aems
Asian Educational Media Service

media database search
go
advanced search | only AEMS collection >

Alan G. Chalk Guides to Japanese Films

Lesson 17: Muddy River

Reading: "Muddy River," 1977, novella, Miyamoto

Viewing:
film, Muddy River, 1981, Oguri, or suggested films dealing with childhood in Japan

Supplemental Viewing: For children's lives in prewar and wartime Japan, consider Kinoshita's *Twenty-four Eyes*; for the period directly after the war, Naruse's *Mother* or Shinoda's *MacArthur's Children*; for the postwar recovery and growing affluence of the families, Ozu's *Ohayo* or Morita's *Family Game*. Another interesting source studying childhood in Japan is the Asia Society's first *Video Letter from Japan* series. These twelve episodes present the life styles and experiences of sixth graders in the more affluent 1980s.

Suggested grades: 9-12

Themes:
The purity and fragility of childhood friendship; childhood and the maturation of a boy from innocence to experience in the vague awareness of death, poverty, sexuality, social prejudice, and loss; postwar Japan, ten years after the end of the Asia-Pacific War, the continuing impact of the war on families and the children of the next generation.

The story:
Osaka 1955, the Itakura family (father, mother, and eight year old Nobuo) runs a small noodle shop restaurant at the edge of a muddy river flowing into the bay. Young Nobuo meets and becomes friends with Kiichi Matsumoto who lives with his widowed mother and sister on a shabby river boat. The story is about their developing friendship and Nobuo's gradual discovery of the differences between their lives. Kiichi's mother, after the death of her husband, was forced to support herself and her two children as a river prostitute moving from place to place on the river. At the end of the novella Nobuo, after a series of disillusioning experiences and a conflict with Kiichi, chases after the river boat again moving toward another destination on the river. He wants to say goodbye to his friend, but Kiichi doesn't appear. We realize, as Nobuo watches the river boat moving away, that he is saying goodbye to his childhood innocence.

Teaching:
The film in video format may be difficult to find. My own copy comes from Japan and is without English subtitles. However, I have seen a subtitled version in this country, though I haven't been able to locate the distributor. Nevertheless, I've included Muddy River in this list because it is such a wonderful, teachable work for young students. If a copy of the film cannot be located, it is possible to teach the novella along with other Japanese films dealing with childhood.

While Muddy River is about impoverished postwar Japan and the continuing impact of

the war on families and children, it is also a sensitively told universal story of childhood and maturation through the loss of innocence. The friendship between the two boys is, at first, pure, untainted by the memories of the war, unaffected by the presence of poverty, social prejudice, and death touching their lives. But gradually the adult world presses in penetrating their fragile relationship and leaving them only with the memory of something lost.

When this film was released in Japan in 1981, it was generally well received by both older and younger audiences. Yet their different reactions to the same scenes revealed the gap between the generations. The older audience cried nostalgically, remembering their childhood struggles the first decade after the war. The young audience, from the distance of their more comfortable and affluent life styles, were amused and laughed at the boy's experiences. This suggests the first problem in teaching Muddy River: most of our students are coming from that secure distance. To fully understand and appreciate the work, they need a personal connection. The key is identifying with the point of view of Nobuo. We must experience the story through his eyes, feel what he feels, and, like him, gradually become aware of the presence of poverty, corruption, and death around him. This may be achieved by first discussing early childhood friendships and memories: our first awareness of prejudice, poverty, sexuality, and death. Before students study this work as Japanese and a reflection of postwar Japan, I suggest they read and view the novella and film in the context of their own childhood memories.

The pattern of maturation brings Nobuo closer to the realms of sexuality and death. His awakening to a vague sensuality is suggested in the experience of having his feet washed by Kiichi's sister, and again during his visit to the prostitute's room when he notices a mysterious fragrance, "moist and sweet, but far from soothing." His initiation is complete when he looks through the small river boat window and sees the woman's face and eyes looking back at him while a man "his naked back spotted with pale flames lay undulating on top of her." A few minutes later, back in Kiichi's room he bursts into tears, sobbing unexplainably.

His encounters with death run through the story: the opening death of the cart man, later the disappearance in the river of the lug worm fisherman, and, more personal, Kiichi's killing of the baby pigeon and setting fire to the tiny crabs. Death is also present in the talk of the adults remembering the war and the ironic deaths of survivors after the war. We note the parallel between the death of the cart man and the earlier death of Kiichi's father. Both men left young wives and two small children, condemning them to impoverished, fatherless existences. Finally, the enormous carp observed in the muddy river by the boys throughout the story emerges as a symbol of death and loss following the river boat up river.

Because of the complexity and irony of Nobuo's childlike point of view, and his subtle, growing awareness, I suggest showing the entire film prior to the reading. Close reading then would allow discussions interweaving the film images and the literary symbols. If, on the other hand, the film version is not available, the other mentioned films shown after the reading would allow discussion of the comparisons and contrasts in the life styles of the Japanese children.

copyright Alan G. Chalk 2000

aems Asian Educational Media Service

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