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When the Japanese film director Akira Kurosawa died on September 6, 1998, the Venice Film Festival honored him with a commemorative showing of *Rashōmon*, the film that in 1951 won the Golden Lion Award and brought Japanese film and particularly the films of Kurosawa to continuing worldwide acclaim.

Upon his death, tributes poured in from other film directors such as George Lucas, Martin Scorsese, and Steven Spielberg, calling Kurosawa “the pictorial Shakespeare of our time.” Now with retrospectives of his lifetime work of thirty films appearing in art theaters, at universities, and on television, classroom teachers have the opportunity to rediscover and teach some of these film masterpieces to a new generation of students.

One of the most teachable of Kurosawa’s films continues to

## Rashōmon Revisited

By Alan Chalk

be *Rashōmon*. The following discussion grows out of my work with high school world literature and world history classes, grades nine through twelve, and also with adult continuing education classes.

The main plot-interest in *Rashōmon* is the twelfth-century mystery story of how a samurai died and his wife’s relationship with the bandit who apparently killed the samurai and possibly raped the woman. But in Kurosawa’s film nothing is definite. The viewer is faced with a murder mystery complicated by multiple, overlapping narratives;

foreignness of the film, they see it, with some guidance, as an entertaining detective story with themselves as the detectives.

In the literature class the film can be compared and contrasted with two short stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, *Rashōmon*, 1915, and *In a Grove*, 1922, the sources for Kurosawa’s film script. In the history class, the film can be approached historically as a metaphorical work reflecting the impact of the devastating defeat of Japan in the Asia Pacific War on Japanese society and culture. In either case, possible themes are the

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conflicting questions and answers; and, finally, variations or layers of truth. Was the samurai killed in a duel with the bandit? Or was he killed by the hand of his distraught wife? Or did he die by his own hand? Who in the different narratives is telling the truth? Is there a single truth? *Rashōmon* continues to work on different levels as a fascinating mystery with psychological and philosophical dimensions.

Some teachers may question the appropriateness of this film for younger high school students, but I have used it effectively with ninth and tenth graders as well as older students. Once they get beyond the initial black and white, subtitled

ambiguity of truth in multiple narratives, the *Rashōmon* Principle applied to history and historical truth, and the problem of moral existence and belief in the encounter with existential doubt and despair.

### FIRST, THE LITERATURE CLASS

Both source stories are found in *Rashōmon and Other Stories* (Tuttle, 1952) and some other collections. Beginning with the reading and discussion of the stories helps the students view the film with a clearer understanding of the central incident and the form of the conflicting narratives. Whether students view the entire eighty-seven-minute film or only selected

## ESSAYS

*The ruin of the historic eighth-century gate works as a symbol of the social and moral decay of traditional Japanese civilization and culture for both twelfth-century and twentieth-century Japan.*



Masago, the wife (Machiko Kyo). Source: *Rashōmon*: Akira Kurosawa, director, Rutgers Films in Print, The State University. Also available from The Kawakita Memorial Film Institute (Japan Film Library Council).

scenes, they should be prepared to recognize the important differences between the film and sources which shape Kurosawa's themes.

From the story *Rashōmon* Kurosawa draws only the title,

the setting, and a suggested theme. The ruin of the historic eighth-century gate works as a symbol of the social and moral decay of traditional Japanese civilization and culture for both twelfth-century and twentieth-century Japan. On the other hand, Kurosawa draws heavily from Akutagawa's *In a Grove* using the structure of multiple narratives: the story as told by the bandit, then the wife of the samurai, and finally, through a medium, the dead samurai. However, in addition, Kurosawa elevates Akutagawa's woodsman and Buddhist priest to major characters, making them the primary sources of all the other characters' stories. This allows the filmmaker to complicate further the problem of who is telling the truth. At the same time Kurosawa is able to redirect Akutagawa's nihilistic conclusion and theme toward a humanistic affirmation of the possibilities of life and the condition of man.

