

## Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

### Lesson 3: Kesa and Morito/Gate of Hell

Readings: "Kesa and Morito." 1918 story. Akutagawa, based on a tale from the 13th c. Rise and fall of the Minamoto and Taira Clans.

**Films:** Gate of Hell, 1953, Kinugasa (Academy Award, Best Foreign Film, 1954.)

**Suggested grades:** 11-12 and college (film also discussed in "History" section)

#### Themes:

Comparing and contrasting two very different works based on the same plot from a 13th- century source; a study of self-sacrifice as a traditional Japanese cultural ideal and as an act growing out of the complex emotional states of love, guilt, anger and vengeance; also, the film alone as a primer on traditional Japanese culture and arts (manners, morals, costumes, dance, music, beliefs).

#### The story:

Both the print and film versions tell the story of a samurai's obsessive love for a beautiful noblewoman who is already married. While the film presents the story in a visually stunning style which romanticizes and idealizes Kesa's self-sacrifice for her husband's honor, Akutagawa's psychological study demythologizes the historical and traditional ideal. His Kesa and her obsessed lover Morito are revealed through interior confessional monologues which uncover the layers of conflicting emotions and motives. Planning to kill Kesa's husband, Morito reflects, "I despise her. I fear her. I hate her. And yet--and yet, all this may be because I love her."

#### Teaching:

Although it is possible to teach the works in either order, I suggest reading and analyzing the story first and following it with the 86-minute film (or selected scenes). The class discussions can be built on the analyses of the two characters in each work, finally focusing on Kesa's motive for self-sacrifice or suicide. With more advanced classes, it is possible to move the discussion-interpretation to the historical and cultural levels. Akutagawa's story is a dark, personal, disillusioned view of traditional ideals in 1918 Japan, while the film is a 1953 postwar view of the traditional cultural heritage, particularly of the Buddhist moral views embodied in the ending. The final scene suggests that Morito has himself become a repentant, traveling monk sitting at the gate beneath the Buddhist vision of Hell, telling his own story. (This is discussed further in the "History" section.)

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