

The 47 ronin response essay



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John Allyn's *The 47 Ronin*, is the true, although slightly embellished, tale of 47 masterless samurai bent on avenging their fallen leader, Lord Asano, as well as a fairly accurate portrayal of the culture of Japan during the eighteenth century. Each page of the *47 Ronin* is steeped in the aura of Samurai, Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist ethics. The most prominent of these ethics, is that of the Samurai; the code of Bushido is modeled by seven core virtues: rectitude (gi), courage (yu), benevolence (jin), respect (rei), honesty (makoto), honor (mieyo), and loyalty (chugi).

The most obvious example of samurai/bushido ethics occurs in the book's final pages; having successfully slain Kira, their master's "archenemy", the contented ronin are granted with the honor of Seppuku (ritual suicide).

Seppuku is the gruesome and excruciatingly painful process of disemboweling oneself, and while most would scoff at this notion, samurai, employing the virtues of Bushido, will happily endure Seppuku to keep their honor intact.

As made apparent often throughout the *47 Ronin*, "loyalty dwarfs all other moral obligations". (pg. 59) Upon hearing of Kira surviving Lord Asano's attack, the Ronins' "sorrow and hopelessness chang[es] to pure rage". (pg. 58) Despite this, Oishi (the main protagonist), adhering to the samurai tenet of wisdom (chi), is able to maintain his composure, and think rationally through the predicament he and the rest of his fellow ronin face. Allyn also regularly alludes to the ethical and philosophical system of Confucianism.

The ethics of Confucianism are what set the events of *The 47 Ronin* into motion; as a result of his rash action towards Kira, Lord Asano is sentenced

to death in reparation for his lack of respect for humanness and altruism, core tenets of Confucianism. Another important virtue of Confucianism is Filial Piety; filial piety is respect for one's parents and ancestors, and it is an ideal to be held above all else. Whether it is Lord Asano's daughter fighting to control her emotions or Oishi wrestling with which course of action is best, filial piety is the most important and salient Confucian virtue explored in The 47 Ronin.

The social hierarchy of Confucianism is also delved into; a fairly inconspicuous hierarchal dispute occurs when Oishi is attempting to gain entrance into a Kabuki theater. In order to make room for Oishi and his fellow Ronin, four merchants, being in the lowest social ranking, are evicted from their box. While referred to far less often than Bushido and Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism both have roles in the 47 Ronin. Taoism's three jewels, compassion, moderation, and humility, comprise its basic virtues. Of the three virtues, moderation is the one most appreciated by Oishi.

To fool his enemies, Oishi allows himself to succumb to the "softening effect" of the geisha and alcohol; it is during this time of gallivanting when Oishi is in his most abnormal state. In direct contrast to the teachings he was raised upon, Oishi "had no more thought for his reputation than the street beggar." (pg. 131) Buddhism is most often alluded to in reference to the life preservation laws that are applied to animals. As a result of these life preservation laws, "foxes, badgers, birds, and insects [run] rampant" (pg. 0) in the fields of helpless farmers, and "horsemanship [becomes] a lost art because the horses' hooves [can] not be pared or their manes clipped..." (pg. 11)

These life preservation laws are instated due to the most superstitious example of Buddhism in the 47 Ronin. After losing a child, the Shogun is convinced by his priest that “ he must atone for some sin committed in a previous life”. (pg. 11) In penance, the Shogun expressly forbids the killing of animals. More than just a classic novel of revenge and loyalty, John Allyn’s *The 47 Ronin* allows on to be immersed in the culture of Japan during the eighteenth century.