

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 4: Rashomon

Readings: Rashomon," 1915, and "In a Grove," 1922, stories, Agutagawa

Film: *Rashomon*, 1951, Kurosawa (Academy Award, Best Foreign Film, 1953)

Suggested Grades: 10th-12th and college

Themes:

The "Rashomon Principle," that truth is relative, subject to different points of view. Agutagawa's stories emerge from a dark personal view of life. Kurosawa's use of the stories shapes his film into a postwar affirmation of the possibilities of life following the physical, social, and moral devastation caused by Japan's defeat.

The story:

The setting of both the stories and the film is 12th-century Japan in the chaos of civil war and natural disasters. Rashomon Gate, built in 789 AD and once the proud symbol for the achievements of Heian culture, is now the symbol of the social and moral decay of Japanese civilization and culture. But history for Agutagawa and Kurosawa is a medium for commenting on the present. The central incident of "In a Grove" and the film is the story of the death of a samurai and the apparent rape of his young wife by a bandit. Narrated from different points of view, the story emerges with many layers: Did the bandit kill the samurai? Or was he killed by his wife? Or did he die by his own hand? Was his wife raped? Or did she respond to the seductive advances of the bandit? The story is like "Little Red Riding Hood" from the points of view of Little Red, Grandma, the Wolf, and the Woodsman. Who is telling the truth? Is there a single truth? That is the mystery and philosophical attraction of the stories and film.

Teaching:

This unit can be used with both high and low ability students. Focusing less on Japanese history and culture and more on the "Rashomon Principle" as it relates to the students' own lives, I used it effectively with a 10th-grade, low-ability class. Possible varied activities include: a debate as to the "truth" of the incident: a court trial with role playing and jury; the adaptation of the pattern of multiple points of view to selected news items or incidents in the students' own lives; the use of the "Rashomon Principle" to explore interracial or intercultural issues.

The key to both the short stories and the film lies in the complex overlays of narration in the interwoven contrasting points of view. Although some teachers may wish to start with the film, I suggest beginning with the stories. The narrational pattern is simpler and clearer, and with print, it is easier to guide the analysis and the interpretation. Also important, the students are free to form their own images and ideas for later comparison and contrast with Kurosawa's film interpretation.

Whereas film, at the high school level, is generally used in support of other studies, the form of the 86-minute black and white film lends itself readily to the study of the art of

film. Video segments can be shown over and over to encourage the students to look for different aspects of the film. One student in the low ability class observed that Kurosawa does "a lot of things with shadows." By the 12th grade, the student was making his own video films.

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