

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 8: Sorekara (And Then)

Reading: *Sorekara* (And Then), 1909 novel, Soseki

Film: *Sorekara*, 1985, Morita

Suggested grades: 12 and college

Themes

The conflict between "giri" and "ninjo" (between duty or obligation and personal feelings), the core concepts of Japanese social and moral order; also, from an existential perspective, the struggle of the individual to find personal meaning in his life and to act upon it.

The story:

The time is turn-of-the century Japan in the midst of change from traditional to Westernized social roles and values. Daisuke, unmarried, handsome, intelligent, and extremely sensitive, lives in a personal world of literature, art, flowers, and preoccupation with his own body and heart. He accepts the security and comforts of his family's financial support, but he does not want to join his father and brother in the family business. At 30, he lives a self-indulgent, affluent life style with aesthetic and spiritual preoccupations, refusing to conform to his family's expectation that he find work and a wife.

In college he had loved Michiyo, the sister of one of his friends, but he had never openly declared his love for her. When another friend asked him to help arrange his marriage to Michiyo, Daisuke set aside his feelings and helped the couple. Now five years later they return to ask his help again. Finding Michiyo in the midst of a hollow marriage and in poor health because of the death of her only child, Daisuke realizes he still loves her.

The novel and film deal with this love relationship, yet it is not a passionate affair. There is no sexual dimension, not even an embrace or kiss. It is a love of restrained lovers, constrained by their natures, situation, and society, a love felt deeply and conveyed only in glances and hesitant, reaching words.

To declare his love for Michiyo, Daisuke must achieve self-knowledge. He must decide who he is and what he wants in his life. And to do this he must rebel against his father and society, against his defined duty and responsibility to his family and the moral-ethical codes of Japanese society. Finally, he must act in the face of ambiguity and uncertainty. In declaring his love, he also declares his independence and individuality; he is free to do and be what he wants, but it is a freedom with terrifying consequences.

If Daisuke and Michiyo are ever to be together, they will be alone together. They cannot know how they will survive in love and life. There is only the promise of love and the

ambiguous future implied by the title: And Then.

Teaching:

Unfortunately, Morita's film is not widely available, but it is worth the search. New Yorker Films did offer a 16mm film rental with English subtitles. The only video I have found is without subtitles. Nevertheless, I have used excerpts from that video with non-Japanese speaking classes that have read the novel. Morita's *Sorekara* is a beautiful visual experience. While some scenes and the general development of the story line depend on dialogue, in other scenes the camera is especially aware of images, signs and symbols as motifs of the work (flowers, colors, water, money, food, furniture, and modes of transportation).

However, even if the film or video are not available, it is still possible to teach *Sorekara* as literature with a visual style. While *Kokoro* seems to be considered as Soseki's greatest work, and *Botchan* one of his most accessible for students, *Sorekara* can provide remarkable insight into both Meiji and modern-day Japanese society. As Morita wrote in explanation of why he made the film, "The modernization of Japan, which started after the 1868 Meiji Restoration, had progressed by the 1910s and the imported capitalism had begun to cause deterioration in Japanese society. ...Daisuke's life style is similar to the indolent ways of contemporary youth and the idealism of intellectuals. Each character in the film (book) has something in common with people today." A question which should provoke considerable student discussion is regarding Soseki's and Morita's attitude toward Daisuke: are they criticizing him, as a weak man, wasting his talents and his life, unable to act properly in terms of his responsibilities to his family and society? Or do they sympathize with him as a man ahead of his time, in conflict with his family and society as he attempts to define himself as an individual in control of his own feelings, life, and destiny?

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