Rashomon and Seventeen Other Stories Study Guide

Rashomon and Seventeen Other Stories by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa

BOOKRAGS

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Rashomon, In a Bamboo Grove, and The Nose Summary

Rashomon:

A recently dismissed servant (unnamed) is watching the rain come down under the Rashomon, a large imperial gate. This is a time, in the late Heian period of Japanese history, that the warlords have wrested control from the monarchs, and the country has fallen into disrepair and chaos. A sign of this is the Rashomon itself which appears dilapidated, its lacquer chipped and fading.

The servant, having no master and thus no job or income, wonders how he will get on in life. He dares to think of thievery as a way to survive, but is frightened at the prospect of being an outlaw. Desperate for a place to sleep for the night, he notices a staircase going to the second story of the Rashomon, which he climbs stealthily.

There he finds stacks and stacks of bodies, the victims of the various warlord wars and other consequences of the times, and an old woman plucking hairs from a corpse. The servant considers this desecration of the dead an evil act, and so he draws his sword and confronts the woman. The panicked old woman attempts to flee, but the servant easily wrestles her to the ground, demanding to know what she is doing. Her answer is simple: she is gathering hair to make wigs. As to the dead woman she is pulling hairs from, the old woman offers the justification that the woman had sinned while alive, selling snake meat as if it was fish, and so the dead woman deserves such an injustice. Suddenly inspired by the old woman's pragmatic approach, the servant states that she will completely understand, then, if the servant were to steal her robe in order to himself survive. So he wrests her robe away from her, becoming a thief, then running back downstairs and into the night. The woman is left naked and wondering what to do amid the dead bodies.

In a Bamboo Grove:

This story is written as a series of eyewitness testimonies to a murder. The first testimony is the woodcutter's. The woodcutter discovered the body of a man in a bamboo grove a few hundred yards from any road. There was a stab wound, seemingly dry and old, but the woodcutter did not find any weapon.

Next the reader hears from a priest, who saw the dead man before the murder on horseback along with a pretty woman. The man looked like a warrior, and he had a handsome lacquered bow and a quiver of hawk-feather arrows.

The next testimony is from a policeman who has captured a renowned thief named Tajomaru. Tajomaru was caught with a horse that was not his and a handsome bow and arrows, which the policeman links to the murder.

Next is an old woman, who was the mother-in-law to the dead man, whom she identifies as Kanazawa no Takehiro. She knows that Kanazawa had been traveling on the nearby road with her daughter and his wife, Masago. The old woman is sick with grief and hopes Tajomaru faces the stiffest punishment. Masago's whereabouts are unknown.

The thief and murderer, Tajomaru, now provides his confession. He gets a peek and Masago and decides he wants to "take her," that is, rape her. He lures both Kanazawa and Masago well off the main road with the promise of looting an ancient burial mound full of treasures and valuable relics. Once deep in the woods, Masago waits with the horses while Tajomaru and Kanazawa go deeper into the grove where the horses cannot walk. Tajomaru then attacks Kanazawa by surprise, binding him and stuffing leaves in his mouth so he cannot talk.

Tajomaru then lures Masago into the grove. When she sees Kanazawa bound she attacks Tajomaru with a hidden dagger, but Tajomaru disarms her and then rapes her in front of her helpless husband. Tajomaru is about to escape, but Masago begs him to kill her husband, as it is a fate worse than death for two living men to "see her shame."

Being an honorable murderer, Tajomaru unties Kanazawa and offers to duel him. They sword fight, and Tajomaru kills him on the 23rd stroke, bragging that no man had ever lasted even 20 strokes with him, so he had at least some respect for Kanazawa. However, after the fight, he discovers that Masago has run away. He himself runs away with the man's bow and arrows and horse.

Next is the confession of a "Woman in the Kiyomizu Temple," who is Masago. After she is raped, she sees in her husband's eyes a look of contempt and hatred for her. She decides that the only way to atone for her shame is to kill her husband (who should not live with such knowledge), and then kill herself. She believes that, with his mouth full of leaves, Kanazawa says "Do it" in regards to her plan, and so she plunges her dagger into Kanazawa. She faints and awakens to find Kanazawa dead. To add shame to shame, obviously she did not summon up the courage to kill herself afterwards, instead fleeing to a Buddhist temple. The confession ends with her sobbing in despair.

The final most unusual testimony is that of the dead man himself, as "told through a medium." The reader might reasonably surmise that this last testimony is the "real truth." After Masago's rape, Tajomaru invites Masago to come with him, telling her it will never be the same with her husband after the rape. Kanazawa, not able to speak, is trying to tell Masago with his eyes that he still loves her and not to listen to the lies of Tajomaru. Instead, Masago agrees to Tajomaru's plan, saying "take me anywhere you like." She follows this up with the command for Tajomaru to kill her husband Kanazawa.

Both men are shocked at Masago's wish, and both think she is despicable. Tajomaru asks Kanazawa to answer with a simple nod of the head whether Tajomaru should kill

Masago. Before he can answer, Masago flees. Tajomaru unbinds Kanazawa and flees as well. Kanazawa, devastated by his wife's rape and her wish to have him killed, ultimately kills himself with his wife's dagger.

The Nose:

Naigu Zenchi is a middle-aged Buddhist priest. His chief characteristic is his huge nose that hangs down six inches to a place below his lips. His nose has been a constant source of torment and embarrassment for Naigu.

One day a disciple arrives with a nose-shortening treatment from a famous doctor. Naigu tries to feign disinterest, but he is eager to try and some days after the two try the treatment. It involves boiling the nose in water, stamping on the nose end repeatedly with a foot, plucking out the resultant fat deposits from the pores with a tweezer, and then re-boiling the nose. Naigu feels no sensation, other than itchiness, from the harm inflicted on his nose.

Naigu's nose indeed does get shorter, and when he wakes the next morning it is no longer than a large average nose. He rejoices.

However, soon he detects changes in behavior towards him from both the lay and priestly communities. People are laughing at him openly now, instead of behind his back, with even loyal disciples breaking out in giggles when he is intoning scripture. The reader is told that it is human nature to wish ill upon a person who has cured or otherwise overcome a misfortune like Naigu's huge nose.

His nose begins to redden and swell, and Naigu figures the treatment may have caused an infection. However, when he awakens, he discovers his nose has grown back to its original length. He is overjoyed, figuring now no one will make fun of him.

Rashomon, In a Bamboo Grove, and The Nose Analysis

These stories, which the editor/translator has listed under the heading "A World in Decay," highlight (or, depending on one's view, lowlight) frailties, flaws, and evil aspects of human nature. In "Rashomon," the unnamed servant's desperation and descent into a life of crime are mirrored by the ruinous Rashomon. Once a source of civic pride and symbol of high culture, Rashomon is now a ruin, complete with a macabre stack of dead bodies on its second floor. Steady rain also parallels the servant's gloom and despair, a literary device called the Pathetic Fallacy. The servant's decision to steal the old woman's robe based upon the woman's own decision to rob a corpse of hair is a disturbing act of moral relativism, selfishness, and desperation, a damning indictment of human nature. The relative anticlimax of the story, in which the servant is never heard from again and the old naked woman simply looks down the stairs amid the dead bodies, bolsters the sense of hopelessness and lack of purpose contained in the story and setting.

"In a Bamboo Grove" offers a striking and novel use of the unreliable narrator, as various testimonies concerning a murder are revealed to have left out information or otherwise be slanted or mendacious in order to protect the interests of the testimony giver and put them in the best possible light. Tajomaru claims he killed Kanazawa after a heroic and honorable swordfight, a story which allows Tajomaru to brag about himself and cast himself as a great warrior-thief. In reality, Tajomaru simply ran, and the man killed himself. Even the seemingly neutral woodcutter who discovered the body is not free of mendacity and the sort of moral taint the pervades the piece, as we realize with the paragraph that the woodcutter had actually stolen the murder weapon, though he claimed he found no weapon near the body. Beyond the interest of the narrative device, "In a Bamboo Grove" offers a set of disturbing moral quandaries, in the name of revealing the darker side of human nature. Is Masago "morally wrong" for wishing her husband dead, or is her wish the only logical recourse for a recently raped woman overwhelmed with shame? Is there misplaced contempt and hatred for Masago in Kanazawa's eyes? How does the reader evaluate Tajomaru, a man capable of raping women but who can find Masago's wish to kill her husband morally repugnant? These impossible questions challenge the reader, who must inevitably make his or her own moral judgements of these people.

