

King Lear and Ran

Japanese Film in the English Literature Classroom

BY JAMES R. KEATING

Teachers often use film to help them present complex subjects in their high school classes. Unfortunately, many films designed for classroom use are not as interesting as commercial productions—and many commercial films are not appropriate for the classroom! A good film is one that students will watch. It must look and sound better than a monotone rendering of a textbook. To engage a Language Arts class, the vehicle itself—the film—must be noteworthy.

In English Literature, one of the great classics is, of course, Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Most teachers show all or part of various film versions of the play, but students say they don't work very well. They feel the acting is stiff and the language difficult, dense, and strangely unfamiliar. But don't give up! There is a film that students will embrace—Akira Kurosawa's *Ran*—a Japanese telling of the Lear story and one of the best catalysts for the study of English and Asian culture in an interdisciplinary format.

Akira Kurosawa (1910–98), one of Japan's finest artists, produced an astonishing number of films including *Seven Samurai*, *Rashōmon*, *The Hidden Fortress*, and *Throne of Blood*, his stunning, highly acclaimed adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. He was known for his use of rich visual imagery borrowed from Japanese theater, painting, music, and dance.

Ran is lengthy and presented in Japanese with English subtitles, but American students love it. Those who complain that Shakespeare is too tough often find the Japanese version intriguing and easier to watch. The grand sweeps of scenic beauty and reliance on action, a universal language, underscore the plot line and its themes.

Both *King Lear* and *Ran* deal with pride, selfishness, and conceit as causes of community suffering (war and discord) and the ultimate personal descent into madness. One man's ego leads to profound unhappiness for many. Somehow students see this more clearly in the Japanese film than in Shakespeare's words. *Ran* creates a "teachable moment." It opens ways for Western students to learn about Asian culture while studying a Shakespearean classic—a perfect combination of outcomes. The task for instructors is to organize a plan that achieves them.

King Lear and *Ran* are too big to read or see all at once in the classroom. Teachers must break them into manageable pieces. Assign students to read the first scene in *King Lear* and watch the first twenty-two minutes of *Ran*. This is enough to get them into the study of the story and the cultures that produced the two versions.

In Shakespeare's story the opening scene is fast-paced; characters banter with one another, punning significantly and foreshadowing events to come. The allusions are sneaky, and the audience has to be alert to catch them. Typical of Elizabethan drama, dialogue is overlaid with metaphor and simile, florid poetic phrasing, and a touch of slapstick. Young audiences have to be prepped for the lively dialogue, obscure references, and important allegory. It works best on stage, it seems, and this may be the reason students don't appreciate *King Lear* on film.

Ran is different. The film is strikingly visual, and students note this fact right away. The visual element catches their attention and rivets them to the story. *Ran* opens with a glorious action-packed hunting scene. Colorfully dressed warriors ride across fields on powerful horses before infinitely vast landscapes, beneath endless skies. The metaphors are there, but they are subtle—even in the midst of all the action, the allusions are subtle. American students love it. *Ran* is the film to use and this short introduction is enough to get students excited about further study.

Instructors have to find ways to *keep* the class engaged in the texts. Teachers should vary classroom activities, of course, because there is no single best way to teach or learn, and we obviously want all students to be involved in the study. It is important to do more with literature than just read it. Some



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Tatsuy Nakadai as Lord Hidetora.
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students learn that way, but others do better when their activities are more physical or when the product of their work is more visual and less verbally abstract.

The following suggestions are ways to look at *King Lear* and *Ran*. First, limit—yes, *limit*—what students do. Students learn more profoundly when we teach less material but at a deeper level.¹ Or, as Lao-Tzu said, “When one sees little, it becomes clear.”² Limit the breadth of what they do—and increase the depth. The plans that follow are designed to focus the study by way of in-depth looks at *King Lear* and *Ran*.

CLUELESS IN THE CLASSROOM Problem Solving With Context Clues

This is a sort of mystery where students use the text, film, *and* supplemental resource material to solve problems posed by the teacher. The supplemental materials might include literary commentaries, histories, Web sites, databases, and textbooks.

The instructor could ask: What internal evidence can you find that indicates the date of the *King Lear* story? The *Ran* story?

This is an excellent place to start developing an intercultural studies unit. The students, with the instructor’s help, can compare and contrast the European and Asian ways of doing things. For example, American students know about the Western custom that organizes historical events by way of dates on a calendar. (George Washington was elected President in 1788.) They are surprised to learn that the history of Japan was not so precisely dated. “The basic Japanese perception of history is, if anything, closer to the myths and tales of old, starting as these do with the equivalent of ‘Once upon a time . . .’ with no further specification of the period.”³ The result is that the past may be hard to date, and a story like *Ran* may seem more like legend than history.

