

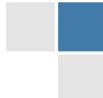
Reflective Statement:

In order to better comprehend the context of our class discussion, it is important to know that before the 1850s, Japan was an inward-looking, isolated nation. However, in 1853, US Admiral Perry visited the nation, encouraging the opening of its borders to the west. The ensuing influx of western ideas and technology translated into rapid economic and social development for the decades to come. Social development, however, caused friction with the more conservative Japanese social customs - a key contrast portrayed in Akutagawa's works.

Bearing this in mind, the class discussion evolved around three main themes: how the contrast between a traditional and more modern Japan is presented in the stories, how global archetypes are adapted to fit Japanese culture and how these stories can be viewed as the representation of a decline in traditional Japanese values of honour, respect and frugality.

The contrast between modernity and tradition was highlighted by the behaviour of the woman in the story *The Bamboo Grove*. It was pointed out that whilst in the past would have been firmly under the control of men, the woman in this story is portrayed as making her own decisions. This ultimately leads to the death of the Samurai. Samurais are important cultural symbols in Japan as they are associated with *Bushido* a moral code meaning *the way of the warrior* - emphasising frugality, honour and loyalty, and thus implying that modern attitudes were responsible for the loss of traditional Japanese values. This was also seen in the exploration of archetypes, with the class pointing out that a priest, a figure that should present high moral principles, falls victim to vanity. The destruction of Kyoto in *Rashomon*, Japan's ancient capital symbol of a bygone era, was also pointed out to be a metaphor for moral decline. It was felt important to mention, however, that his largely detached, objective narrative voices means that Akutagawa never actually criticises modernisation in his works - he just limits himself to describing behavioural trends, letting the reader come to their own conclusions.

Class discussion ended with a brief consideration of how preset Japanese culture might see these stories in comparison with our own interpretations, and whether our conclusions would be shared. The translation of the work was mentioned as a limiting factor to our full understanding - given the idea that so much of the stories' inferences were inevitably dependent on the social context of the Japanese language.



Written Assignment:

In what ways does Akutagawa's Rashomon present the motif of decay?

Japanese author Ryunosuke Akutagawa's short story *Rashomon* focuses the idea of decay on the city of Kyoto, which is physically in ruins following a series of crippling natural disasters. Initially, decay is portrayed in terms of the physical decay of the environment, but as the story progresses it becomes evident that beyond the lack of care shown for what was once a great city of Kyoto, lies a more profound sense of moral and social degradation. Much of this seems to do with the idea of the survival of the fittest; the characters recognize and loathe violent and animalistic behavior in others but they seem completely unable to stop themselves falling victim to it as well.

The story is set in the ancient Japanese capital of Kyoto, in ruins after a series of 'natural disasters'. Akutagawa chooses to portray the city through the presentation of the Rashomon, or main gate - a symbol of the city. An omniscient narrator portrays a very detailed picture, albeit with an underlying critical tone. For example, when he states, 'no one bothered to maintain the Rashomon' the use of the word 'bothered' suggests the author's frustration with the lack of care for the building. Imagery is also used here to convey the decay of the setting. For example, in the phrase, 'lacquer peeling here and there', the vagueness of the 'here and there' suggests that peeling is not only limited to one specific point, it is more generalised and pervasive to the environment. In other places, Akutagawa prefers to point out direct images of decaying parts of the gate, as seen in 'white droppings on the gate's crumbling steps, where long weeds sprouted in the cracks between the stones'. 'Droppings' and 'weeds sprouted' reinforce the lack of care and references to 'crumbling' and 'cracks' suggest that the building is falling into a state of total disrepair. Word choice suggests abandonment more than negligence - as if humanity had turned its back on this structure rather than it simply being a victim of a lack of attention.

This idea that the lack of maintenance of the Rashomon is more entrenched than temporary is further reinforced by ample comparisons between what the building used to be and what it is now. For example, the author mentions that the Rashomon overlooked 'a thoroughfare as important as Suzaku avenue' but now 'foxes and badgers come to live in the dilapidated structure'. This suggests the decay of human living space as well as the increasing lack of distinction between humans and animals, as if the past living spaces were all separate, now animals roam freely in the centre of Kyoto. The idea is further portrayed by the pervasive 'stink of rotting corpses' as spaces for living creatures, human or animal, are degraded by smells and the sense of death, in what was once one of the most prestigious parts of the city.