"The Nose," though less severe and certainly provided in a more mirthful, fairy-tale mode than the preceding stories, nevertheless continues the theme of the more unfortunate aspects of human nature. Naigu is crushed by and obsessed with his physical deformity, just when such a man should eschew any regard for physical attributes, as a priestly man devoted to spiritual matters. His vanity leads to low self-esteem which colors his entire day-to-day life. Finally he finds a remedy, and here again human nature is not given much credit. The community wishes to cut Naigu down, disdainful of someone who has overcome misfortune. Naigu's wish for his large nose to return and this wish's fulfillment is a sort of sad and ironic testament to the lengths people will go to in pursuit of physical beauty.

Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale, and The Spider Thread

Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale, and The Spider Thread Summary

Dragon: The Old Potter's Tail:

E'in is a Buddhist monk who, like Naigu Zenchi of "The Nose," has a huge nose that he believes everyone chides him for. As retribution against the townspeople of Nara for making fun of him, he posts a sign on nearby Sarusawa Pond, stating that a dragon will ascend from the pond on the third day of the third month.

Word of the dragon begins to circulate, and the innocent prank has worked much too well. A child claims to have been visited by the dragon in her sleep to confirm he will ascend from the pond, stirring debate. People begin to claim they have seen parts of the dragon in the water. E'in is loving every minute of it, that is until his own aunt shows up from a distant province to see the dragon. E'in tries to get his aunt to leave, but his aunt proclaims that if she gets a glimpse of the Dragon King, she can die happy.

By now, E'in was in too deep to confess his prank, and he not only cares for his aunt but agrees to escort her to the Pond on the specified day and watch for the dragon. On the day, scores of people from lands near and far huddle around the pond to watch the ascension of the dragon.

With all the commotion, and with his aunt by his side, E'in both feels sick at the prank, and actually finds himself hoping and believing that a dragon will rise from the pond. Meanwhile, nearly an entire day passes by, and the pond is as calm as ever.

Suddenly, a long thin cloud forms over the pond, and then thunder and lightning erupt. Amid a great swirl of wind and rain and lightning, E'in catches sight of a huge 100-foot-long dragon emerging from the pond and into the skies. It is over almost as soon as it began.

E'in hardly believes what he saw, but his aunt and everyone else saw the dragon too. The narrator asks the reader whether E'in's prank worked like a charm or failed miserably. To ask E'in himself this question would be futile, as E'in to this day has no idea what happened.

The Spider Thread:

Lord Buddha Shakyamuni (the deified progenitor of Buddhism) is strolling in the garden of Paradise. From his vantage point, he looks down into Hell. He spies a man named Kandata, who is in Hell for killing and robbing. However, Kandata had performed one

act of goodness, in refraining from stamping a spider to death when he had the chance. For this kindness, Lord Buddha decides to give Kandata one chance to redeem himself, and so a heavenly spider weaves a special thread like a rope, all the way from Paradise to Kandata in hell.

Kandata is in eternal torment, perpetually drowning in the Pond of Blood. He discovers the spider thread hanging above him and grabs a hold. Pulling himself higher and higher, he realizes he is climbing away from Hell, and he gets very excited at this possible chance to escape. He climbs for hours and is tiring, but he is happy to continue.

At this point, he notices that literally hundreds of other sinners are below him climbing the spider thread as well. Fearing the thread will break, he yells at them that the thread is his and his alone. At this point the thread breaks and he plummets back into Hell.

In Paradise, Lord Buddha watches the scene and shakes his head with sorrow. Kandata failed a test of compassion when he refused to let other sinners on the thread, and that is why the thread broke.

Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale, and The Spider Thread Analysis

"Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale" has a magical, positive tone that is clearly a departure from "Rashomon" or "In a Bamboo Grove," though it is also based on human flaws and foibles. Strikingly similar in premise to "The Nose," "Dragon" also features a holy man with a ridiculously large nose. Taking a more active role than Naigu, E'in decides to get back at his detractors by predicting a miracle he knows is false. In this way, E'in is depicted as too obsessed by the merely physical and too petty, failing in his holy duties by in fact betraying his faith, proclaiming a false miracle.

The story classically escalates from there, as E'in gets more than he proverbially bargained for, and the dragon myth becomes a huge event. The ending, with the actual appearance of a dragon, is a pleasant "deus ex machina" in a most literal form, as a god appears (here, a Dragon God) at the conclusion to resolve the story.

"The Spider Thread" is a sort of classic pedagogical fable, in the mode of Aesop or Grimm. The story presents a clear division of good and evil, and thus is intended for the reader to learn a moral lesson. Kandata is punished for his sin of a lack of compassion by not allowing other sinners the escape from Hell afforded to him. "The Spider Thread" features a Buddhist conception of Heaven and Hell and Lord Buddha himself; Kandata was given a chance to escape from Hell based upon one good deed in life among a host of evil deeds. However, the good deed only provides Kandata a test, which he fails, revealing perhaps the true nature of his soul.

Hell Screen

Hell Screen Summary

The narrator is a servant for the Lord of Harikawa. He is known far and wide as a great man. A great many rumors and tall tales surround him, including that he survived a battle with goblins without a single scratch, and that he exorcised a ghost that had been haunting a mansion. The most fantastic and frightening tale, however, is the tale of the Hell Screen.

The painter who creates the Hell Screen is a painter named Yoshihide. He is a cruel and arrogant man, but widely considered (especially by himself) to be the greatest painter in the land. In some ways he moves and looks like a monkey, and so behind his back people call him "Monkeyhide."

Yoshihide has a very fair and beautiful daughter, whom he is very protective of. She figures into an event concerning a local monkey brought to the Lord's mansion. The monkey becomes a permanent resident of the mansion, and is given the name of Yoshihide. One day, Yoshihide is caught stealing a tangerine from the Lord, and the Lord chases the monkey in a rage. The monkey is saved by Yoshihide's daughter, who begs the Lord to spare the poor monkey. After this incident, the monkey and Yoshihide's daughter grow close, and soon the monkey is treated with kindness in the mansion.

Yoshihide the man, meanwhile, is treated with contempt and derision. He is miserly, nasty, immodest, and demanding. He is also iconoclastic, using faces of harlots to depict the faces of goddesses in his paintings, for example. However, no one can deny the power of his paintings, which fill one with dread and awe.

Another of Yoshihide's traits is that he is over-protective of his daughter. She is promoted to a junior lady-in-waiting, a great honor, but Yoshihide asks the Lord to demote her in exchange for a painting he makes for him. There are rumors that the Lord is courting the daughter, but the narrator dismisses these rumors as untrue. The Lord is insulted and rejects Yoshihide's request. This causes a rift between the men, and their relationship is strained for months.

However, suddenly, one day, the Lord asks Yoshihide to paint Hell as a folding screen, all eight levels of Buddhist Hell. Yoshihide begins at once. The task consumes him, and he soon loses all contact with his daughter. He makes a great firestorm for one panel which frightens all with its power.

It is revealed that Yoshihide must actually see something, or its equivalent, in order to paint it. He is able to paint the fires of Hell because he once saw a city fire. Yoshihide is about 80% done when he cannot continue the painting. Specifically, one portion of his painting calls for a burning carriage and a young lady burning alive in the carriage, screaming in agony, and he has never seen such a thing. In desperation, Yoshihide

asks Lord Harikawa to set a carriage on fire for him; the Lord, frothing at the mouth and clearly touched with some sort of madness, does Yoshihide one better; he promises that a carriage will burn with a young lady inside of it.

One night, the stage is set for the carriage fire, with the Lord, the narrator and servants, some samurai, and Yoshihide in attendance. The Lord reveals that the lady to be burned is none other than Yoshihide's daughter. Yoshihide, the mad Lord, and the disgusted servants watch as the carriage burns with the daughter, bound and writhing in agony, inside of it. It is said that Yoshihide watches with a sort of religious reverence.

The narrator believes the Lord chose Yoshihide's daughter as a sort of lesson to teach Yoshihide, in revenge for wanting to inflict misery for the sake of art. However, there is also the rumor that the daughter rejected the Lord's advances. As for Yoshihide, he completes the painting and it is a frightening masterpiece. He hangs himself that very night, perhaps to join his daughter in Hell.

Hell Screen Analysis

As with "The Spider Thread" or "The Nose," Akutagawa incorporates fairy-tale conventions and a fable-like moral lesson. As such, "Hell Screen" serves as a cautionary tale against the artist sacrificing too much in the name of his art. Here, the "sacrifice" is made literal to a disturbing degree; Yoshihide must watch his own daughter burn alive in order to complete a scene of the same in his great masterpiece. Yoshihide is not the only one who is mad in this tale, however; the Lord Harikawa, who is characterized as being drained of color, panting like a beast, and frothing at the mouth, is as mad or evil as his painter Yoshihide, both for commissioning the painting of Hell and for ordering such a cruel "lesson" to be carried out. As with E'in in "Dragon," the Lord seeks revenge and gets more than he bargained for.