Nevertheless, dating *Ran* is possible. Students should note the dramatic action, use of props, dress, architecture and color in the film. Then with supplemental sources, they should find out how a castle might have looked in the Kamakura or Momoyama Period or how Momoyama Japan might have expressed itself in furniture, or how the use of firearms changed defensive fortifications. Costumes and samurai uniforms suggest a time when cultural taste favored rich and opulent coloring. During the sixteenth century tastes had changed “. . . from chaste and cultivated simplicity to the florid use of gold and color . . . [It was a time of] lush opulence quite different from the understatement of an earlier period.”⁴ Moreover, the use of firearms could only have occurred after 1543, when the Portuguese first introduced guns to the Japanese.⁵ The film shows feudal lords at war with one another, and supplemental material would show this pattern of conflict existed in the sixteenth century.

Social, political, and military structure sometimes offer a good clue for dating a story, too. In sixteenth-century Japan, the *ie*, which we might describe as “household,” was more than the “. . . unit of family members living together that the English word implies. It has the nature of an economic unit, highly independent and persisting over generations.”⁶ These “households” assumed responsibility for governing over large regional areas and were supported by a warrior class, which enforced authority and expanded it by military conquest. So it appears from the historic facts and social customs that *Ran* must be dated sometime in the latter part of the sixteenth century, by Western reckoning. Students learn about Japanese history and culture while trying to date the story.

Dating *King Lear* is a challenge as well. Shakespeare wrote few references to events, places, or political leaders, or others that specifically identify the time of the action. Religious references, where they exist at all, are mostly to the classical gods. There is one off-hand, future tense, remark about Merlin. It suggests that Lear predated King Arthur. It isn’t much to go on.

Social and political customs are helpful, too. In feudal England, a sort of chivalric code was in effect, which helped organize behavior in the absence of recognized legal codes or enforcement provisions. It was a sort of honor system in which people at every level were expected to perform their duties. So it was that Lear’s decision to forsake his royal responsibility and divide his kingdom was a violation of what was expected of a king at the time. At what time? It’s hard to say precisely, but Lear must have been a pre-Christian king, probably before 600 A.D. Again, the process helps the class to learn more than it would have if the teacher had simply written a date on the chalkboard.

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ORIENTEERING

Concept Maps and Textual Landmarks

Another way to approach the study of literature is by mapping important concepts. Some students excel at this because it is more tactile, active, and visually appealing. “Visual representations of content can be a powerful instructional strategy for illustrating relationships to students in graphic ways. They are equally potent when students use them to portray their sense of how concepts are related to one another.”⁷ Students should create a concept map to answer an important question about the film or text. Again, limit the task and reflect deeply on a particular element of the study. Ask students to identify imagery common to both stories. Ideally, this should be developed into a comprehensive analysis of cultural values, literary conventions, and, of course, the relationship of imagery to thematic intent.

First, create the map—and the bigger the better! Use the chalkboard or bulletin board . . . or even an entire wall. Have students write their observations on note-cards or paper cutouts taped to the wall. Then the cards can be rearranged to reorganize their thought processes or to meet different objectives. Make this an active activity.

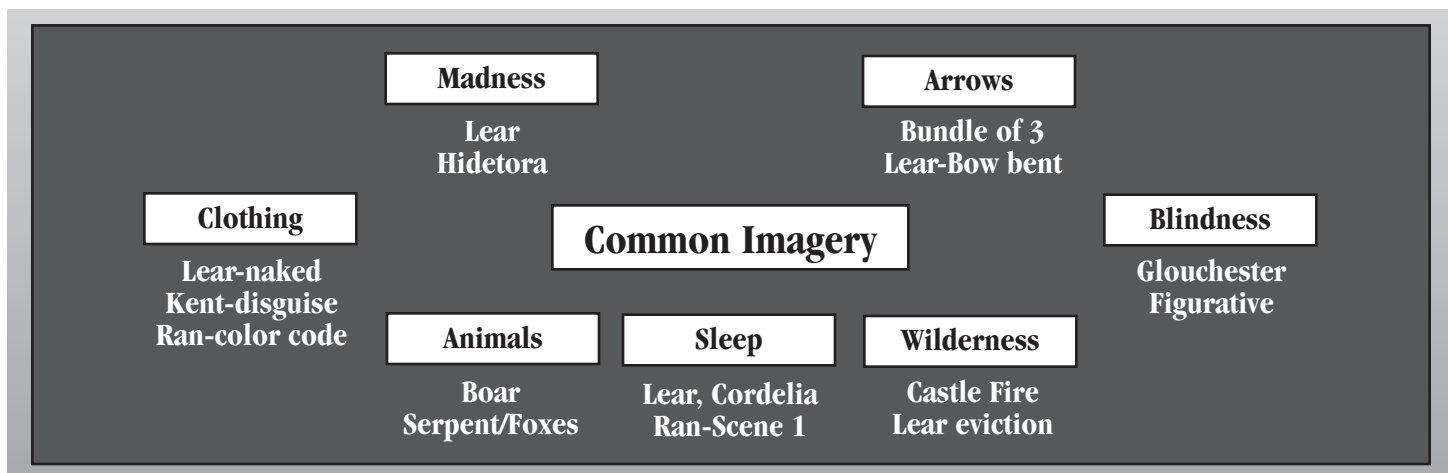
The instructor can post the central topic and students note the categories of common images and specific examples, posting examples as they find them. It might look something like Fig. 1., but it can go much farther in detail. It’s a wonderful way for students to build upon one another’s work. It also keeps the topic *visually* in front of the students while they study and orients them to the author’s thematic intent.

