

The legacy of "in a grove" on hollywood storytelling



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Although the title of Ryūnosuke Akutagawa's short story "In a Grove" may not be familiar, the story may well be. In 1922, *Sincho* magazine published "In a Grove" as a kind of ancient Japanese detective story, with the mystery at the center of the narrative presented in the form of a trial testimony from various witnesses. Nearly thirty years later, a film would be adapted from Akutagawa's story and given the title of an earlier and entirely unrelated story by the author: "Rashomon." While the plot of the movie is taken directly from "In a Grove" it is from Akutagawa's "Rashomon" that the movie's framing device of stories told beneath a large city gate was derived.

The structure of the story in which the same event is interpreted through the eyes of assorted witnesses providing their own slightly different perspective has since become almost something of a sub-genre unto itself. At the time of Akutagawa's story, however, the concept of a narrative without any one singular objective truth was still exceptional enough to be considered confusing by many publishers and, later, producers.

"In a Grove" prefigures Postmodern fiction with its fragmented narrative and multiple possibilities for objective truth arrived at by subjective analysis of the facts. The story thus situates Akutagawa well ahead of his Modernist peers working in western literature at the same time. However, while "In a Grove" looks far into the future in manifesting a 21st century sensibility regarding the potential for absolute truths, the writer also looked back in time for inspiration. American writer Ambrose Bierce's 1907 story "The Moonlit Road" was a story with which Akutagawa was familiar and elements of the older tale reveal that that familiarity. "The Moonlight Road" presents the possibility for discovering the truth about a woman's murder from the

testimony of three narrators: the dead woman's son, a man who may be her husband and—through a medium—the spirit of the dead woman herself.

Since its initial publication and the subsequent film adaptation by noted Japanese director Akira Kurosawa, the influence of "In a Grove" has far surpassed its readership. While obviously not the first piece of fiction to experiment with relating the same event from multiple perspectives, its narrative structure and thematic conceit has irrefutably transformed "In a Grove" into one of the standard plot devices most called upon for duty in Hollywood.

Movies like *Vantage Point* and *Hoodwinked!* are constructed entirely within the form of "In a Grove." In fact, *Hoodwinked!* even takes on the story's form of being witness testimony in a police investigation. Unlike with Kurosawa's interpretation in *Rashomon*, however, the mystery gets comprehensively solved, but the big bad guy behind it all turns out to be a character who plays into each of the witnesses recalled testimony, but is not one of the witnesses. While those two examples and many others take on "In a Grove" as the underlying screenplay template for relating their entire narrative, many other movies take Akutagawa's concept more as a reference which can be pinpointed down to a single sequence. For instance, the song "I Remember it Well" from *Gigi* and the entire framing of the dual narrative of the song "Summer Loving" in the movie *Grease* owe a debt to "In a Grove."

The list of television shows that did not do an episode inspired by the story's structure might well be shorter than the list of those television shows that did. Some highlights of the so-called *Rashomon*-style of storytelling can be

found in particular episodes of TV series like Thirtysomething, All in the Family, King of the Hill, Invader Zim and, of course, The Simpsons. So effective is this device that not one, but two standout episodes of The X-Files follow Akutagawa's lead: "Bad Blood" and "Jose Chung's `From Outer Space.'" The former recreates the same scene from the differing perspectives told in retrospect by Agents Mulder and Scully, while the latter episode gives a robust tip of the hat to the idea that no absolute objective truth can ever be gained from subjective recall of events. The X-Files episode is hardly the only example that has broadened or subverted or taken the idea outlined in the story "In a Grove" to places unexplored by Akutagawa. To give an idea of just how deeply embedded into Hollywood's go-to plot machine Akutagawa's trope has become and to what extent it has been adapted and reconstituted, consider that TV shows from The New Adventures of He-Man to CSI have taken at least one shot at it. What was rare and experimental in 1922 has become conventional—if no less fascinating—over the ensuing century.