

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 14: The Sound of the Waves

Reading: *The Sound of the Waves*, 1954 novel, Mishima

Film: *The Sound of the Waves*, 1975, Nishikawa, or the animated classic, *The Sound of the Waves*, 1986, Sato

Suggested grades: 9-12

Themes:

1. Young love prevailing against the attempts of people to keep them apart;
2. A mythic hero and heroine reflecting a cultural ideal that is all but lost in modern Japanese literature and life; and
3. The sea and "the sound of the waves" as the source of the natural rhythms and spiritual strength of these islanders.

The story:

On the surface, *The Sound of the Waves* is a simple, lyrical tale of first love. The young lovers, a poor eighteen year old fisher boy and an *ama*, a female diver, who has just returned to the island and her wealthy father, must defend their love against a closed circle of gossip, the antagonism of peer jealousy, and obligations to a social code which places one's role and duty above the urgings of the heart. Although there is, in the novel and both films, a scene in which Shinji and Hatsue share a naked embrace, the incident and the entire story, is a modest, sensitively drawn love story within appropriate moral guidelines for younger students of literature.

If there is a problem teaching this story, it lies on its surface simplicity and innocence. Yet this is the author's artistic and thematic intent. In the context of Mishima's large body of tormented writings, *The Sound of the Waves* is an idyllic love story representing the author's personal and unguarded ideal: two youths who, in their simplicity, love, and purity, are symbols of a way of life in harmony with nature. They are isolated from the complexity and corruption of modern society, yet they are on the threshold of awareness. Their community and lives are changing, and ahead is an unknown future just beyond their traditional, pastoral world.

Teaching:

The above description applies mainly to the novel; the film and animated classic are oversimplified to the point where they lose Mishima's deeper themes. Still, they can be interesting aids in teaching the novel. Although the film version is not readily available in this country, it can be found in a few of the East-Asian Outreach centers. Further, because it is not subtitled for American audiences, the full film is recommended for use only with classes which have studied the novel or are studying Japanese language. The animated classic, on the other hand, is subtitled, available, and, despite its limited interpretation, useful as an introduction to the novel.

Shinji and Hatsue in animation are "cute" and hardly the mythic hero and heroine of Mishima's novel. Their love story, adapted for young audiences, is a morality piece advocating sexual restraint in the love relationship. Students may laugh at the nude embrace ending in the couple's decision to wait until they are married. But amusement with the animated version can lead to a more serious reading and interpretation of the novel's setting, characters, and themes.

The theme of place operates on several levels. Although the time is postwar Japan, around 1955, life on the island goes on essentially as it has for generations, existing between the teeming industrial and urban heartland of Japan and the deep expanse of the Pacific Ocean. Mishima modeled Uta Jima after a tiny island called Kamishima, off shore of Ise and Nagoya. For the author, the island is a microcosm of traditional Japan. Asking the students to locate the general off-shore area and then draw an aerial view of the island depicting the main locations and buildings of the story, will require close readings of the text, help them visualize the story, and allow them to experience the pastoral character of the island.

Another theme is found in the symbolism of the sea. To the rustic islanders, the sea is not only a source for its food, but also a spiritual presence. Shinji will pray to the God of the sea to watch over the village and his family and also to help him become "a fisherman among fisherman" and find a wife such as Hatsue. Students should be directed to seek out passages which develop the symbolic and thematic nature of the island and the sea.

While place is an important aspect of structure and theme, the focus of the novel is on the two lovers. The problem is that there is little tension or depth generated in or from these characters. They are not reflective or capable of inner conflict or rebellion. They fall in love, suffer because of the rumors about their relationship, but abide by the traditional social-moral code of their society. They are not like Romeo and Juliet; rebellion and tragic passions are not in their characters. It is interesting to note that their problems originate from the two "outsiders" on the island, both former islanders who have been corrupted by modern and mainland life style to the point they have lost the virtues and moral character of the island.

Understanding the deeper nature of Shinji and Hatsue can come only from a study of them as idealized, virginal creatures of the island and sea. She will win the diving contest bringing up more abalone than Shinji's mother, the island's most expert diver. He will save the ship belonging to Hatsue's father by diving into a typhoon-mad sea to secure a line to an anchoring buoy. On the end, their physical beauty, strength and courage, their moral natures, and the worthiness of their love will be recognized by Hatsue's father and the village. They will marry and become the progenitors of the island's beauty, traditional values and moral nature. But they will remain air-brushed images of characters embodying the author's ideas and ideals.

A concluding second viewing of either the live-action film or the animated version can provide a basis for criticism of the limitations of the visual interpretations and an appreciation for Mishima's literary achievement.

copyright Alan G. Chalk 2000

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