

COLT 264 Midterm 2

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Problem Why does Sei Shōnagon argue that a priest ought to be good looking?

The central argument of Sei Shōnagon is that "Should we look away, we may forget to listen." Specifically, for such spiritual discourse, if the priest, the orator, cannot captivate the listeners' undivided attention, they would be predisposed to either daydream or observe their surroundings, inciting lustful thoughts that induce suffering. For instance, on page 54, "two of them sneak peeks at the women's carriages outside, and it is effortless to envision what they are exchanging with one another." (54) If individuals become distracted during a religious ceremony, they will soon disregard the "less engaging" priest with sagacious words. Consequently, Sei Shōnagon posits that an attractive priest garners more of people's attention than an unappealing one.

Problem What is the only "man-made" disaster that Kamo no Chōmei describes in the first half of An Account of a Ten-Foot-Square Hut? Name two ways that this event affected the city of Heian and its inhabitants.

The man-made disaster refers to the relocation of the Capital. In the Sixth Month of 1180, the capital was shifted from Kyoto to Fushiki. (625) For the Japanese populace, Heian-Kyo held substantial importance, distinct from all other cities. Established over four centuries prior, Kyoto symbolized *stability* and *tranquility*. The transfer of the capital incited apprehension among the people. The dwellings in Kyoto were demolished and left unrestored. (626) Kyoto inhabitants complained about losing their land. (626) More crucially, the capital lost its *unique* status; as the Mappo era approached, when the capital of stability and peace needed to remain steadfast, it was relocated, akin to a lighthouse in the darkness dimming its radiance. Although the court reverted to the original capital by winter, the turmoil mirrored the instability of the world during the Mappo epoch.

Problem At the end of An Account of a Ten-Foot-Square Hut, Kamo no Chōmei acknowledges that he has grown quite fond of his little hut and the life he enjoys there. In what way would this attachment present a problem for him?

Kamo no Chōmei acknowledges his attachment to his hut and his solitary way of life. This poses a problem for him as it contradicts the essence of the Buddha's teachings: the idea of impermanence, and advocate non-attachment and non-clinging to anything. Chōmei is aware that his fondness for his grass hut and his lifestyle

goes against these principles, as he writes, "The essence of the Buddha's teachings is that we should cling to nothing. Loving my grass hut is wrong. Attachment to my quiet, solitary way of life, too, must interfere with my enlightenment." (634) Despite the fact that Chōmei has adopted a simple life in seclusion to cultivate his mind and practice the Way of the Buddha, his attachment to his current lifestyle conflicts with impermanence and hence presents a challenge to his spiritual progress towards enlightenment.

Problem Identify at least 2 ways that the bandit Tajōmaru, in the film *Rashōmon*, narrates his version of events to the magistrates in such a way as to make himself look good.

Tajōmaru emphasizes his cunning and skill, and boasted about the "honorable duel". Tajōmaru highlights how he managed to deceive the samurai by luring him away to valuable swords, capturing him without resorting to lethal force. Furthermore, in his account he also describes the scene where he subdued the resistant woman. The above evidence shows that Tajōmaru is a adept, shrewd outlaw. In his subsequent description of the duel, Tajōmaru emphasizes the ferocity of the duel, as the two "crossed swords 23 times", surpassing his prior record. Depicting the duel as a fair and honorable battle for the woman, Tajōmaru describes himself as a man of honor and of skill.

Problem In the film *Rashōmon*, why does the woodcutter look distraught in the final moments of the husband's version of events, as presented by the medium? (This scene takes place around the 1:01:00 mark of the film.) In what way does the scene undermine the validity of the woodcutter's final version of the incident?

At the conclusion of his testimony, the samurai mentions someone taking his dagger. The woodcutter's distraught reaction to the testimony indicates that the woodcutter might indeed know more than what he initially admits. As the woodcutter merely claims to have discovered the body at the beginning and later confesses that he observed the entire incident, his reaction instills doubt regarding his honesty and motivations. If he conceals the theft of the dagger, it raises the likelihood that other aspects of his testimony are also partly fabricated. Consequently, although the woodcutter recounts the entire event from a third-person omniscient perspective, his testimony might still be motivated by personal biases and may not be fully accurate. This also connects to the movie's central theme of fallible human perception and elusive truth.

Problem When considered as a whole, do you find Kamo no Chōmei, author of *An Account of a Ten-Foot-Square Hut*, to be humble or arrogant? Or a mixture of both? Discuss.

An Account of a Ten-Foot-Square Hut describes the solitary life of Kamo no Chōmei during his times. Through the presentation of a modest, peaceful lifestyle in his hut, Kamo no Chōmei demonstrated his humble nature, but he also reveals a sense of arrogance through comparing himself to the nature and contrasting with "the world". This essay aims to explore Chōmei's dynamic character through analysis of behaviors that imply his mixed attitude.