The other component of this tale is a warning against arrogance. Yoshihide, who uses murderers and prostitutes as figures in the depiction of gods, scoffs at the idea that such disrespect might insult the gods. Similarly, he feels he will remain untouched by painting a super-realistic depiction of Hell. Like Icarus and his melting wax wings in Greek mythology, or the Tower of Babel in the Judeo-Christian tradition, Yoshihide overreaches and forgets the lowly place he inhabits in the greater scheme of the universe. As the Hell painting consumes Yoshihide, so is he ultimately consumed by actual Buddhist Hell.

Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum, O-Gin, and Loyalty

Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum, O-Gin, and Loyalty Summary

Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum:

In the form of a memorandum written by the titular doctor, this is the story of a woman named Shino. The reader is given her background. She marries a man named Yosaku and has a child by him named Sato. Yosaku becomes ill and dies, and during this period Shino converts to Christianity (corrupted as "Kirishitan" by the doctor, as are other Christian words). She does not remarry but instead makes a living by weaving. She attends church and spends time with a priest. The villagers spread rumors that she is having an affair with him, and she becomes despised. Village elders discuss banning her from the village due to her religious beliefs, as Christianity is persecuted at this time in Japan.

Given Shino's reputation, Dr. Ryosai refuses to provide medical treatment to her very sick daughter Sato. Shino begs and begs, but the doctor will only perform a diagnosis if Shino renounces her faith. This back and forth goes on for several days. In the end, a sobbing Shino says that she will renounce her faith to save her daughter, and the doctor makes her prove it by having Shino stomp and break a cross.

The Doctor goes to Sato and makes his diagnosis. She is very sick and he believes she is suffering from typhoid fever. The condition is too far advanced, and Dr. Ryosai says Sato will die by morning. Shino is devastated; not only will she lose her daughter, but she has lost Jesus Christ and believes she will spend eternity in Hell. Later the doctor learns that Sato dies, a fact recorded by several village officials, and that Shino has gone mad with grief.

The Doctor is summoned on another call and goes past Shino's house. Outside is a mob of angry villagers. Inside the home is Shino, surrounded by the priest and other members of the Christian Church, and most surprising is the presence of Sato, who appears to be alive and well. Accounts from villagers indicate that Sato has been "prayed" back to life by the priest and his men. Dr. Ryosai has never heard of someone coming back to life from typhoid fever. Finishing up his memorandum, Dr. Ryosai says the event is another example of the "heterodox practices of the Kirishitan sect," and that a thunderstorm parallel to the incident undoubtedly was a sign of Lord Buddha's abhorrence of the priest.

O-Gin: Like "Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum," "O-Gin" takes place, the reader is told, in a time when Christianity is persecuted and believers are sentenced to burn at the stake. In a village called Yamazato there lives a child named O-Gin, whose parents are

Buddhist. The parents both die before they are able to establish a life in the village, and so O-Gin is put into the custody of a long-time local farmer, Jo-an-Magoshichi, a fervent Christian who baptizes O-Gin. His wife is Joanna-O-Sumi, and the three of them have a fine time tending the farm. O-Gin is given a christianized name, Mariya-O-Gin, after Saint Maria, just as Magoshichi used Saint Joan of Arc to christianize his name.

One Christmas eve, however, when crosses and other obvious Christian symbols are hung, policemen raid the home and arrest the family for being Christian. The local magistrate orders the three to be put to death, unless they renounce their Christianity. They are tied to stakes and about to be burned in front of a large crowd, when O-Gin speaks up and says she has abandoned Christ. Her adoptive parents are devastated, but O-Gin tells them that it would not be fair for O-Gin to go to Heaven while her real (Buddhist) parents are destined to spend eternity in Hell.

This causes Joanna-O-Sumi to cry, and Jo-an-Magoshichi berates her for faltering in her faith as well. Joanna-O-Sumi states, Heaven or Hell, she only wants to be with him, her loving husband. O-Gin begs them to renounce as well, so they can all be together in Hell. Jo-an-Magoshichi relents, renounces his faith, and all three are released. The crowd seems disappointed in the lack of any execution, and the narrator wryly suggests that this event is the single most embarrassing story of failure for Christianity in the history of Japan.

Loyalty:

A man named Shuri is the head of the House of Itakura, a minor noble house in the feudal system of Japan at the time. He is young, and he is going mad. Every sensation seems magnified to the young lord, and he sometimes lashes out in mad, violent outbursts.

The House Elder, Maejima Rin'emon, is disturbed at this behavior, especially since, if Shuri were to offend greater lords while at Edo Castle, or otherwise demonstrate his madness, the greater lords would have every right to confiscate Shuri's holdings and end the House of Itakara. Rin'emon makes a decision to hold the House name and reputation in higher esteem and importance than the current Head of the House, Shuri, and he hatches a plan to groom an Itakura relative to take the place of Shuri.

Shuri learns of this plot, and he releases an order demanding that Rin'emon be strangled to death for his insubordination. Rin'emon, not one to take such a thing lying down, moves from the House along with his family and own retinue, retiring as House Elder. The second-in-line, Tanaka Usaemon, becomes House Elder. Usaemon raised Shuri from youth, and he has a familial attachment to the young man.

Shuri attends a Castle event, and afterwards Usaemon is suddenly summoned to the castle of Sado-no-kami, also an Itakara with the title of Junior Councilor. Sado-no-kami informs Usaemon that Shuri has committed an offense. On the topic of Rin'emon, Shuri tells Sado-no-kami that he can keep his opinions to himself, and he accuses Sado-no-kami of favoritism towards Rin'emon. These are both horrible offenses, only forgiven

because Sado-no-kami and Shuri are of the same House. Should Shuri act out again like that to someone of another House, he would surely lose the House and title. Sado-no-kami makes Usaemon promise that he will not let Shuri out of the house to ruin his House's name and reputation. Usaemon agrees, but is conflicted by his personal attachment to Shuri, which clouds his judgement as to the wisest course of action.

Shuri learns of Sado-no-kami's directive, and begs Usaemon, in tears, to be let out once more to see the Castle before he relinquishes his title as Head of House due to his mental illness. Usaemon agrees.

Shuri goes to the Castle of the Shogun during the next event and murders a man named Munenori in a bathroom with a short sword. Munenori is surprised and cannot fight back. Shuri flees, and someone stumbles upon Shuri in a corner of a room, pulling his hair out to atone, Shuri says, for murder. They arrest him. Munenori dies of his wounds some days later.

Shuri is sentenced to commit seppuku, ritual suicide, but he will not cut his own belly, so an executioner beheads him. Usaemon is sentenced to be strangled to death for letting Shuri out to commit his act. Other members of the Itakura family are put on house arrest.

Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum, O-Gin, and Loyalty Analysis

Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum is a study in contrasts. On one hand, the reader is provided the story in the form of a doctor's "memorandum," an official document to be submitted to select high officials in the government. It is provided, appropriate to such a document, in a dry, matter-of-fact style, the product of a professional objectively reporting on events.

On the other hand, the content of the memorandum deals with a painful, emotional dilemma, followed by nothing short of a miracle. Akutagawa has been very interested in people in great and impossible conflicts, be it the servant in "Rashomon" who must choose between starvation or a criminal life, or Usaemon in "Loyalty" who must choose between a cherished man he raised from boyhood or societal pressures. In "Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum," Shino must choose between her daughter's life or eternity in heaven. She chooses her daughter, and by choosing her daughter, she chooses compassion. Compassion is a virtue Akutagawa seems to esteem highly, most explicitly in "Spider Thread" in which Kandata is given a chance to escape Hell based upon his compassion for a little spider. Even though Shino has renounced her religion, her compassion is rewarded by the Christ-like resurrection of her daughter.

"O-Gin" similarly relates a renunciation of faith, and again for all the best reasons. O-gin does not think it right that she gets to enjoy heaven while her Buddhist real parents, ignorant of the Christian faith, must endure eternity in Hell. Underlying both these stories is a criticism of organized religion, along the well-worn observation that, if all the

world's religions were correct, everyone would burn in Hell. By breaking the shackles of the dubious regulations and draconian beliefs of Christianity, many of which have nothing to do with virtue or kindness and everything to do with tradition and power, O-Gin is rewarded with the survival of her family by displaying solicitude and compassion for her dead parents.

