luffy, Robin, and the crew arrive at the city. As Robin is the only remaining individual who can decipher the poneglyphs, the 9th unit of the Government's Cipher Police, or CP9 as they are called, captures her shortly after her arrival.

CP9 is an extralegal intelligence agency created by the government for illegal covert operations. It is led by Robin's antithesis, a craven and ambitious government functionary named Spandam. If Nico Robin is an exceptionally talented individual whose life was destroyed by an unjust government system, then Spandam is the very



embodiment of that system. He is incompetent and untalented, and appears to have received his government position through the intercession of his powerful father. He is the head of CP9 in name only; The powerful personalities in the unit really decide on its tactics and operations. Befitting the head of a secret organization, he is always seen wearing a leather mask that obscures most of his face. He is unaccountable and unethical, and has made locating Nico Robin his life's mission.

To prevent Robin from resisting arrest, Spandam threatens to execute Luffy and his crew in the same manner as the innocent people of her home island. Horrified at the threat to her only friends, Robin relents, and is to be taken to the World Government's judicial island. There she will be given a show trial, found guilty, and taken to prison. Once in government custody, it is explained, she will be tortured to discover what she knows about the location of these weapons of mass destruction. As Robin has lived her life amongst outlaws, there are many legitimate crimes for which Robin could be convicted. Spandam decides to charge Robin for the crime of continuing to live after the government ordered all scholars of Ohara to be killed. Though Luffy will travel to the judicial island in order to fight CP9 and free Robin, the true battleground in this arc is in Robin's own mind. Spandam intends to take advantage of her suicidal tendencies to crush her will to resist the government's dictates.

When Luffy and his crew attempt to save Robin, they run up against the members of CP9. The agents first try and convince the pirates of the justness of the government's cause: "If there were a demonic power capable of burning the world to ashes, and the only one who could awaken that power was an innocent little girl of a mere eight-year-old, don't you think that girl should be killed for the sake of humanity" (Oda v39, 119). It is clear the World Government wishes to use Robin as the archetypal scapegoat. It is interesting to note that CP9 chooses to formulate their question by referencing the innocent eight-year-old Robin, rather than the inarguably criminal twenty-eight-year-old woman she has become. It is roughly similar to one of the most eloquent descriptions of the scapegoat archetype, written by Dostoyevsky in his *Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan Karamazov discusses the cruelty and injustice of the suffering of children with Alyosha, and poses a similar ethical question:

Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—that baby beating its breast with its fist, for instance—and to found that edifice on its unavenged tears, would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? (268; Pt I, Book V, Ch 4)

Spandam believes such an exchange is fair on the basis of numbers alone: "If a hundred must die to save one thousand, we will kill one hundred on the spot without hesitation" (Oda v42, 198). Luffy and his crew reject the terms of this deal, and rather than allow Nico Robin be punished for the crime of defying government edict by continuing to live, the pirates instead decide to declare war on the World Government. Luffy orders one of his crew members to set fire to the flag sitting atop the courthouse

tower. Nico Robin is so incredibly moved by this show of defiance that she screams, “I want to live!” for the first time in her life (Oda v41, 204). From that point on, Robin resists Spandam’s attempts to transport her to the prison, at one point even biting a handrail to prevent Spandam from being carrying her away. In the battle between rights and security, Luffy and his pirates refuse to accept the easy answer of condemning an innocent woman to death to prevent a potential threat at an unspecified time in the future. Though Water Seven continues with exciting and imaginative battles and a chase to rescue Robin, the true climax comes with Robin’s acceptance of her own innate desire to live.

Although Luffy and his crew do rescue Robin, the government does not simply fall due to the righteousness of their cause. Now sixty volumes into the series, the war between Luffy and the World Government continues. This has been a too brief introduction to the political world of *One Piece* and, I have regrettably removed detail that Oda uses to paint a far more nuanced and complex world. Additionally, new themes have been introduced since the conclusion of the Water Seven arc. Readers learn, for instance, that Luffy’s father is a revolutionary leader considered by the World Government to be a major terrorist threat. It is revealed that the World Government itself may be nothing more than a puppet of a corrupt aristocracy, itself complicit in forced labor and human trafficking. With each new volume, new detail is added to the world that provides readers with a whimsical, defamiliarized interpretation of events and institutions that affect our current politics. *One Piece* and shōnen manga in general are popular because of the themes and values they express, and I look forward to further analysis of shōnen series.

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