The humble aspects of Chōmei's personality are evident in his choice to live in a small simple hut. Chōmei willingly gives up his material possessions and social status to live in the hut in a minimalist lifestyle for a more spiritually fulfilling life. As a result, he enjoys the simplest pleasure in life. He says: "...Sometimes we go to the paddies at the foot of the mountain, collect fallen ears of rice, and tie them into sheaves." (632) Here, Chōmei implies his humility as disregarding the humane desires and enjoying the simplest pleasures of life. Additionally, He also explains his self-reliance and his humble nature through self-sufficiency. Living a solitary lifestyle, he puts everything only to himself. He believes that depending on oneself promotes good health and content, as he writes: "...To trouble others is bad karma. Why should I borrow the strength of another?" (634) Knowing that he elected to distance himself from the world, Chōmei could no longer rely on others. The depiction of self-containment and self-sufficiency enhances his humble quality.

Nevertheless, the aforementioned portrayals of Chōmei are rather implicit compared to the evidence of his arrogance. In the excerpt, Chōmei overtly criticizes the people in the capital for their pursuit of materialistic good and social status, using contrast to imply that he has found a more superior way of life through seclusion. He claims, "When I happen to venture into the capital, I feel ashamed of my beggarly appearance, but when I come back and stay here, I pity those others who rush about in the worldly dust." (634) Contrasting himself with the "worldly people" who are following their desires, Chōmei differentiates himself and highlights his speciality compared to the commons, a clear example of arrogance. Additionally, Chōmei also suggests that he understands the virtues of a simple life better than others, as he applies simile to compare himself to the crab and the osprey, the creatures of the nature: "I am like them. Knowing myself and knowing the world, I have no ambitions, I do not strive. I simply seek tranquility and enjoy the absence of care." The quote suggests that Chōmei claims to have found the path to the world through the solitary life, implying that his life in seclusion has gained him a better understanding of life compared to the ones who are still "struggling in the common world." The examples of "proving speciality" of himself explicitly demonstrates Chōmei's innate arrogance and his contempt towards "the world". Through contrasting language, Chōmei also reveals his opinion towards the world and his belief in correctness of his life in seclusion.

As Chōmei possesses humble qualities while also demonstrating arrogant behavior, it would be difficult for us to classify him as a strictly humble or arrogant person. Nevertheless, through describing his unique experiences during his life in solitude, the text constructs his character as a mixture of both.

Problem Explain the artistic chain that culminated in the 1951 film *Rashōmon*, covering 1) the Heian-era Konjaku “source” text, 2) the early twentieth-century Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s short story version, and 3) Kurosawa Akira’s film. How do these materials overlap and, more importantly, how do they differ?

The 1951 film *Rashomon* (film) by Akira Kurosawa is the climax of the culmination of the Heian-era Konjaku source text (source) and Akutagawa Ryūnosuke’s short story (story). Following a similar plot to the source and similar narrative structure to the story, Kurosawa modifies the presentation of the details and thematic focus, appealing to the post-WWII Japanese audience while also utilizing the film medium in storytelling. This comparative essay aims to explore the frameworks of the three mediums and analyze the causes of the differences in storytelling.

The film follows a similar outline in terms of plot to the source while adapting the storytelling technique from the story. The film’s plot proceeds as a continuation of the bandit luring the samurai and tying him up for the woman. Despite referencing the source, the film instead emphasizes on the story *after* the bandit raped the woman, contrary to the source, which highlights the man’s foolish behavior that *caused* the subsequent consequences. Similar to the story, the film tells its story through personal-biased testimonies forming conflicting facts, iterating the theme of elusive truth from the story. In addition to the testimonies, the film adds the woodcutter’s testimony as he reiterates the story to the commoner from a *bystander’s* perspective - although details (question 5) show that even his “objective” version may not depict the truth. Although the man also mentions in the story that “someone gently pulled the dagger from my chest” (19), highlighting the fact that the woodcutter took the dagger undermines the validity of his story and enhances on the story’s central topic in unreliable human perception.

Additionally, the film conveys a slightly altered thematic focus than the source and the story. Expanding on the aforementioned theme of elusive truth, the film broadens it by probing the potential for redemption and kindness. In the final moments of the film, the woodcutter decides to adopt the abandoned baby despite his initial reluctance and skepticism. This act of kindness, despite the woodcutter’s previous shortcomings, showcases the potential for good even amid the darkness in human nature, suggesting that compassion and empathy can prevail over selfishness and deceit. Delving deeper to the complexity of human motivations, Kurosawa offers a more thought-provoking theme that appeals to the post-WWII Japanese audience in their darkest ages.

The additional movie-specific visual and audio components enhances storytelling. Taking advantage of the medium’s possibilities, Kurosawa employs background sound effects like drums in the duel between bandit and samurai. In Tajōmaru’s testimony, fast-paced drums and accompanying wind instruments help generating the suspense in the “epic duel”. Comparing to the absence of such drums in the woodcutter’s depiction of the “truth” - a rather cowardly fight, the drastic contrast in intensity of the duel further accentuates the difference between characters’ testimonies, again hinting on the central theme of unreliable human perception.

Drawing from the text and the story, Kurosawa adapts the plot and narrative structure while incorporating new thematic layers and employing the unique capabilities of the film medium. The overlapping elements pay homage to the original works, while the differences showcase Kurosawa’s ability to craft a compelling, thought-provoking film that resonates with post-WWII Japanese audiences.