The decay of the physical environment is also shown to play a role in the presentation of characters. Firstly, they are depicted in similar ways to the dilapidated physical setting. We are told that the servant has a 'festering pimple on his cheek', which indicates a sense of the grotesque. Equally, the woman is dressed in a 'rusty black robe' - the word 'rusty'

suggesting something old, dirty, as if she were wearing a rag off the streets. Furthermore, the characters are portrayed as constantly fatigued: 'the man gave a great sneeze and dragged himself to his feet'. The word 'dragged' implies that he was forced to move against his will - as if people lack the motivation even to complete the most basic of human actions. The servant is not even upright - which is another indication of his similarity with animals; walking upright is substituted for ape-like lounging and being controlled by the lazy moments of the lower body.

Secondly, the people in the story seem to be affected by a kind of social decay. They exist with a kind of perpetual despair: the servant is 'waiting for the rain to end'. Apart from the sense of pathetic fallacy - the grim, miserable conditions in which he is portrayed, there is the suggestion of a kind of hopelessness; the servant has nothing better to do with his life - no aims, no ambitions - nothing to look forward to. This is understandable, perhaps, as he has been 'dismissed by a Master he had served for many years', which indicates a breakdown of the old feudal system. Although oppressive and dictated by social caste, the story thus expresses a sense of nostalgia for old certainties and a sense of stability in the lives of ordinary people.

With this degeneration of social norms is shown a sort of moral breakdown too. Akutagawa refers to how 'it became customary to abandon unclaimed corpses in the upper story of the gate' - the word 'abandon' indicating that there is consideration for what was once human life. This is further reinforced with the simile 'discarded upstairs like a dog': human and animal life are shown as indistinguishable - and both consigned as objects to be placed in a dump. The protagonists in the story find themselves stealing from dead bodies or smashing ancient Buddhist statues to use as firewood. References to the 'presence of crows' sets a kind of comparative analogy between scavenging animals and the human characters, who spend their time in the story stealing from corpses, or each other - like parasites.

Interestingly, the characters are not without understanding of what they are doing, but even the way in which their actions are 'justified' only reinforces the moral ambiguity of the story. For example, being found stealing hair from corpses by the servant, the woman says 'I know, I know, it may be wrong... [but] she used to cut snakes into four inch pieces and dry them and sell them as fish.' She initially admits guilt: 'I know, I know', yet defends her actions with the statement, 'I think the woman would understand what I am doing to her' in the name of survival, as well as saying that the person she steals from was dishonest in life, and therefore her act is sort of morally justified. The same behaviour is reflected in the servant. Whilst he is initially depicted with a kind of superior moral code: 'he would have probably chosen starvation [over thievery] without the least regret' yet in an action 'banished from his consciousness' he steals the woman's robe - once again in the name of survival, sarcastically declaring to her 'you won't blame me then for stealing your clothes'.

The interaction between the two characters proves that this short story isn't simply about the physical decay of a city. Of course, 'crumbling' structures and 'cracks' pervade the environment, yet Akutagawa's choice of the Rashomon reflects his deep concern with the

loss of Japanese tradition - gates and shrines being its tangible representation. The loss of tradition also has an effect on the morals of Japanese society, which is brought to its knees as extreme misery forces characters to behave more and more like animals. The story therefore reads almost as a metaphor, an allegorical narrative to warn Akutagawa's rapidly modernising, 1920s Japan that the loss of tradition can only be accompanied by a more troubling breakdown in social and moral order. In this way Rashomon the story presents a theme that runs through a lot of later Japanese literature - and indeed the 20th Century more generally: it becomes a story about the loss of identity.

Examiner comment and marks:

This is a strong assignment. The Reflective Statement picks out a range of interesting and important features of context - making occasional reference to the way they are relevant to the stories. The candidate then focuses on a meaningful, pertinent topic, and develops it in a coherent manner by talking about decay in a variety of ways. The argument presented at the end - that the most important or significant aspect of the notion of decay has to do with the loss of traditional and identity, reflects a fair degree of independent thinking. There is good reference to literary craft - certainly in terms of word choice, although not perhaps as sufficiently broad a frame of reference as one might like to see. The presentation is good, although elements of repetition and a lack of clarity with the argument in places limits the mark to a 4. Language is for the most part clear and quite articulate, although there are problematic moments. A '5' is nevertheless justified there.

Marks awarded:

- A: Fulfilling the requirements of the Reflective Statement: 3/3
- B: Knowledge and Understanding - 6/6
- C: Appreciation of the writer's choices: 4/6
- D: Organization and Development: 4/5
- E: Language: 5/5

Total Mark: 22/25

