

## Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 16: Patriotism/Rite of Love and Death

**Reading:** *Patriotism*, 1960 story, Mishima,

**Viewing:** the short film *Rite of Love and Death*, B&W, 1965; *Mishima*, or an excerpt from it (Schraeder, 1986);

or an excerpt from A&E Biography, *The Strange Case of Yukio Mishima*.

**Suggested grades:** Because of graphic depiction of the grisly act of "hara-kiri," this unit is recommended only for 12th grade Advanced Placement and college level literature courses.

### Themes:

The story offers a range of themes depending on the teaching and critical approach:

1. In a literary, textual approach, the thematic focus is on the author's interpretation of the young officer's motives for committing hara-kiri (or seppuku). Although the title suggests a possible theme, Mishima's concept of "patriotism" is complex and controversial;
2. In a biographical approach the theme involves a reading of the story as a pre-cursor to Mishima's own suicide ten years later;
3. In a historical approach the theme involves a comparison-contrast of the actual 1936 rebellion by young Japanese officers to Mishima's postwar interpretation;
4. In anthropological and sociocultural approaches the theme focus is on suicide in the context of the romantic traditions of hara-kiri (or seppuku) and double suicide in Japanese literature and history.

### The story:

The date is February 28, 1936, three days after the beginning of the young officers' rebellion and assassination attempts to eliminate pro-Western and anti-military leaders in the Japanese government. Lieutenant Shinji Takayama is facing a dilemma: In the morning he is to lead a company of loyal soldiers against his best friends, young idealistic officers who because he was just recently married did not invite him to join them in their rebellion. There is no doubt in his decision to commit hara-kiri or seppuku: "Tonight I shall cut my stomach." Mishima describes his resolve as made with "the clarity of a stream fed from melting snows." Rieko, with the expectation of a soldier's wife, does not flinch at the decision but announces simply, "I am ready. I ask permission to accompany you." The remainder of the story describes their preparations for their suicides as a "rite of love and death," the title he later gave to his short film version of the story. Both story and film describe in almost religious detail the rite of their love making, the lieutenant's bloody self-disembowelment, and Rieko's suicide plunging a knife into her neck.

### Teaching:

Why teach this story? Why search for the film-video version or clips? One critic describes it as a "grotesque short story...a major preoccupation with sado-masochistic death 'beautified' by an esthetic of blood and sexuality." (Miyoshi, "Mute's Rage," *Accomplices of Silence*.) Another critic, (Armando Jameira in Japanese and Western Literature), writes "Patriotism is a masterpiece, the best Mishima has written. Here the world of love and death blend together into one beautiful picture."

The teaching possibilities of the work begin in shock and end in the encounter with the complexity of literary and filmic art in presenting a beautiful love story and a grotesque double suicide in the context of meaning. While the class may not agree with Mishima's thematic idealization of this act, or the students agree with each other, their experience can be the beginning of understanding and appreciation of the complexity of a work of literature and film approached from different critical approaches.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Mishima's writings were generally taught with an emphasis on the biographical approach and his dramatic 1970 suicide. Although, I believe, Mishima is still widely taught as representative of "modern" Japanese writers, there seems to have been a decline with the discovery of newer, younger, writers. In a mature advanced placement literature class I decided to teach "Patriotism" as the quintessential Mishima story. Although acknowledging that it represents the convergence of his art, thought, and life which would lead to his suicide, I wanted to test student reactions to see if the story could stand on its own, separate from the comparison to Mishima's now-legendary suicide.

With that goal in mind, I used the three paragraph summary introduction to the story, eliminating the usual Mishima literary-biographical approach. The students, on the basis of those three paragraphs alone, had to interpret the situation, the suicide motive, and the author's apparent attitude toward this characters and their act. The key question was: In the author's view, was it a tragedy? I did not try to resolve the ensuing classroom debate but simply assigned the rest of the story for further interpretation.

Only after students had been guided through textual, biographical, historical, and sociocultural dimensions did I show the Mishima film version. Prior to locating this complete version I had, when teaching Mishima's fiction, used the brief excerpts present in Schrader's *Mishima* and the A& E Biography of Mishima. Viewing the entire Mishima film, we were able to discuss the film as the author's interpretation of his own story.

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