

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Rashomon 1950 Akira Kurosawa. 1910-1998

STORY

Rashomon was the first Japanese film in more than a decade to catch the western imagination, and market. Prior to the release of *Rashomon*, in 1950, the west had enjoyed very little contact with Japanese film, perhaps because in many ways the Japanese film industry seemed so similar to the western, with its studio system and its attention to genre films. Nor had full attention yet gotten around to Kurosawa's earlier films—this was his twelfth—though he had, we would say in retrospect, with the present film found just the setting and just the inspiration he required, to express his mature vision. In particular he had found a textual inspiration, some short stories by Ryunosuke Akutagawa, a brilliant younger writer who took his own life in 1927, declaring that the moral problems of the twentieth century world were too much for him.

Sourcing. What Akutagawa gave Kurosawa, for working inspiration, was simple but effective: the setting in Kyoto, the eleventh century capital of Japan; a geopolitical atmosphere strongly suggesting cultural and urban breakdown; the grounding point for the story, the great if crumbling Rashomon Gate that led into Kyoto City; and—on the level of literary device—four narratives, concerning a recent rape and murder, which are being discussed by three locals taking shelter from the rain, under the Gate's high lintel.

The narratives. It is the woodcutter who has in the course of his forest work come upon the corpse of a samurai, and hears buzz of an associated rape. The priest, who has been following the case, reports being very disturbed by it, and especially in light of testimonies he has been hearing, in the nearby prison courtyard.

First narrative. The first account has been given by a notorious highway robber, a savage and explosive man who while recounting burst out constantly into furious laughter. According to his account he was sleeping in the forest when he heard a carriage passing, in which a samurai and a lovely lady were sitting. Terribly stirred up by the woman's beauty, he follows the carriage, binds the husband, then sustains a terrible attack from the knife-armed woman. Eventually he seduces her, and at her request engages in combat with, then at her request kills, her husband.

Second narration. The second narration, as reported by the priest from the prison courtyard hearings, is given by the wife. She claims that she was raped by highway bandit, then begged for mercy from her bound husband, who had been forced to watch the terrible scene. She could find no pity in his eyes, just cold fury, and so she begged him to stab her to death. At this point, she says, she fainted, and when she woke she found her husband dead, having stabbed himself in the chest. This was the second account of the reason for the samurai corpse in the forest.

Third narration. The third testimony is provided by the dead husband through a female medium. According to this account the wife, having been raped by the highway man, fell for him, and begged him to kill her husband. The highwayman, however, was repelled by this suggestion, and instead engaged in combat with the husband. It was in the course of this combat that the husband was stabbed to death, while the wife escaped.

Fourth narration. The woodcutter, who had initiated the present inquiry, thanks to his discovery in the woods, finally returns to his account and admits that he had lied. He had in fact, he now says, come upon the wife begging the highwayman to kill her husband, after having raped her; whereupon the highwayman went into battle with the husband and eventually killed him, in an inconclusive and non-heroic struggle.

Summary. In the end all three narrations agree upon only one event; the rape of the woman by the highwayman. Each accounts in a different way for the death of the samurai which is the matter of legal interest

In the present case. There are two possible conclusions to draw, from the perplexing inconsistencies among the four narrations. One is that the truth is elusive, cannot be pinned down. The other is that people's accounts of the truth cannot be relied on. These are different accounts of truth, from within philosophy—and the dispute over them is central already, say, to Plato's *Theatetus*—but Kurosawa's genius is to have incorporated these big picture issues into dramatic but daily interpersonal conflicts, visible and consequential.

THEMES

Truth. The nature of truth—whether it can be identified and pinned down or not—is central to the film, and Kurosawa can be said to have raised interesting doubts about truth. Only one agreed-on truth—the death of the samurai—emerges from the four narratives, while the deep nature of even that truth will depend on the veracity of the accompanying elements of each narration

Lust. Clearly the one sure driver, of the puzzling events of this film, is lust—even, on certain accounts, the lust of the lady for the highwayman. Lust is not in dispute here.

Nature. Both torrential rains, and mysteriously shaded forest settings, enforce the murky situation of the plot that occupies this film.

Violence. The one event beyond dispute in the film is that the husband, an innocent victim surely, is killed. The stakes of the perplexing tale are high, and deadly.

CHARACTERS

Tajomaru (the bandit highwayman). The indisputably bad guy In this tale. That he raped Masago is in question in none of the narratives, though his subsequent actions are greatly in dispute.

Woodcutter. The initiator of the tale of the finding of the corpse of the samurai. Later the woodcutter withdraws his earlier statements, claiming that he came upon the lady supplicating Tajomaru.

Takehiro.(samurai lord) The samurai lord, the murder and stabbing of whom is the centerpiece of every narrative in question.

Masago. (samurai's wife) The samurai's wife. Raped, by every narration, but with subsequent reactions and actions in each narration.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

TAJOMARU

Character. The main character, Tajomaru, is a bandit or highwayman. He is violent, even when bound by the police, and in every account, of the movie's action, he is an active rapist, quite glad, also, to follow up his rape with the murder of the samurai himself. He is given to a kind of wild, cackling laughter, which, combined with his evident delight in cruelty, makes him appear a madman—which arguably he is.

Parallels. The personality type, to which one wants to refer the highwayman, whether in literature or in life, is the sexual sadist—for in the case of each of the four narrations Tajomaru is prepared to kill the husband he raped, and in some cases to make the husband watch the rape. The closest parallels we will find, and they are legion, would come from the other arts, at the points where they touch on sadomasochism, , a theme reaching as far back as the *Mimes* of Herondas, in Greek antiquity, and

collecting kin abundantly throughout the modern centuries: as in the work of de Sade, Apollinaire's *One Thousand Rodes*—which Picasso considered the best book ever written--or the superb BBC TV series, *Doc Martin*, which makes the most of a doctor who would enjoy the punishment Tajomaru would provide him.

Illustrative moments

Bound. At the very outset of the film we see the highwayman bound, under interview by the local police, who are investigating the case of the murder of the samurai. His muscles bulge, his face pulses with anger and mirth, and we experience him as a dangerous force of nature.

Noticing. As Tajomaru tells his tale, we see—on screen—the passion he immediately conceives for Masago, as her chariot passes him in the forest. He is just waking up from a nap, and he is lustful as a feral beast.

Fighting. While the accounts of Tajomaru as murderer vary, no doubt exists that he is ready to kill the samurai. Whether this action is merciful or furious, it is the action of a fighting killer.

Concerned. In the third narration, given by the dead husband through a medium, Tajomaru is portrayed as unwilling to murder the samurai in cold blood. The highwayman insists on normal combat, and to that extent 'gentlemanly conduct.'

Discussion questions.

If you were the judge presiding over the trial of Tajomaru, in the case of the murder of the samurai, what would your decision be? Can you imagine a situation in which you would be persuaded by the argument that the highwayman was not guilty of the murder of the samurai?

Please review the epilogue that follows the trial, in *Rashomon*. This segment, which we omit discussion of above, is Kurosawa's effort to justify his faith in human nature, despite the severity of the judgment which appears to be passed earlier in the film. How do you like this epilogue?