"Loyalty" features shackles of a different sort, the rigid caste system of feudal Japan. Within the system, the slightest offense could result in disaster and misfortune of the highest degree. Perhaps this, in part, is the cause for some of the suffocation and paranoia of Shuri. Rin'emon has the courage to "buck" the system and do the honorable and wisest thing by abandoning his madman master. Usaemon is the unfortunate victim of another Akutagawa dilemma when he cannot force himself to abandon Shuri. Over and again in these stories, those who behave well are rewarded and those who behave poorly are punished.

The Story of a Head That Fell Off, and Green Onions

The Story of a Head That Fell Off, and Green Onions Summary

The Story of a Head That Fell Off:

A Chinese warrior named Xiao-er is fighting in a battle when something slams deep into his neck. Knowing he's been cut, he drops his sword and clings to his horse, which gallops well away from the battlefield until the din of battle can no longer be heard.

As the horse is traveling, Xiao-er believes he is dying, and so he endures a multitude of emotions, from hatred of the countries fighting (Japan and China), to wanting his mother and father, to hating himself for letting someone cut him. At this point some low-hanging willow branches knock Xiao-er off his horse, seemingly unconscious.

He awakes in a sort of near-death state. He is in the country where he had been with the horse, but strange shadow forms are floating in the sky. He also sees the sesame seed field behind the house he grew up in, and then a paper lantern dragon, and then a Chinese woman's bound foot, which he wants to caress but cannot.

Xiao-er becomes overcome with loneliness and regret. He swears that if he ever has a second chance at life, he will reform his formerly wicked ways and live a life of virtue.

Cut to a year after the Chinese-Japanese war is over, and two Japanese military men are chatting over cigars and coffee. One, Major Kimura, refers the other to a Chinese newspaper article, which states that former military soldier Xiao-er, a known trouble-maker, got into a bar fight and his head separated from his body, resulting in death. Only the slightest violence made the head separate, and officials guess that Xiao-er had an old war wound that had reopened.

Kimura states that he actually met Xiao-er in the hospital when he was recovering. He seemed in good spirits, and he described his near-death experience and his vow to become a better man. When Kimura is asked why the man became a trouble-maker after such a vow, Kimura responds that it is important to realize that one cannot trust oneself. Xiao-er was thus, in a sense, betrayed by himself, and he dies full of regrets.

Green Onions:

This "story-within-a-story" uses a frame narrative involving a young writer who is hurrying to write a story overnight with a deadline in the morning. The central story involves a Tokyo waitress named O-Kimi. She is sixteen and beautiful, and because of her beauty and friendliness she gets much attention and very good tips, which angers a

rival waitress, O-Matsu, who is not so pretty or friendly. O-Kimi feels she is very taste conscious and sophisticated. Her favorite books are melodramas and sentimental romances, she has a handsome fake lily in her room with a petal missing, and she has a proud bust of Beethoven in her room, only it is not Beethoven but the U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, unbeknownst to O-Kimi. It is clear the author is mocking O-Kimi's so-called sophistication.

One day, O-Kimi falls in love with Tanaka, who in Western culture could be described as a "hippie" or "bohemian," a person more concerned with looks and artistic pretension than reality, one who can "skip out on a loan with the same heroic energy he brings to singing with his Satsuma lute." O-Kimi and Tanaka have a date to watch the circus in a neighboring town. O-Kimi is in an "artistic ecstasy" and imagines the date will be something akin to Sir Lancelot sweeping the young maiden off her feet.

They meet for the date. As they pass through an alley, O-Kimi spies a sign for green onions at a very good sales price. This sign creates a sort of epiphany in O-Kimi, who suddenly realizes the importance of paying each of her bills and becoming financially responsible. She takes two bunches of green onions, then catches up to Tanaka, seemingly a new woman.

The Story of a Head That Fell Off, and Green Onions Analysis

"The Story of a Head That Fell Off" involves the sort of realistic pathos of a seriously-wounded man who believes he is dying, in the larger context of a lesson or moral fable. Very much inside the head of Xiao-er as he cycles through what seem like appropriate emotions for a dying man, the reader is touched by Xiao-er's story and strongly allies with him as he makes a wish to reform his ways if given a second chance.

The abrupt change in setting and character, to the two Japanese men having coffee and cigars, foreshadow Xiao-er's use as a symbol or "teaching opportunity" and the cessation of a living, breathing, character. A newspaper article describes the macabre ease at which Xiao-er's head falls off during a bar skirmish, due to his old war wound. Kimura remarks that the lesson to be learned is that one cannot trust oneself. In a slightly more familiar form, it may be more clear to characterize the opening of this old wound as the past coming back to haunt Xiao-er. He vows to reform but remains a trouble-maker: this broken vow manifests itself as the old war wound, the albatross around Xiao-er's neck, always in danger of being exposed with dire consequences.

The lightly comic "Green Onions" bears a whimsical frame story in which a writer must dash off a quick story before a morning deadline. Is the reader to compare this storywriter to O-Kimi, who by the end has realized the importance of bills and financial responsibility and deadlines? Both storywriter and O-Kimi (with her change in the end) seem to have abandoned their "artistic ecstasy" for a pragmatic financial approach.

As in certain sections of "Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum" or "O-Gin," "Green Onions" is also told in a tongue-in-cheek, sarcastic manner. The reader is told O-Kimi is sophisticated, but the fact that many of her furnishings are fake (lily) or second-hand (the "desk" which the storywriter makes fun of), the fact that her favorite novels are melodramas or romances, and the fact that she presumes her bust is of Beethoven when it actually depicts Woodrow Wilson, are all counter to the notion of "sophisticated."

Horse Legs

Horse Legs Summary

The story focuses on one Oshino Hanzaburo. The storyteller apologizes that such an ordinary man is the protagonist of his tale. He works at the huge Mitsubishi corporation and is about as ordinary as they come. His wife Tsuneko is ordinary as well, and their union is the result of an arrangement.

The monotonous life of Hanzaburo is shattered when he falls dead one day suddenly of a stroke while working at his desk. Hanzaburo finds himself in a strange office, along with two Chinese men with official-looking robes on. They ask him if he is Mr. Henry Barrett, and Hanzaburo says he is not. The men are panicked; apparently they have made a mistake and have killed the wrong man in their function as some sort of death-causers. It has been three days since Hanzaburo has died, and by this time his legs have rotted. Hanzaburo reaches for his legs and they collapse on him like "shriveled balloons."

There are no recently-deceased people with adequate legs for Hanzaburo, but one of the Chinese men has heard of a recently dead horse that might do. He returns with a pair of real horse legs. Hanzaburo begs them not to attach horses' legs to him, but they do. They correct the mistake and restore Hanzaburo to life. He wakes in his coffin just as the funeral is occurring. His wife, associates, and local media declare it a miracle.

Hanzaburo becomes obsessed with hiding his horse legs from everyone, but it is not easy. They smell, are covered with fleas, and are very difficult to walk with. He keeps a diary in which he details incidents where his secret is nearly uncovered, including a time he kicks a rickshaw driver giving him a hard time, sending him across the street with his great horse legs.

This charade is kept up for months, until one day Hanzaburo's legs cannot help but prance and kick. The storyteller guesses this behavior is due to the Yellow Dust coming through the region, a storm which frightens horses.

Hanzaburo barely makes it home from work, and he orders his wife to bind his legs, still desperate to keep his legs a secret. She does so, and eventually sits on top of him and holds him so he sits still. After thirty minutes, however, Hanzaburo's horse instincts overcome him, and with a great whinny he breaks free of his bonds. Tsuneko faints before she sees any horse legs. Hanzaburo gallops out of his house, disappearing into the night.

Six months later, Tsuneko gets a visitor, Hanzaburo, whom she hardly recognizes, perhaps because he has become more horse-like. He reveals his horse legs to her, and she can only scream his name in horror, torn between her love for her husband and her repulsion for his condition. He gallops away, and Tsuneko understands why he left. In

the last paragraph, the reader is given the obituary of Henry Barrett, who dies the same day of Hanzaburo's resurrection.

Horse Legs Analysis

Introductory notes are helpful here, which state that "to see the horse's legs" is an old Japanese expression meaning "to uncover something hidden or not meant to be seen." It is a reference to traditional Japanese plays, in which a horse might be played by two actors whose legs would poke out of the crafted horse's body.

Akutagawa takes this expression and literalizes it to an outrageous and farcical degree. Poor, and painfully ordinary, Hanzaburo is the victim of a divine mix-up, and is stuck with actual horse legs when he is miraculously resurrected after the mistake. Akutagawa takes the story to its logical limit, thinking up all the near-misses and ridiculous scenarios possible for a person trying to cover up his horse legs.

