

Deciphering truth and
modernism in
ryunosuke
akutagawa's in a
grove essay sample



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For a reader, Ryunosuke Akutagawa's 1922 short story *In a Grove* gives more questions than answers as the last sentence ends. Within the story Akutagawa presents seven accounts surrounding the murder of a samurai named Kanazawa no Takehiro in a bamboo grove. Three of the seven accounts clearly contradict each other, calling into question not only their accuracy but the accuracy of any of the seven accounts. Through this device, Akutagawa pursues the question of truth not as a constant but as a subjective element of the human experience.

The instability of linear truth for Akutagawa is not limited just to *In a Grove*. Several of his story stories present a re-telling of events or intertextualization of previous literary works that call into question the assumed truths of the narrators. It has been argued in cases like his 1920 short story *The Ball*, a re-telling of an earlier work by a French author, that he was "clearly deploying these literary techniques to articulate a strongly felt political sensibility, particularly with regard to the issue of Western cultural imperialism in Japan." (Rosenfeld, 2000)

In A Grove does not lend itself to such a clear-cut argument of Western resentment. It does, however, possibly open itself up to a questioning of pre-Meiji (and, pre-Western) values. Of the three most contentious accounts of events presented within the story, none can really be perceived any more or less true by the account alone. In each re-telling certain elements are suspect, certain elements are corroborated by other accounts, and all three present a different killer. We as readers are then forced to use our own judgment, replete with our biases of gender, class, and culture, to decide whose account is the most trustworthy.

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Of all the character's retellings, the wife's is perhaps the most easily discarded as false. Details of her testimony, such as three successive suicide attempts failing, or the A Matter of Perspective Zunspoken request from her husband to kill him, are highly suspect and when compared to the testimony of the two men her story has less in common.

Yet, her story is not meant as a defense but was given as a confession in a temple. In such a voluntary situation it's hard to imagine why she would lie, and there is a plausibility to her story. Suicide pacts have long been escalated to a kind of romantic art in Japanese and Western literature alike. We colloquially say the road to hell is paved with good intentions, and perhaps in this case, ashamed at what her husband might say if she removed the gag of leaves, she saw, rightly or wrongly, a request to die from him because she wanted to see it and felt such a suicide pact was fitting and then was unable to follow through with it.

Her story, in contrast with the other two, present the utter despair of the victim of such a horrible crime, a crime that in her day would have shamefully marked her for the rest of her life. While it's very easy for the thief to say that he wanted to keep the husband alive, he violated the man's wife in front of him, and no longer he or the wife lived that violent memory would never have been undone. Her life as a kind of ghost, roaming the earth in shame without family or friends, reiterates this. Whether the husband had lived or died, he and his wife's lives were effectively ended the minute the robber raped her.

As to the similarities between the thief and the husband's testimony, I believe Akutagawa is actually being self referential in his own re-telling of the tale. *In a Grove* is adapted from a classical tale found in *Konjaku Monogatari*, a collection of stories purported to be from the Heian period. Retelling such a story is not anomalous; rather, there is a fairly rich cultural tradition in Japan of retelling popular stories and in retellings fictionalizing true accounts into legends. As we don't know the circumstances through which the mystic was summoned to gain the husband's story or how much time had passed, there are more questions by having it in the text than answers. We can assume though a story like this would have traveled in the town and was probably hot gossip, and as with all gossip was slightly altered in the many retellings.

As the wife was never found or made testimony to the police that we know of the story of the thief would have probably been the most widespread. It's also likely that the mystic had heard his story or one of the many retellings, so similarities within the two, whether you believe it is a "true account" from beyond the grave or not, are very easily understood. To the skeptic of any era, the most likely explanation for the husband's story is that the mystic heard the thief's account and used it when someone asked them to channel the husband. The mystic reappropriates a circulating story to suit the devices of her customer and Akutagawa reappropriates similarly to suit his own overarching literary themes.

While if we were to examine the original story we might find some interesting clues into Akutagawa's intent based on this line of thinking,

assuming that the mystic had heard the story we can see some very
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interesting ways that the story was theoretically altered to suit societal opinion. For example, the character of the wife changes drastically from a victim of circumstance to a weak willed woman demanding the murder of her husband to the point that the thief wants to kill her and the husband wanted the thief pardoned for what he did for wanting her dead. The circumstances of the husband's greed that are to blame for the entire situation are conveniently absent in this story and the husband is presented almost saintly, the thief worldly and as fair as one could be in such a position and the blame for all of the problems instead fall on to the wife, who is put in this situation, again, at the hands of both her husband's greed and the thief's lust.

Readers, too, would have offered a unique instability to the universality of this story. When Akutagawa wrote this story his country was just wrapping up one of the most dramatic changes in its history. The Meiji period just a short while previously would forever change the Japanese people's perception of everything from medicine, culture, crime, gender and the world. (Jansen, 1995) It would have been a very unique opportunity to question previously held beliefs with the new, modern perceptions, or to manipulate the self held views of the readers to make value judgements within a text. Each of the three disputed accounts in the story comes from a person of a different class or sociocultural status in Japan at that time - a class position that had changed greatly from the story's origins in the Heian period and even from just the preceding era.

In stories like *Rashomon* Akutagawa would debate in depth the role of the thief in society, a position at one of the lowest levels of society. Women in <https://assignbuster.com/deciphering-truth-and-modernism-in-ryunosuke-akutagawas-in-a-grove-essay-sample/>

society had very few rights, as is even noted in the story. The wife wears a veil to hide her face while they are traveling, is in abject despair, not over the rape itself, but the shame of it. Indeed, even though the testimony comes from a mystic, the samurai man's story has the most societal clout from a traditional perspective. We could then assume perception of the accounts would be different with different groups of people in Akutagawa's day. Traditionalists might side with the samurai husband's account, a kind of noble Confucian martyr, whereas a modernist might see right with the thief or the wife's story.

If we examine some of Ryunosuke Akutagawa's other work, notably *Rashomon*, a story closely linked to *In a Grove* due to the movie version of both, we can see that Akutagawa has his own moral compass in regards to these kind of issues. A man finds an old woman stealing hair from the dead to make wigs to sell for food. When confronted, she justifies herself with tales of how much undeserving these dead are of respect and how they too are sinners. The man responds by stealing the woman's coat. Akutagawa here is making a statement here I feel that wrong only begets wrong, and if you invoke such a chain it will only continue, no matter how justified the crime. Depending on our moral perceptions of right and wrong then our perceptions of the true villains of *In a Grove* will change.

In A Grove is a key example of how the Japanese psyche, still reeling from the speeding onslaught of industrialization and westernization in the Meiji period, comes to put a unique mark on the face of modernization through plays of perception. In the absence of linear truth Akutagawa has created a puzzle with any infinite number of answers.

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