One of the first images in both stories refers to arrows, and students inevitably comment on it. In *Ran*, Hidetora wants to demonstrate to his sons that arrows can be easily broken one at a time, and he asks each of them to break an arrow to prove it. But, he says that three arrows bundled together cannot be split because their unity provides strength. The older two sons attempt to bend the arrows, and they do not break. But Kurumono, the youngest, shows it is really pretty easy after all—he simply breaks them over his knee—foreshadowing trouble.

In Shakespeare’s story, Lear becomes angry at Cordelia’s too-weak proclamation of love, and Kent’s defense of her. Twice he tries to silence his friend and then warns him, “The bow is bent and drawn; make from the shaft.”⁸ The imagery is apt, as Kent soon discovers to his disadvantage.

The concept map can also be used to help students isolate one specific issue and organize their thinking around its most important characteristics. For example, the instructor can assign the class to search for animal imagery. Students like this exercise, partly because the examples are so abundant and partly because the metaphors are fun. One study found “. . . 171 references to animals, including 98 animal comparisons . . .” in *King Lear*.⁹ Lear refers to himself as a dragon and to his treacherous daughters as tigers, cows, serpents, vultures and pelicans. When Lear descends into madness, he says the state of man is nothing more than that of a forked animal, “. . . reinforcing the dark and painful atmosphere of the work.”¹⁰ Ask students to scour the text for examples of animal imagery, and then do the same with the film.

FIGURE 1



***King Lear* can be difficult to teach, and it is not made much better when students watch a film version they consider boring.**

Students love Kurosawa's *Ran*, and its use is one of the best ways to help students appreciate the story.

Kurosawa used dozens of animal images in *Ran*. Select one for students to study. They will develop a better understanding of Asian culture and the metaphors that have special meaning to it. A student might look into the image of the fox and diagram the findings study as in Figure 2. They can create a flow chart that begins with overall cultural significance on the left side and then develops more specific applications on the right.

The fox has a long history in Japanese literary convention. Foxes may deliver messages from the gods and symbolize abundant harvests. But they may also hypnotize people, trick and mislead them, seduce men, deceive women, and portend disaster. They are cunning creatures, and knowing this, students may better understand this image in *Ran*.