Echoing Akutagawa's nihilism is a new character, a cynical commoner who, at times,

speaks for the audience, doubting and questioning the different versions of the central incident. The priest's remarks, on the other hand, suggest that he is the spokesman for Kurosawa's themes. From the start we are told that the incident of the apparent murder and rape represents something more terrible, more frightening. The priest, who has seen hundreds of men killed like animals, says, "There was never anything as terrible as this. Never. It is more horrible than fires or wars or epidemics or bandits."

From this the thematic question becomes: What is more horrible than fires, wars, or epidemics? What is more horrible than death? Kurosawa's answer is the incident with its conflicting narratives as a metaphor of existence without the possibility of absolute truth and justice. However, in the conclusion of the film he counters Akutagawa's pessimism and nihilism with a human act. The woodsman's taking an abandoned baby into his already large family offers hope for mankind,

"Time casts shadows over the Japanese soul, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. In their own voices the poets speak in words from everyday life, yet lyric and deep. English and music—a beautiful response."

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transcending the threat of life without the certainty of truth and meaning.

The priest, commenting on this act, says, "Thanks to you I think I will be able to keep my faith in man." And the film ends with the storm diminishing, the sun breaking through the rain clouds, and the woodsman compassionately carrying the baby through and away from the ruin of Rashōmon Gate.

For students who have difficulty achieving these levels of understanding, various exercises and activities can translate the abstract themes into more accessible learning experiences. Both *In a Grove* and the film suggest a court hearing or trial. Students can role-play as the characters reciting their versions of the incident to the remaining students as a jury considering the truth and guilt of each character. How they deal with the discovery that there may not be any certainty to their interpretations and judgments can be at once a disturbing and profound learning experience.

Other possibilities include extensions of the thematic pattern to the examination of selected news items, especially those involving interracial or intercultural issues. One student compared the form to *Little Red Riding Hood* with the tale told from the points of view of the wolf, Red Riding Hood, the grandmother, and the woodsman. Once understood, the *Rashōmon* Principle can be a valuable concept and tool for students in dealing with other works of literature and film, social studies events, and even, perhaps, their own problems.

### In the History Class

For the history class it is possible to view *Rashōmon* as reflecting Kurosawa's and the Japanese people's conscious-

ness of the physical, social and moral devastation caused by Japan's involvement and defeat in the Asia Pacific War. When the film was planned and made between 1948 and 1950, Japanese filmmakers were under strict occupation censorship codes restricting all references to the war. For Kurosawa the historical content of twelfth-century Japan, the ruin of Rashōmon Gate, the storm and hard rain which force the woodsman and priest to take refuge in the ruin, all suggest war. As mentioned above, the priest remarks that it is a time of war but that the moral implications of the murder and rape and the impossibility of truth and justice are worse than war. In this context, the human act of the woodsman transcends the moral chaos of the times. The promise of a family and love for the abandoned child redeems the possibilities of man and life. This optimistic theme emerging from the symbolic ruin of Rashōmon Gate certainly must have appealed to the Japanese and the world audiences rebuilding from the ashes of World War II.

Now fifty years later, *Rashōmon* suggests a model for the approach to history as multiple, often conflicting narratives in search of historical truth. For a course or a unit involving different, conflicting narratives of a historical event, the film *Rashōmon* and the concept of the *Rashōmon* Principle can provide a structure for student dialogue and debate, and possibly an image and metaphor for transcending differences.



The Priest (Minoru Chiaki), the Woodcutter (Takashi Shimura, and the Commoner at the ruined gate of Rashōmon.

Source: *Rashōmon*: Akira Kurosawa, director, Rutgers Films in Print, The State University. Also available from The Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.

### RESOURCES

#### VIDEOCASSETTE

*Rashōmon*, produced and directed by Akira Kurosawa (87 minutes). If this video is not available from a regional East Asia Resource Center, it can be found or ordered through Blockbuster Video. It is also available through Kinokuniya, New York (212-765-7766) and other stores offering foreign films.

#### PRINT

Akutagawa, Ryunosuke. *Rashōmon and Other Stories*. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1952.

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