

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

The Bad Sleep Well 1960

Akira Kurosawa. 1910-1998

STORY

Among the three magisterial Japanese directors, of the early post war period--Mizoguchi, Kurosawa, and Ozu-- Akira Kurosawa is the most flexible and self-searching. As we know from a drama like *Rashomon*, Kurosawa is able to create the historical genre, the film or tale set prior to the Meiji Restoration (1868).) That would be historical drama, dealing with events prior to the 1860's, at which time the New Japanese Empire was restored and the modern period of Japanese culture was announced. (In that film not only does Kurosawa penetrate the samurai mind but he establishes a richly pre modern historical environment.)

Modernity. As we know from his film *Ikiru*, however, Kurosawa was keenly aware of the modern as well as of the archaic Japanese consciousness. *Ikiru* himself, though aspiring in the end of his life to some kind of pre-modern heroism--a transcendence of his everyday self, in this case--is the quintessential little man of modern literature, the figure of Bartleby the Scriver, who sits in his office corner and files inconsequential material without much interest in it.

Nishi. The film in front of us is eminently 'modern' in theme--it is set, after all, in downtown postwar Tokyo, and involves corporate greed, jealousy, and in the end violence. Among the pieces of violence necessarily central to the present film is a well past but far from forgotten murder, of the protagonist's father, from within the construction company for which his dad worked, Dairyu Construction Company. It is this murder which Nishi is determined to avenge, thus playing his part in the age old saga of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. And it is by thinking his way into that old thematic, that Kurosawa once again, as he had previously done with *King Lear* and *MacBeth*, finds the deep channel toward globalism standing inside perspectives in which West and East are simply deepening mirrors of one another.

Subterfuge. Nishi's entry, into the violence that destroyed his dad, is won at the cost of his own identity--which he has to concoct in order to sign up with Dairyu and to penetrate its corporate secrets. Not only identity loss has been required, but Nishi has had to marry the boss' daughter, and co-opt the inside knowledge of an underling of the company, in the course of which manipulations he has further entrapped himself in the perplexities of the puzzle-solving revenge quest he is on. As if we were not sufficiently aware, at this point, of the ravages of wavering, in our modern *Hamlet*, we see his wife, inherently trusting her dad, reveal to the old man the hideaway location of Nishi, and, not much later, the murder of Nishi by Iwabuchi's thugs.

Aftermath. In a sense it is over now, the 'sweet prince' having bowed to the inevitable; but in another sense the *Hamlet* toxins are still spreading. Iwabuchi is again comfortably in charge of his company, the reporters are once again sniffing around him for scraps of news, but now it is another Iwabuchi, no longer at ease, no friend of his daughter, a figure of contempt to his son, no contacts around him except the characterless voices of government officials discussing bottom lines with him. Nishi is dead, but he has died as a full human being, no longer tortured, as is Iwabuchi, by the sense he is surrounded by enemies.

THEMES

Corruptness. Big city industrial corruptness is the deepest illness of the society Nishi is fighting. His father in law personifies the secretive, person-indifferent power wielder, in the corporate environment of cutthroat competition. Nishi personifies a fundamentally loving social participant, but he comes to realize that love will not suffice to bring on justice; and even his own efforts, to restore the nobility of his relation with his wife, are too little too late.

Revenge. Nishi realizes too late how secretive and vicious the face of corporate culture is. In his first assault on Dairyu Construction he misunderstands how impenetrable the thicket of evasion is, in the company which has deprived him of his father. By the end, however, he realizes that the corporation is too strong for the individual, and that his efforts to beat the system are doomed.

Emptiness. The picture of social emptiness, of vain chatter, is perfectly depicted by the paparazzi who gather around Iwabuchi and his company, at the time of the mirror. The values of these guys are no more significant than the scraps of gossip news they devour from the lips of the swanky marriage guests.

Love. In the end, which destroys him, Nishi is forced to realize that toughness as well as love is necessary for success. His wife, Kieko, who is herself torn between her image of her dad as loving, and her love for Nishi, will barely support Nishi if all he can think of is the need for revenge against his father in law.

