

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 15: The Temple of the Golden Pavilion/Enjo

Reading: The Temple of the Golden Pavilion, 1956 novel, Mishima

Supplemental Readings: *The Temple of the Golden Pavilion* has, over the years, set off a wide range of critical interpretations. A selection is:

Miyoshi, Masao, *Accomplices of Silence*, Univ. of Cal., 1974.

Napier, Susan J., *Escape from the Wasteland: Romanticism and Realism in the Fiction of Mishima Yukio and Oe Kenzaburo*, Harvard, 1991.

Peterson, Gwenn Boardman, *The Moon in the Water: Understanding Tanizaki, Kawabata, and Mishima*, Univ. of Hawaii, 1979.

Ueda, Makoto, *Modern Japanese Writers and the Nature of Literature*, Stanford Univ. 1976.

Yourcenar, Marguerite et al., *Mishima: A Vision of the Void*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1986.

Film: *Enjo (Conflagration)*, 1958, Ishikawa, or excerpt from the film, *Mishima*, 1986, Schraeder

Suggested grades: for the entire novel and film(s), 12th grade advanced placement, and college

Themes:

On the basic story level, appropriate for most students, is the protagonist's struggle to overcome a personal handicap (stuttering) and to fulfill or rebel against his father's dream and expectation for him. On a psychological level, the thematic focus is on a young man's love-hate obsession for an ancient Buddhist temple and his motives for destroying it. On a philosophical level, the theme takes shape from a dramatic monologue by the character and author on the nature and meaning of beauty. On a literary level, the themes emerge from the author's development through the work of a multi-layered symbol, the Golden Temple.

The story:

At the time of the release of both the 1956 novel and the 1958 film, the story of the burning of the temple was well known by Japanese audiences. Mishima's novel and Ichikawa's film version were based on the actual 1950 news event when a young monk-in-training set fire to and destroyed the five hundred year old Golden Temple. This act shocked the Japanese public.

The temple, a national treasure and a symbol of the cultural heights of historical Japan, had survived the terrible destruction of Japanese cities during World War II only to be destroyed by a deranged youth. For Mishima, then, the task was not simply to retell the

story but rather to interpret it, to present a view of the life, psychology, and motives of the young student leading to his destructive act, and further to explore the meaning of the act in the context of postwar Japanese society.

While Mishima's character is based on his careful study of the background of the arsonist and the circumstances of his crime, it is apparent that the author and his character frequently merge. In Mizoguchi, Mishima found a persona and a voice through which he could speak about his own personal, artistic, and philosophical concerns. Although the writer of the novel's introduction in the English translation refers several times to Mizoguchi as "a sick young man" and a "psychotic hero," Mishima's character and narrator is not easily categorized or judged. In fact, it is in the complexity and ambiguity of the author-character and his narrator that the novel achieves its powerful effect and meaning.

Mizoguchi's story is like a confession told after a crime. As the son of older parents (his sickly father was a Buddhist priest in charge of a poor, remote temple; and his mother was an adulterous, unhappy, shrewish woman) he was expected to follow his father, become a priest, and someday be appointed the head priest of the Golden Temple. But born with a stutter and what he describes as a weak constitution and an ugliness, he grew up alienated from the outer world, finding solace or escape only in the dream of the Golden Temple his father had described for him. From this inner world of beauty, he imagined himself as either a great tyrant or an artist ready to embark on some yet unknown mission. That desire would later lead him to the destruction of the Golden Temple.

Teaching:

Although it is a complex and difficult novel, it is too good, too great a 20th-century work, to ignore. The difficulty should not discourage teachers from teaching at least the opening chapter as either a complete "short story" or an invitation to read the entire novel.

In approaching the novel, in this case, the mentioned films are not helpful. They are useful only as film interpretations after the students are thoroughly familiar with the story. However, biographical material on the life, writings, and ritual suicide of the author can be used to create interest in the work. If it can be located, *The Strange Case of Yukio Mishima*, a 1987, one hour program in the Arts and Entertainment Cable Network Biography series, is quite good. Otherwise, excerpts (the black and white biographical segments) from Schrader's *Mishima* can be used.

Chapter One introduces the students to Mizoguchi, his family background, his stuttering handicap, and his first impressions of the Golden Temple. It is possible with close reading and discussion to speculate as to what psychological problems and behavioral patterns evident here would lead him later to destroy the temple he seems to love. Key questions to be answered through reading the entire novel are:


1. What are Mizoguchi's motives and thoughts leading to the destruction of the temple? Is he a "sick man," a psychotic? Or is it possible to follow his reasoning and understand his final act? What is Mishima's apparent attitude toward Mizoguchi and the act?
2. Does Mizoguchi change through the novel? Does he come to terms with his problems: his stuttering? his self-image? his relationship with women? his understanding of the nature of beauty and the temple? What is the influence of each character on the development of Mizoguchi's decision to set fire to the temple?
3. What meanings does Mishima suggest about the burning of the historical and cultural monument in relation to Japanese society and post-war Japan?

4. And for advanced students, in what ways does the Zen koan (mental puzzle) contribute to the thematic interpretation of the novel, and, particularly, the destruction of the temple?

The suggested films are, in themselves, interpretations of this ambiguous novel, Ichikawa's 1958 film *Enjo* (or *Conflagration*) a New Yorker film-video, has recently become available through the Blockbuster Video chain. This early black and white version offers an oversimplified interpretation of Mizoguchi as a misunderstood, alienated young man who burns down his beloved temple to save it from the creeping commercialism and corruption of post-war Japan. The frame of the film is the police interrogation of the arsonist and in the end his suicide during his transport to prison. Missing is Mizoguchi's complex love-hate relationship with the temple and the metaphysical problem of beauty.

On the other hand, Paul Schrader's 1986 *Mishima* offers in spectacular color a 20-minute excerpt from the novel. The segment with an almost surrealistic rendering of the Golden Temple as the symbol of ideal beauty suggests that Mizoguchi must destroy it to free himself from its possession of him. Only by setting fire to it can he live (the novel's final words). Another fascinating film interpretation is Takabayashi's 1976 *Kinkakuji* which offers a deeper psychological study of Mizoguchi's erotic obsession with the temple. However, this film is not available with subtitles and may be located only in Japanese video sources.

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