

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 6: The Martyr

Reading: *The Martyr*, 1918 story, Akutagawa.

Viewing: animated classic, *The Martyr*, 1986, Takasuka.

Suggested grades: 9th-12th, allowing for different levels of interpretation

Themes:

The primary theme is the nature of pure religious faith and the psychology of the martyr, based on a legend dealing with the early Japanese Christians living in the area of Nagasaka during the 16th century.

The story in both the print and animated forms appears, at first, to be a simple and moving children's story working from Christian themes and biblical allusions. On Christmas night, a young homeless orphan stumbles into small, rural Christian church during the Christmas service. Lorenzo is accepted by the congregation because of a Christian rosary on his wrist. But where he came from or who his parents were remain mysteries. He says only, "My home is paradise" and "My Father is the Father of all." Because of the boy's apparent purity and piety, the people see him as, "An Angel sent by god."

For three years Simeon, a former samurai and now a brother in the church, takes care of the boy like a younger brother, directing his saintliness toward some religious role and destiny. But when Ine, the umbrella maker's daughter, accuses Lorenzo of being the father of her unborn child, the village people and Simeon turn on the boy refusing to believe his innocence and banishing him. After a year of wandering in exile, Lorenzo returns just as a raging fire sweeps through the village. Plunging into the inferno, he saves the child he has supposedly fathered, at the cost of his own life. As a tearful Ine confesses over the body that Lorenzo was not the father, the people discover the truth: that Lorenzo was a young woman.

Teaching:

This simple story, the animation, and the surprise revelation of Lorenzo's identity tend to obscure the author's more serious concerns and the thematic purpose of the piece: the study of the nature of pure religious faith and martyrdom.

In his unfortunately brief life 1892-1924, Akutagawa wrote approximately one hundred finely crafted short stories, exploring the darker side of human nature, but also a number of essays on the nature of fiction. Although insisting on the importance of style and a lyrical plot, he repeatedly emphasized the didactic use of literature, seeing it as a source of life understanding. Through many of his stories Akutagawa explored the conflict between man's animal nature and his need to believe in some transcending force such as art or religion. In his last years before his suicide at age 35, he was increasingly interested in Christianity and the theme and psychology of self-sacrifice. "The Martyr" written in 1918, nine years before his death, was one of around fifteen

stories dealing with early Japanese Christians and their struggles to hold on to their religious faith.

Because of the surprise ending, I suggest first showing the 22-minute animated video to allow the class to react together. The following discussion should deal with the expected disbelief that she could conceal her female identity, why she concealed it, and how the final revelation adds to the story and theme. Then the assignment of the reading of the story can involve a comparison-contrast of the print and video forms as an approach to a "deeper reading." Suggested areas for study are the differences between the two versions and how these differences influence interpretation, the use of allusions to the life and words of Jesus, references which suggest that Lorenzo has a special religious identity and purpose, and finally the analysis and the interpretation of Lorenzo's martyrdom. This last issue opens up the ambiguity of the author's representation of the Christian community. On one hand is the criticism of the gossiping pettiness of the people in their preoccupation with sin and their suspicions about the relationship of Ine and Lorenzo. On the other hand is the awe of the religion's power of guilt and faith allowing the believer to overcome the fear of death in the sacrifice of one's life to save another. The psychological layers of Lorenzo's act can serve as a basis for discussion and debate.

A possible extension of the unit is research into the history of Christianity in Japan. The story is set in the period in which Christianity made inroads into Japanese society and culture. The Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier came to Japan in 1549, and until 1638 Christian missionaries spread the religion from Nagasaki to Edo or present day Tokyo. However the shogunates concluded that Christianity in its unwillingness to accept other religions, its ties to European colonialism, and its emphasis on the primacy of the individuals' conscience, undermined their attempts to unify and control the society. Years of brutal suppression and persecution including incidents of mass crucifixion of Christian martyrs drove missionaries out of the country and virtually eliminated Christianity in Japan. However, it survived in a few rural villages near Nagasaki where people continued secretly to follow a primitive form of Christianity for over two hundred years. Only after the religion was reintroduced in the latter decades of the 19th century did these Christian enclaves, Kakura Kirishitans, surface. In 1918 when Akutagawa wrote "The Martyr" he was fascinated by the stories of these groups and their spiritual heritage of faith, miracles and martyrdom. Today although only about one percent of the Japanese population consider themselves Christian, many more are interested in the ideals and rituals of the religion. The story could provide a springboard to the study of the religions of Japan and how Japanese (although two thirds of the population claim not to be actively religious) draw on aspects of Shintoism, Buddhism and Christianity in their lives.

Another story about these hidden Christian communities and the atomic bombing of Nagasaki is Mitsuhashi Inoue's "The House of Hands" in *The Crazy Iris*. "The Martyr"s themes can be connected with other Akutagawa stories such as "Kesa and Morito" and "The Hell Screen." Also, a comparison-contrast can be developed with the companion piece on Izumi Kyoka's video, "The Priest of Mt. Kouya."

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