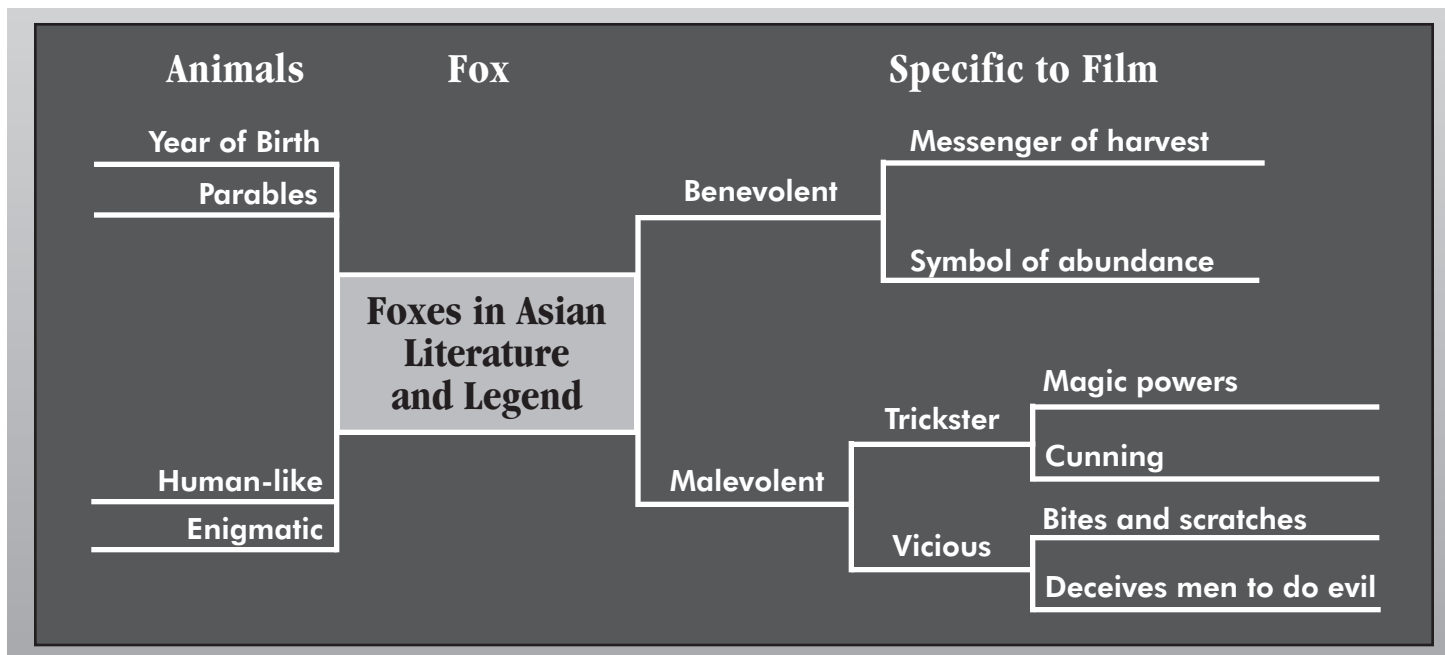


FIGURE 2

The chart will serve as a visual organizer. Students can expand the chart as far as they like. The more research they do, the more interested they become in the overall concept of imagery in the Japanese (or Elizabethan) context. Tables help students visually organize their ideas so they can turn them into oral or written presentations, which they should be asked to do. That is, their work on a visual organizer should be used to produce something tangible. It is important that students write their conclusions at some point. Richard Light's study found that writing is the most important characteristic leading to student engagement in a course and its material.¹¹ The important thing is that students are meaningfully active in their study of *King Lear* and *Ran* and responsible for producing documented and justified written conclusions to important questions.

The important thing is for students to better understand the literature they read. The strategies described here are just two of many possible ways of helping students to look through the text and film. They also suggest ways for students to visually display their thought processes as they look more deeply into the imagery of the stories.

From the standpoint of a literature instructor, *King Lear* can be difficult to teach, and it is not made much better when students watch a film version they consider boring. Students love Kurosawa's *Ran*, and its use is one of the best ways to help students appreciate the story. The added benefit is that it is a good introduction to Japanese history, culture, and literature. In fact, students will develop a better awareness of Japan without specifically trying to do so! Instructors can achieve this wonderful combination of interdisciplinary and intercultural objectives in an English Literature class. It's worth the doing.

SUGGESTED SUPPLEMENTAL SOURCES

Here is a list of potential supplemental sources for *King Lear* and *Ran*; it is by no means exhaustive. Instructors should determine the materials that might be available in their own libraries, on-line, or in databases that students can use. It is important that the sources a teacher selects are well known to the instructor and accessible because many students will not know where to turn without guidance.

KING LEAR

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NOTES

1. Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 122.
2. Nicholas Bouvier, *The Japanese Chronicles*, trans. Anne Dickerson (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1992), 46.
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4. W. Scott Morton, *Japan: Its History and Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 119.
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7. John R. McClure, Brian Sonak, and Hoi K. Suen, "Concept Map Assessment of Classroom Learning: Reliability, Validity, and Logistical Practicality," *Journal of Research in Science Teaching* 35, no. 4 (1999): 475-92, quoted in "Concept Maps as a Testing Tool," *The Teaching Professor* 15, no. 10, December, 2001: 8.
8. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 36.
9. Julie Kane, "From the Baroque to Wabi: Translating Animal Imagery from Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Kurosawa's *Ran*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 25, no 21: 149.
10. Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1935, rept. 1958), 342, quoted in Julie Kane, "From the Baroque to Wabi: Translating Animal Imagery from Shakespeare's *King Lear* to Kurosawa's *Ran*," *Literature Film Quarterly* 25, no 21: 150.
11. Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 55.

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