Apart from the innate tragicomic potential of such a premise, "Horse Legs" is a larger condemnation of the conformity of modern Japanese corporate society (Hanzaburo's succumbing to his horse instincts during the storm is neatly dismissed by a mendacious editorial dismissing Hanzaburo as insane and irresponsible), and the story is also reminiscent of "The Story of a Head That Fell Off" insofar that an inward shame or secret has a terrible and macabre outward manifestation. Hanzaburo's return to his wife in order to show her the horror of his condition is a tragic touch, the sort of impossible dilemma the reader has seen from Akutagawa before.

Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years

Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years Summary

Daidoji Shinsuke is born in a ugly, drab part of Tokyo called Honjo. He comes to appreciate his dreary home and takes on a dislike for other, "prettier" parts of town. Through Honjo, in a strange way, he comes to also appreciate natural beauty, even if it is at first only a cloud reflecting in a muddy street pool.

One very formative event in his early life comes when he and his father travel to the much-frequented Hundred-Piling Bank of the Sumida river. There are no fishermen there that day, and Shinsuke discovers why: there is a bloated corpse floating in the river. That image affects Shinsuke deeply.

Shinsuke is never nursed by his mother. He blames his lack of good mother's milk on his relative lack of physical prowess as a lad. He is a frail boy, and someone who is frightened of most everything, and so to overcome or hide this additional secret he takes on a persona of fearlessness with neighborhood boys, daring to jump ditches or do other physically dangerous challenges. His "milk complex" is abated when he learns that Romulus, founder of Rome, was raised on wolf's milk. Suddenly his being raised on cow milk is a point of pride rather than shame.

Shinsuke comes from a poor family, and resents his low stature and the need to constantly struggle financially. He still remembers a used, dilapidated desk his parents bought him, which serves as a symbol for him of his poverty. His parents "fake" a better upbringing—for example, by giving relatives a normal sponge cake but provided in a box with a fancy baker's label on it—which makes Shinsuke hate his parents even more. To deal with his feelings, Shinsuke begins to write a "Diary without Self-Deceit," which he believes is the one place he does not have to put on airs and lie.

Shinsuke does well academically at school, but very poor socially. His "deportation" grade is always a low "6." His teachers consider him a "smart-aleck," and punish him for seemingly no reasons.

Books become for Shinsuke his primary pastime and a way to escape his dreary conditions. Books are more real to him than reality, and he weighs real-life situations in relation to situations in his favorite books.

Shinsuke has much difficulty making friends. His primary factor in determining friendship is intelligence. Non-intelligent people are clowns or mere passersby to Shinsuke, not worthy of his time.

Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years Analysis

This story is a thinly-veiled autobiographical account of Akutagawa's childhood and the events which have informed his storytelling and subject matter. In his fascination with a river corpse, the reader finds a macabre sensibility that will later find its way into stories such as "Rashomon" or "In a Bamboo Grove." In the illogical hatred he feels for his parents and friends, we see precursors to protagonists in "The Nose" and "Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale," who must fight against derision and spite. The inner shame he carries in not being raised on his mother's milk manifests itself later in the shame Hanzaburo must carry and hide in "Horse Legs." The fact that Shinsuke feels more at home with books (art) than reality is a fact that could be said for Yoshihide, the hero of "Hell Screen." The isolation he feels and the resultant distance from society is reflected in such works as "O-Gin" and "Hell Screen." "Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years" is very useful in this way to mine qualities that show up frequently in other works written by Akutagawa.

The Writer's Craft, and The Baby's Sickness

The Writer's Craft, and The Baby's Sickness Summary

The Writer's Craft:

A man named Yasukichi is a teacher and translator of English texts for the Naval Engineering School. As the resident writer, he is sometimes given odd writing tasks, and on this day a Captain Fujita orders him to write the eulogy for recently deceased Lietenant Honda, who died of a stroke. Yasukichi wonders what to write, and Fujita tells him to make something up and make it sound good. However, Yasukichi is given a file on Honda by a young naval officer, which is little more than a naval schedule, telling him almost nothing personal about the man.

Yasukichi feels his life's work is not his job but his creation of literature. He writes short stories which are regularly accepted by a local literary magazine. He spends most of his time on his short stories and much less time on his job's duties, and certainly even less time on something like this eulogy. That night, he spends painstaking hours tweaking his latest short story, and almost runs out of time as he dashes off Honda's eulogy, which he fills with sentimental claptrap and generic cliches, not bothering to learn anything about Honda.

On the day of the funeral, Yasukichi joins the funeral procession through town, his mind on possible short stories taking form in his head. Then the traditional Buddhist funeral begins with chanting. Finally, Admiral Sasaki addresses those gathered and begins to read Yasukichi's eulogy.

The eulogy goes on for some time, and then Yasukichi hears a laugh. He is mortified, but discovers that what he thought was a laugh is actually the stifled sob of Honda's sister in attendance. Similarly, Honda's brother and father are fighting back tears. Yasukichi realizes that his cliched, carelessly-written eulogy has deeply affected these people, and he feels shame for having paid the eulogy so little mind.

Later, he is congratulated for his eulogy by Fujita and feels embarrassed. He is then shown a review of his latest short story. The critic is mercilessly scathing, calling the story the "spare-time jottings of a Navy school teacher." Yasukichi is ultimately amused by the irony that his rushed eulogy was so well-received, and his painstaking masterpiece was so utterly panned.

The Baby's Sickness:

The narrator is a writer whose wife reveals that their baby is ill. The doctor comes and says it is nothing to worry about, just an upset stomach. The baby, Takashi, also has a slight fever. The doctor comes the next day and administers an enema to the baby.

The baby does not improve. Another enema is administered and a lot of mucus comes out, an amount that frightens the narrator and his wife. The narrator, meanwhile, has been hired to write an article for a magazine, and the deadline is the next day. His baby's crying grates on his nerves and he cannot concentrate.

That night, the narrator's aunt realizes that the baby is much worse, and the doctor has been summoned again. The doctor asks to speak to the narrator privately, and he says that the baby's digestive tract has shut down, though he doubts it is enough to kill the child. They agree that it will be best to take Takashi to the hospital. The narrator tells the magazine of Takashi's condition and that his piece will not be ready in time, feeling guilty about blaming his son for his lack of an article.

The baby is rickshawed to the hospital. The next day, the narrator trudges in the rain (with the incorrect clogs on, and thus he becomes muddied and soaked) to the hospital, where his wife and mother-in-law are with the baby. The baby cannot drink his mother's milk, but nonetheless he appears to be doing better. The crisis has lifted and the atmosphere seems finally less suffocating.

The Writer's Craft, and The Baby's Sickness Analysis

Here are two stories which serve as comments on the life of an artist, and the nature of being an artist, specifically a writer. As such, they can be read as possible autobiography. Surely the tragicomic conclusion of "The Writer's Craft," with Yasukichi receiving merits and tears for his hastily-scribbled eulogy and critical venom for his painstakingly-crafted short story is a situation the real author Akutagawa endured in his various submissions to literary magazines and popular journals. In a larger sense, it comments on the fickleness of critics, and the fact that art is truly a matter of taste and any reactions cannot be predicted in the slightest.

"The Baby's Sickness" is a more realistic and less horrific version of "Hell Screen," in that it shows the reader the sacrifice that the artist must make for his work. The narrator is initially angry and annoyed at the baby for its sickness, as he has a writing deadline and its wailing is distracting him. Fortunately for Akutagawa, it does not take the death of the baby for him to realize that his child is more important than his current writing.

Death Register, and The Life of a Stupid Man

Death Register, and The Life of a Stupid Man Summary

Death Register:

The narrator states that his mother is a lunatic, though a quiet lunatic, and so he never enjoyed a mother's care. She died when he was 11, and the narrator remembers the events surrounding her death. Living with his adoptive mother, the narrator is alerted by a telegram as to his mother's deteriorating condition. They travel by rickshaw to her. The first night he cries, but finds the second night he is unable to do so. His mother dies the third night. The narrator remembers how long the funeral procession trip was, and that he fell asleep several times during it.

Next to be recalled is the death of his eldest sister, named "Hatsuko" meaning First Daughter. She is said to be the smartest amongst the siblings. She wears Western-style dresses. She dies on April 5th when she is very young. The narrator does not get to know her, but he feels that a female presence is always looking over his shoulder. Whether this is Hatsuko or his mother he cannot tell.

