Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 9: The Izu Dancer

Reading: *The Izu Dancer*, 1926 novella, Kawabata

Film:*The Izu Dancer*, 1986, Takasuka

Suggested grades: 8-12 and college

Themes:
Loneliness and first love; the young man's journey to self-awareness and self understanding; the fine line between child-like innocence and sexual awareness; in pre-war Japan the barriers between social classes.

The story:
The nineteen year old narrator, an introspective student on a holiday from an upper class school in Tokyo, is hiking the Izu Peninsula attempting to escape his feelings of loneliness and depression. He meets and becomes infatuated with a young dancer in a traveling family of entertainers. At first he feels a vague erotic attraction to her. But when he sees her in the nude in a public bath, he realizes that she is still a child, still pure and innocent. This changes his feelings for her to a loving brother-like protector. He is accepted by and becomes close to the family. Although they are, as traveling entertainers, considered to be social outcasts, they, in their few days together, are able to help him to accept himself and to respond to others in a warm, open way. At the end the narrator and the little dancer part with the promise that they will meet again. Yet we understand, as the narrator seems to realize, that this will never happen; this sweet tender moment in life has passed, and the love they feel is impossible.

Teaching:
Kawabata's seemingly simple story and style open the novella to young readers, yet his subtle and complex perceptions can also challenge mature, advanced students. *The Izu Dancer* is an excellent introduction to Kawabata's longer works, or alone, a very teachable example of traditional Japanese sensibility and style.

The 23-minute animated version simplifies the story even further making it a love story complicated only by the older woman's (in the video, the dancing girl's mother) restrictions. The girl is not allowed to go to the cinema with the boy because "a Tokyo student could never love a minstrel girl." The ending, however, does hint that their love will prevail in his promise to visit her in the summer. Despite these changes, the film can be very useful in helping the students to see the differences between the two versions and thereby to enter into a deeper reading and understanding of the original story. Showing the animated version first and allowing students simply to react with observations and questions should lead to the major issues and themes to be explored in more depth in the novella.

The main focus should be on the motivations for the young man's Izu journey and his pursuit of the little dancer. Although the piece is written in first person and, somewhat,

in a confessional mode, he reveals very little directly about his background and state of mind.

The second focal point and the climax of the story are, of course, the narrator's observation of the little dancer bathing in the nude. This moment frees him from any erotic feeling he had for the dancer. He now sees her as a child, still innocent and pure. She becomes for him a symbol of pure beauty, still unsullied by life. He can love her like a brother, protecting her and inwardly worshipping her like a painting in his memory. For the narrator the experience is an epiphany, a moment of self-revelation. Ultimately then, the story is his journey to self-awareness and self-understanding. But for Kawabata it is something more. He uses the image of clear, pure water purging the mind with tears. But the last words of the Seidensticker translation suggest an ambiguous "soon nothing would remain." Whereas *The Izu Dancer* is an early Kawabata story, it does anticipate his later writings and themes including the Buddhistic idea of a positive emptiness. In the conclusion of his 1968 Nobel Prize Speech, Kawabata said, referring to a line of traditional Japanese poetry, "Here we have the emptiness, the nothingness of the Orient. My own works have been described as works of emptiness, but it is not to be taken for the nihilism of the West. The spiritual foundation would seem to be quite different."

To prepare students for this deeper understanding, especially those who have little knowledge about prewar, traditional Japanese life style, some preliminary information and discussion will be helpful. First is the simplicity and conciseness of Kawabata's haiku-like style. Selecting and teaching one or two of the author's over one hundred and forty "Palm of the Hand" stories can prepare them for closer reading.

Second is the emphasis on bathing throughout the story and the traditional (if now historic) Japanese practice of public bathing. An interesting and helpful source is the 1994 book, *A View from the Bath* by Scott Clark (paperbound, Univ. of Hawai'i). In the introduction he writes:

> In groups or alone, in steamy public bathhouses, large outdoor hot spring pools and small private bathrooms Japanese immerse themselves daily in hot water. These ablutions do more than cleanse their bodies: the baths are imbued with meanings and symbols of Japanese culture. To take a bath in Japan with an understanding of the event is to experience something Japanese. It is to immerse oneself in culture as well as water.

Another problem area is to understand a little of the prewar social class distinctions between the narrator as a gentleman student from a prestigious Tokyo college and the social lower class of traveling entertainers. This is revealed through the story in occasional remarks by secondary characters and in the way the family treats the young man. That the family helps him find more suitable lodging in another inn indicates their awareness of the class distinction. Yet the young man's inviting them to visit him in his lodging and later his willingness to stay with them in the inexpensive inn in Shimoda indicates his change, his acceptance of them as equals. However, the incident in which the family waits for him to drink first from the spring suggests a social time-honored class distinction that will not easily change.

Student attention should be drawn to other symbolic actions: the implications of the dancer's spilling the tea, the narrator's hat changes from a student to a hunting cap, the residues of the little dancer's makeup, the comb, the remarks that he is a "nice person," and in the final scene the narrator's crying openly with the young traveling student with whom he shares food and warmth. This is truly a literary piece with many layers of possible exploration.

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CEAPS The Center for East Asian and Pacific Studies

Asian Educational Media Service

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
805 West Pennsylvania Avenue MC-025
Urbana, Illinois 61801

Phone: (217) 333-9597
aems@illinois.edu