

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 7: The Holy Man of Mt. Koya

Reading: "The Holy Man of Mount Koya," 1900 story, Kyoka,

Film: animated feature *The Priest of Mt. Kouya*, 1986, Kondo

Suggested grades: 12th and college

(Although the video is unrated and advertised as "suitable for most audiences," *The Priest of Mt. Kouya* does contain animated nudity and the sexual implications of a woman who seduces travelers and transforms them into animals.)

Themes:

A tale of a holy man's archetypal journey through a hell-like wilderness and fleshly temptation to knowledge of man's and his own nature and a deeper meaning of love.

The story:

Although Izumi Kyoka (1873-1939) was during his life a popular and respected author of tales of fantasy, mystery, and romance, his work was not widely available in translation until 1996 when the University of Hawaii published *Japanese Gothic Tales* by Charles Shiro Inouye. Now, the combination of the print and visual forms can open up "Kyoka's World" to mature high school students of Japanese literature. However, the two forms present rather different stories. The 23-minute animated version oversimplifies the narrative to a clearly defined conflict between good and evil. The 52-page story provides considerably more background and depth.

A young wandering Buddhist monk from Mount Koya on a pilgrimage to Shinshu takes a rarely traveled path into a mountain wilderness where he encounters first a field of snakes, then a dark forest of raining bloodsucking leeches, and finally in a secluded mountain cottage a beautiful, alluring woman with mysterious powers. There he must decide whether to give up his religious mission and remain with the woman or to continue his life as a wandering monk.

In the animated version the woman is a beautiful seductive witch. In the print version, she is more complex, a woman with the power to nurture and heal as well as the power to transform men into animals. In both she reigns over her dark world with a fascinating yet frightening love.

Teaching:


The story is enchanting, although in the animated version, at times, a little silly. But the print version is powerful and pulls us into its gothic world with a brilliant verbal and visual style. This apparently is the art of Kyoka, reminiscent of the best writing of Edgar Allan Poe. For this reason I suggest starting with the print. If the story is too long, sections may be assigned: pages 6-9 deal with the monk's Dante-like passage through the snakes and leeches; 10-17, with the monk's encounter with the woman and the central waterfall bathing scene; and 24-26 with the monk's decision whether or not to

stay with the woman. These final sections also provide a dimension to the story neglected by the animated version. The woman's story of how she became attached to her grotesque and crippled husband and then stranded in the mountains reveals the loving and compassionate side of her character. This contradiction to her demonic side creates a more ambiguous, complex, and fascinating character. The monk's dilemma and decision at the end is not simply the temptation of the flesh but rather the blurring of lust and love. Showing the animated version following the study of the story leads to a critical approach, questioning what has been left out of the video and how the absence of those parts changes the possible interpretations.

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