The narrator's real father was a rabble-rouser and trouble-maker who will always want to fight. The father tries to ply the narrator with ice cream in order to get him to run away with him and away from his adoptive parents, but he refuses. The narrator also witnesses the deterioration and death of his father when he is 28. Father loses his senses at the end and is referring to things not there.

The narrator goes to the cemetery plot where these three dead family members are buried, and is moved.

The Life of a Stupid Man:

This is less a story than a series of textual fragments that Akutagawa left to his writer friend Kume Masao shortly before his suicide. They include brief snatches of memory and autobiographical moments. These moments and memories include: Akutagawa's real mother's insanity, love of books, an artistic epiphany upon viewing a Van Gogh reproduction, disgust at examining a cadaver as research for his short story "Rashomon," his continued love for his wife, his agony over his affair with a fellow artist he calls "the crazy girl," his sorrow at touring a city ruined by a great earthquake, his bouts with insomnia, an attempt to hang himself, an offer to perform a "Platonic double suicide" with an acquaintance, and his struggle with and addiction to narcotics.

Death Register, and The Life of a Stupid Man Analysis

These stories feature Akutagawa at his most confessional, and most pessimistic. With "Death Register" he essentially reveals to the world his "Horse Legs"-like secret shame, that his mother was insane and that he might, too, be tainted with mental illness. "The Life of a Stupid Man" is a very personal confession of Akutagawa's addiction to narcotics, his affair outside of marriage, and his suicidal thoughts.

Both these stories are very fragmentary, their locomotion based upon word associations, stream-of-consciousness, and sensual memories. As such, they are thoroughly modern in their conception and execution. Perhaps too, the fragmentation of these works, written when Akutagawa was in a downward spiral of drug addiction, depression, and madness, is a reflection of Akutagawa's mental condition.

Spinning Gears

Spinning Gears Summary

"Spinning Gears" is an autobiographical work covering what would be among the last few days of Akutagawa's life. He heads toward Tokyo for a wedding reception. While on the train, a man in a raincoat sits next to him, and he is met with a sense of unease. He sees or hears mention of a raincoat several more times, and believes a higher power or fate is trying to tell him something. These "omens" crescendo in a moment when Akutagawa learns his brother-in-law suicidally throws himself in front of a train, wearing a raincoat.

Akutagawa's "last days" are similarly filled with these sort of frightful omens, seemingly innocuous events that Akutagawa's paranoid mind puts together to mean death and doom. He bestows great significance in the fact that one slipper is missing when he wakes in the morning, for example. He learns from his sister as they pack his dead brother-in-law's possessions away that the man's face was ruined beyond recognition except for his mustache, which survived intact. Eerily, a portrait of the dead man portrays a fuzzy and ill-defined mustache. Akutagawa hears a man mention that something is "tantalizing" and Akutagawa goes back to the word's root, Tantalus or another word for inferno, to continue his paranoia and sense of dread. He tries to block all these various associations out with heavy narcotics in order to sleep.

Eventually he believes the Furies are chasing him. He sees an image of St. George slaying a dragon, using the same dragon symbol he uses in his own name. He picks up a phone and hears an indistinct foreign recording say what sounds like "mole" over and over, which Akutagawa recasts as the French word for death, mort. He has a meeting with a wise holy man, but cannot bring himself to believe that God exists. He is more sure that the Devil exists, a sentiment expressed in a novel he has just purchased—another coincidence.

These paranoid associations, related images, and Akutagawa's own morbid logic climax near his home when he believes he is being followed and that his death is imminent. He feels he is being pushed down. He falls unconscious and awakes in his bed. His wife arrives in a panic, and she states she had a premonition that he (Akutagawa) was going to die, which only increases Akutagawa's terror.

The author stops his story at this point, stating he cannot write on as he is enveloped in despair. He hopes someone will strangle the life from him. Presumably days after this Akutagawa overdoses on narcotics and commits suicide.

Spinning Gears Analysis

As one of Akutagawa's last works before his suicide, "Spinning Gears" is a frighteningly realistic portrayal of Akutagawa's own paranoia and madness gone out of control.

Everything is a sign or a conspiracy in Akutagawa's addled mind. Chance sightings of raincoats foreshadow his brother-in-law's suicide; encounters with wings, be they an airplane in the sky or a logo on a taxicab's radiator cap, evoke the story of Icarus, who dies after flying too close to the sun with waxen wings in Greek mythology. Many things also evoke death for Akutagawa, be it a phone message stating "mole" which sounds like the French word for death, "mort," or some random person calling something "tantalizing," which Akutagawa traces back to Tantalus, or Hell. These omens, along with a non-specific sense of dread and a sense of being pursued, come to a crescendo when the author feels he will die and that Death is coming for him. Even when he wakes after fainting from this terrifying episode, the nightmare continues when his wife tells him she had a premonition about him dying.

Characters

Daidoji Shinsukeappears in Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years

Shinsuke is widely acknowledged as a thinly-veiled persona for author Akutagawa himself. Shinsuke grew up in Honjo, a poor and run-down district in Tokyo, and the boy comes to like the area more than richer areas. A formative event for Shinsuke occurs when he and his father go to a much-frequented bank on a river, and they discover a dead body floating in the water. This upbringing and event can perhaps explain Akutagawa's interest in the macabre, as with the dead bodies in "Rashomon."

Shinsuke was raised on cow's milk rather than his mother's milk, and he carries this fact like a secret shame throughout much of his early childhood. This fact also perpetuates an unbridled, unreasonable hate—towards his parents, towards himself—that Shinsuke acknowledges he bears into his adulthood. Afterwards, Shinsuke learns that Romulus the founder of Rome was raised on wolf's milk instead of mother's milk, and so Shinsuke does not feel so badly about his own upbringing, even carrying it as a point of pride from then on.

Shinsuke was born into a relatively poor family, and thus he feels he was deprived of many possessions and opportunities that other kids had. This increases his hate and loathing. As an outlet for all of his ill feelings, he creates a "Diary without Self-Deceit" to express his true feelings.

Shinsuke values intelligence above all else, and he loses himself in books and intellectual debates. If he judges someone as not smart enough, they are clowns or mere passersby to him and not worthy of his attention.

Yoshihideappears in Hell Screen

Yoshihide is a brilliant but tortured artist, and with these characteristics perhaps a somewhat autobiographical portrait of Akutagawa himself. He is widely acknowledged to be the best painter in the land, and he never fails to abuse this position, deriding other artists' work and otherwise possessive of a great arrogance and lack of concern for others. He has a single daughter and is very possessive of her, to the dismay of the local Lord. He is a contrarian, and where others find the Lord's promotion of his daughter a great honor, Yoshihide wishes only that the Lord demote her.

Yoshihide's "fatal flaw" is that he cannot paint something without first directly viewing the same thing in real life, or a close approximation thereof. When he is tasked to depict Hell in his masterpiece, the Hell Screen, he can realistically depict Hell's flames because he saw a great fire once. However, he is unable to depict a woman burning alive in a carriage, as is called for in the final panel of the screen. Obsessed and holding

art in an unreasonably high position, above the value of human life even, Yoshihide consents to watch his own daughter burn alive in a carriage in order to complete his masterwork. Once he completes the work, he cannot go on living and subsequently hangs himself so he might join his daughter in Buddhist Hell. Yoshihide is the consummate "tortured artist."

Naigu Zenchiappears in The Nose

Naigu Zenchi is a Buddhist priest who has low self-esteem over his huge nose, which he obsesses over. He undergoes a treatment to shrink his nose, but discovers that those around him ridicule him even more with a normal nose than with a large nose. To his relief, his huge nose grows back.

E'inappears in Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale

E'in is a Buddhist monk who, like Naigu Zenchi, has a huge nose, earning him the nickname "Storenose," after his title, Keeper of His Majesty's Storehouse. To get back at the town who ridicules him, he plays a trick, posting a sign near Sarusawa Pond stating that a dragon will emerge from the pond on a certain date. To his amazement, his prank comes true.

Kandataappears in Spider Thread

Kandata is a thief and murderer who is suffering in Hell when Lord Buddha decides to give him a chance to escape from Hell, based upon the one good deed Kandata performed in life, refusing to stomp on a spider. Kandata climbs a heavenly spider thread, but when he yells at other sinners trying to climb "his" thread, the thread breaks and he falls back to Hell, failing in a test of his compassion.

Shinoappears in Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum

Shino is an independent widow with a child, Sato. Shino embraces Christianity at a time when that religion's practice is punished and outlawed. When Sato falls ill, Shino begs the doctor to tend to her daughter, but the doctor refuses based upon her Christianity. Shino must choose between her faith and the possible health and survival of her daughter.