CHARACTERS

Nishi is just getting married, to the daughter of his boss, as the film opens. At this point we are unaware that Nishi is himself playing a role, a faked identity, so that he can find out the truth of his own father's death within the company, and can take revenge accordingly. The association with Shakespeare's Hamlet comes in here; like Hamlet Nishi has gone underground—"the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king"—so that he can identify and destroy the individual who got rid of Nishi's own father. Ultimately, Nishi identifies Iwabuchi, the CEO of Dairyu, as the guilty one. But Nishi is murdered too soon to take his revenge, even if he knew what revenge would look like, in the present situation.

Iwabuchi is the CEO of the construction company of which Nishi's father was an employee, a murdered employee. Iwabuchi is a heartless company director, indifferent to any outcome but commercial success, and yet in the end, as he cuts himself off from all friendship, he finds that he is lonely and isolated, and that his life no longer has meaning. Even his daughter has lost her love for him.

Wada is an employee of Iwabuchi's company. In his effort to ferret out the causes of his father's death, Nishi brings pressure on Wada to tell all he knows. In the end, Wada becomes Nishi's chief confidant, almost a substitute father figure, and is murdered, along with Nishi, by Iwabuchi's thugs.

Kieko is Iwabuchi's daughter, who is married to Nishi in the opening scenes of the film. Arguably she is being used as her father's pawn, for her dad wishes to use her as a shield against Nishi—whom he has had murdered. In the end Kieko is torn between trust in her dad, to whom she reveals the secret of Nishi's hideaway, and love for her husband. But by this time it is too late; Nishi has been found and killed.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

NISHI

Character. Nishi is the character into which Kurasawa builds his historically complex study. An admirer of aspects of the samurai cult, sensitive to traditional issues of honor and military stance, Kurosawa is also keenly sensitive to the 'modern world,' in which bourgeois values like sensitivity and even love now compete for central attention. Nishi lives both the ancient mandates—in this case, for revenge—and the claims of the loving family, for Kieko is a devoted wife, who is herself torn between the demands both of her father's honor and of her husband's struggle to be morally worthy of her. That the behavioral dilemma facing Nishi is universal, and has roots in the inevitable dilemmas of the human condition, is strongly undertraced by the interlacing of Nishi's fate with the story of Hamlet, a story which, as well known, had roots far deeper than Shakespeare's time—in the work of the twelfth century Saxo Grammaticus, and then backward into the mists of Scandinavian oral poetry.

Parallels. *Hamlet* is our parallel, par excellence, yet it is impossible to overlook an even more ancient rival-parallel, the story of Oedipus, which we know perhaps first from the fifth century drama of Sophocles—though Homer himself had already staged a meeting between Odysseus and Oedipus, in the underworld—but which resonates through world myth wherever the injunction of father-killing descends onto a compelled scion. These two anciently intertwined myths assure a global foundation to the existential efforts of Nishi.

Illustrative moments.

Married. Nishi is married to Iwabuchi's daughter, Kieko, in an effort—on the company's part—to keep him quiet, and, on Nishi's part, to learn the secrets of his father's murder by the company owned by Kieko's dad.

Murdered. In the end, perhaps simply because he had not sufficiently earned Kieko's trust, Nishi is flushed out of his hideaway—where Wada has joined him—and been killed by the CEO's goons.

Disillusioned. Nishi is ultimately disillusioned. He began the film's quest in search of justice for his father, but by the end his own moral purity has been compromised. He now knows what he believes in, his value system, but he has already seriously compromised that belief.

Abandoned. Too late in the game, Nishi realizes that he loves his wife—whom he had initially married in order to ferret out information—but by this time she has inclined to trust her father, and, fatefully, gives in to dad's trick, and reveals Nishi's hideaway.

Discussion questions

Is there anything of the samurai left in Nishi?

Does the coexistence of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with Kurosawa's Nishi, add interest, strength, or power to the portrayal of Nishi? For the reader/watcher, what value is added to a contemporary art work by its resonance with a past masterpiece?