Xaio-erappears in The Story of the Head That Fell Off

Xaio-er is a Chinese warrior who receives a deep neck wound in battle. Believing he is dying, he clings to his horse and runs away from the battle, In a field, he bemoans his fate and promises to reform his wicked ways should he have a second chance at life.

He is given that chance but continues to be a trouble-maker, breaking his promise to himself. In a sort of retribution, his head is knocked off by brief violence in a bar fight.

O-Kimiappears in Green Onions

O-Kimi is a pretty but bubble-headed waitress who is full of "artistic ecstasy," to the point she cannot pay her bills and is unconcerned with the real world, especially finances. A sign advertising a fantastic price for Green Onions seems to change her ways, and in the end O-Kimi becomes more responsible.

Hanzaburoappears in Horse Legs

Hanzaburo is an ordinary corporate man who dies of a stroke. In the afterlife, he learns his death was a mistake. Unfortunately, his legs have already rotted at this time from his accidental death, and so he is provided with the only kind of legs available at the moment, horse legs, which Hanzaburo must deal with and keep secret in real life once he is resurrected.

Usaemonappears in Loyalty

Usaemon becomes the "Head Elder" of a minor noble House ruled by Shuri. Shuri has gone mad, but Usaemon is torn between his love for Shuri and his responsibilities for the health and well-being of the house. Knowing he is wrong and succumbing to his baser instincts, Usaemon allows Shuri to visit the aristocratic Castle during a social event, during which Shuri stabs a man to death. For his "loyalty" to Shuri, Usaemon is sentenced to death by strangulation.

Objects/Places

Rashomonappears in Rashomon

Rashomon is a once-magnificent imperial gate that has, by the time of the story, fallen into bad disrepair and ruin. The unnamed servant of the story creeps into the second story of the gate to find a pile of dead bodies and an old woman plucking hairs from the dead for wigs.

The Dragon of Sarusawa Pondappears in Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale

A Buddhist monk, E'in, plays a prank on his town by claiming that a dragon will arise from the nearby pond on a certain date. The town and all nearby towns become excited about the dragon and it becomes a big event. On the date E'in specified, everyone gathers at the pond and E'in is aghast when a dragon does indeed emerge from the pond to fly out of sight into the sky.

The Spider Threadappears in Spider Thread

The spider thread is provided by a heavenly spider, dropping like a rope all to way to Kandata suffering in Hell. It provides Kandata a chance to escape Hell, but it also serves as a test of the man's compassion. When Kandata fails that test by berating other sinners who are climbing the thread, the thread snaps and Kandata is thrown back into Hell.

The Hell Screenappears in Hell Screen

The Hell Screen is a multiple-panel folding screen that Lord Harikawa hires the great painter Yoshihide to make. It depicts the eight circles or levels of Buddhist Hell. Yoshihide subjects his apprentices to hellish punishments for inspiration, and finally Yoshihide must watch his own daughter burn alive in a carriage in order to depict the same scene in his final screen.

Hanzaburo's Horse Legsappears in Horse Legs

A tragic mistake in the afterlife is made, and Hanzaburo is killed before his time. Unfortunately his legs have rotted in the time it took to rectify the mistake, and so Hanzaburo is cursed with horse legs to replace his rotted real legs. He tries to hide his hideous deformity from wife and co-workers alike.

Shinsuke's Used Deskappears in Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years

Shinsuke receives a beat-up desk from his parents, and above all the desk becomes a symbol for Shinsuke of his family's low upbringing and their never-ending struggles with poverty. He comes to hate his station in life and resent his parents.

Green Onion Signboardappears in Green Onions

O-Kimi, on a date with Tanaka, stumbles across a vegetable stand advertising an irresistibly low price for green onions. Suddenly possessed with a desire to be financially responsible and pay her bills, O-Kimi temporarily breaks up her date to purchase 2 bunches of green onions.

Honjoappears in Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years

Daidoji Shinsuke (a thinly-veiled version of author Akutagawa) grows up in the Honjo section of Tokyo. Honjo is apparently a poor to lower-middle-class, run-down section of Tokyo, and Shinsuke eventually takes quite a liking to his dreary neighborhood, influencing his maturation.

Lieutenant Honda's Eulogyappears in The Writer's Craft

A short-story writer and English instructor named Yasukichi writes this eulogy in haste and fills it full of clichés and empty sentiment. However, the eulogy moves the dead man's family greatly, and Yasukichi is forever sorry he treated such a serious duty with such indifference.

The Spinning Gearsappears in Spinning Gears

The narrator (and presumably, real-life author Akutagawa) sees translucent spinning gears as a hallucination before his eyes, which multiply in number and block his vision. They disappear eventually, but he is left with a headache. The gears may be a sign of the madness Akutagawa so dreads that he inherited from his insane mother.

Themes

Gloom and Decay

One section of this work is called "A World in Decay," and in fact a certain macabre sensibility can be found not only in the stories under this heading, but most of the stories in the volume. The title short story, "Rashomon," features a once-proud imperial gate, now in ruins, full of dead bodies and a shriveled old woman desecrating the dead in order to survive by selling wigs. The unnamed servant protagonist uses the old woman's moral relativism against her, robbing her of perhaps her only possession, her robe, as he bounds into the night into a life of crime. Setting has a profound relationship to character and plot here. "In a Bamboo Grove" uses the same period in Japanese history to tell a tale of shocking and sudden moral depravity; Tajomaru's own evil spreads like a sickness to the formerly virtuous Masago, rotting her moral compass with a rape. "Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale" and "The Nose," though lighter and more comic than the aforementioned stories, are also about the darker side of human nature, showing the pettiness of a community which meets a man overcoming a physical deformity with derision in "The Nose," or the gullibility of a community in "Dragon."

Hell Screen's gothic setting and content demonstrates how art can lead to a different sort of decay, a decay of the mind, as Yoshihide goes mad painting his masterpiece, and the Lord goes mad in commissioning it to teach a lesson. This sort of "horror of art and the suffering of the artist" theme is repeated in "The Writer's Craft," and "The Baby's Sickness," among others.

Perhaps Akutagawa's obsession with the macabre can be traced back to his childhood, as seen through the veil of "Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years," in which the young boy sees a floating corpse in a river, an image which stays with him indefinitely.

Impossible Dilemmas

Perhaps hand-in-hand with obsessions with the macabre and with death are the impossible, hellish dilemmas Akutagawa offers many of his characters. Examples are numerous: the servant must starve or turn to a life of crime in "Rashomon"; Yoshihide must endure watching his cherished daughter burn alive in order to finish his painting in "Hell Screen"; Usaemon must choose between a man he loves and raised from birth or the reputation of his House in "Loyalty"; Hanzaburo must somehow try to live with literal horse's legs in "Horse Legs"; Kandata fails his test of compassion when he believes his rope to Heaven will break from the weight in "Spider Thread"; and Shino and O-Gin must choose between their faiths and their families in "Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum" and "O-Gin," respectively.

What is the reader to make of these frequent dilemmas, these impossible, tortuous, and shameful decisions and realities? Perhaps they are the product of a pessimistic and

diseased mind, a product of "depressive realism" in which life is viewed as a series of no-win, agonizing circumstances. In "Spinning Gears" Akutagawa quotes the phrase, "Life is more hellish than hell itself," and perhaps this sentiment is the source of such a pessimistic view of life. After all, as revealed in "Death Register" and "Spinning Gears" most explicitly, Akutagawa (wrongly or not), felt himself caught in a series of dilemmas in his own life. He relies on narcotics for sleep, but they cause him great harm; he engages in an affair outside of marriage but is plagued with guilt about it; he is crowned as a master of Japanese literature and called "Sensei" by young impressionable men, but feels he deserves no such accolades; perhaps most significantly, he feels he must "act normal" as he descends into madness and addiction, hiding his mental illness as a secret shame, much like Hanzaburo with his horse legs or Xiao-er with his neck wound in "The Story of The Head That Fell Off." In this way, the spinning gears he hallucinates that block his vision are a sort of physical manifestation of the pressures he feels, stuck between interlocking gears, "between a rock and a hard place" to use an American expression.

The Oppression of Society

Contained in many tales in this collection is a criticism of the restrictions placed upon people by society. The master-servant oppression of feudal Japan is commented on in "Rashomon" and "Loyalty." In "Rashomon," a masterless servant must commit to a life of crime simply because there is no option outside of the oppressive feudal system. In "Loyalty," Usaemon loses his life because the system has forced an otherwise good and kind man into the impossible situation of choosing between a family member or the family name (which in itself is a sort of artificial, oppressive construct).

Religion is not spared by Akutagawa as an oppressive institution. It causes agony in the case of Shino in "Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum," who is forced to choose between her daughter and her illegal faith. O-Gin must similarly choose between family and faith, as Akutagawa subtly mocks both Buddhism and Christianity's promise of eternal damnation for non-believers, which the author perhaps believes is simply another manifestation of power-mongering and oppression.

In the later autobiographical works, Akutagawa himself reveals lesser but still powerful restrictions placed on himself by society's rules. He resents the adoration he receives but must still act and perform in a certain way about it. Outside pressure and financial concerns cause him (or his surrogates) to rush his art, as in "The Writer's Craft" or the frame story of "Green Onions."

Style

Point of View

Point of view is a very interesting aspect of these stories, and is perhaps one of the most creative qualities of each story. Almost every story bears a narrator's presence in one degree or another. In some instances this "presence" is very small and subtle: in "Rashomon" the reader is first told that the servant is waiting for the rain to end; later the narrator qualifies this statement, stating in fact the servant is recently masterless and has no idea what to do. "Hell Screen" is peppered with the narrator's qualifications and backtrackings of various kinds; at many points phrases like "I have heard," "I am told," "The rumor is" make the reader question the veracity of the content being presented. In "Horse Legs" the story starts with the narrator apologizing for the boring mediocrity of the protagonist.

These qualities are the hallmark of the device known as "unreliable narrator," in which there is a question that events as they are told happened in quite the way they are presented. Nowhere is this most explicit than in Akutagawa's most brilliantly structured story "In a Bamboo Grove," where the half-truths and mendacity of testimonies are peeled away and exposed as the reader delves deeper into the story. For example, Tajomaru boasts that he killed the murdered man with a heroic and honorable sword fight; in reality, he ran like a coward, and only claimed such a fight in order to make himself look better.

Setting

Setting plays a powerful part in many of these short stories. The settings are necessarily varied, as Akutagawa does not write about a single particular place and time for his stories. Setting can serve to mirror or provide commentary on the inner lives of characters, as the dilapidated Rashomon structure does for the servant protagonist in "Rashomon." Akutagawa can use a setting in order to comment on or criticize, as he does with "Horse Legs," questioning the bland conformity of modern Japanese corporate society. Akutagawa is not afraid to use the device known as The Pathetic Fallacy, in which weather, above and beyond setting, is used as a comment on a character or characters' inner lives.

History is also an important component of setting in these stories. "Rashomon," and "In a Bamboo Grove" are set during the end of the Heian period, historically a low point in Japanese history in which culture disintegrated and chaos reigned. For the stories "Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum" and "O-Gin," Akutagawa sets his stories during a period in which Christianity is actively attacked and suppressed. "Loyalty" depends upon the rigidity and formality of feudal Japan for its conflict.

Setting is finally crucial to the modern, more autobiographical stories, in which the velocity and fragmentation of modern life plague the narrator (Akutagawa himself).

Language and Meaning

Akutagawa is many times a master of "setting the scene" or mood, using particularly evocative and descriptive phrases to describe decay and gloom, for one example, in "Rashomon." In many instances, the setting is intended to match or at least comment on the interiority of characters. In "Rashomon," the physical decay and hidden horror (dead bodies) of the Rashomon itself directly foreshadows the servant's own moral decay and plunge into crime. In "Dragon: The Old Potter's Tale," an entire community seemingly wills an impossibility into the realm of the possible. O-Kimi's character is reflected in the various possessions found in her apartment; sentimental novels, a fake lily, a stubby used desk. In "Hell Screen," the very presence of the Screen, painted in such a masterly fashion as to evoke true dread and fear of Hell, seems to propel two characters in particular (the Lord and the painter Yoshihide) into a kind of madness and inner Hell by the story's conclusion.

Akutagawa is a very well-learned and well-read novelist, with particular knowledge of the Western literary tradition. As such, several Western ideas or words frequently make their way into the various stories, terms like the French "sentamentalisme" or "fin-de-siecle." Favorite novels, Eastern or Western, are also frequently included to comment on the proper story or add another layer of meaning. Finally, Akutagawa can use language for comic effect, as in his Christian short stories "Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum" or "O-Gin," in which Christian words have been corrupted in translation, as "Zesus" for "Jesus," "Inherno" for "Inferno," and "Sagramento" for "Sacrament."

Structure

This text is a collection of 18 short stories by Ryonosuke Akutagawa. Though loosely chronological, the text is more accurately divided into "themes" or "subjects" that the editor and translator has categorized the stories into. "A World in Decay" includes stories set in the ruinous end of the Heian Period in Japanese history, a time when warlords ruled and chaos reigned. "Under The Sword" includes stories about persecution and oppression, be it towards Christians as in "O-Gin" or a story set inside the rigid Japanese feudal system, "Loyalty." "Modern Tragicomedy" covers stories written later in Akutagawa's life, set not in ancient times but in modern times, with both tragic and comic themes: "The Story of a Head That Fell Off," "Green Onions," and "Horse Legs." Finally, "Akutagawa's Own Story" includes six stories that the editor and critics agree are to a greater or lesser extent autobiographical. They may be expressly and explicitly autobiographical, as with "Death Register" or Akutagawa's own descent into madness with "Spinning Gears," or they may be couched in fictional terms but still relate to the author or his craft, as with "The Writer's Craft."

Supplemental and useful texts include a chronology of Akutagawa's life (especially relevant to tracking some of the events of "Spinning Gears" and "Death Register"), introductory notes, and endnotes.

Quotes

"We noted earlier that the servant was "waiting for the rain to end," but in fact the man had no idea what he was going to do once that happened. Ordinarily, of course, he would have returned to his master's house, but he had been dismissed from service some days before, and (as also noted earlier), Kyoto was in an unusual state of decline. His dismissal by a master he had served for many years was one small consequence of that decline. Rather than say that the servant was "waiting for the rain to end," it would have been more appropriate to write that "a lowly servant trapped by the rain had no place to go and no idea what to do." The weather, too, contributed to the sentimentalisme of this Heian Period menial. The rain had been falling since later afternoon and showed no sign of ending. He went on half-listening to the rain as it poured down on Suzaku Avenue. He was determined to find a way to keep himself alive for one more day—that is, a way to do something about a situation for which there was nothing to be done." (Rashomon, 4)

"I met that couple yesterday, a little after noon. The second I saw them, a puff of wind lifted her veil and I caught a peek at her. Just a peek: that's maybe why she looked so perfect to me—an absolute bodhisattva of a woman. I made up my mind right then to take her even if I had to kill the man.
Oh come on, killing a man is not as big a thing as people like you seem to think. If you're going to take somebody's woman, a man has to die. When I kill a man, I do it with my sword, but people like you don't use swords. You gentlemen kill with your power, with your money, and sometimes just with your words: you tell people you're doing them a favor. True, no blood flows, the man is still alive, but you've killed him all the same. I don't know whose sin is greater—yours or mine. (A sarcastic smile.)" (In a Bamboo Grove, page 13)

"They never laughed so openly before. Our dear Naigu would sometimes break off intoning the scriptures and mutter this sort of thing to himself, tilting his bald head to one side. His eyes would wander up to the portrait of the Bodhisattva Fugen hanging beside him. And he would sink into gloom, thinking about how it had been for him a few days earlier, when he still had his long nose, 'just as he who can now sink no lower fondly recalls his days of glory.' The Naigu, unfortunately, lacked the wisdom to find a solution to this problem.
The human heart harbors two conflicting sentiments. Everyone of course sympathizes with people who suffer misfortunes. Yet when those people manage to overcome their misfortunes, we feel a certain disappointment. We may even feel (to overstate the case somewhat) a desire to plunge them back into those misfortunes. And before we know it, we come (if only passively) to harbor some degree of hostility toward them. It was precisely because he sense this kind of spectator's egoism in both the lay and the priestly communities of Ike-no-o that the Naigu, while unaware of the reason, felt an indefinable malaise." (The Nose, page 25)

"Standing at the edge of the Lotus Pond in Paradise, Lord Shakyamuni watched everything that happened. And when, in the end, Kandata sank like a stone into the

Pond of Blood, the Holy One resumed His stroll, His face now tinged with sorrow. Kandata had thought to save himself alone, and as just punishment for this lack of compassion, he had fallen back into Hell. How shameful it must have seemed in the eyes of Lord Shakyamuni!
The lotuses of the Lotus Pond, however, were unperturbed. They swayed their perfect pearl-white blossoms near the feet of Lord Shakyamuni, and from their golden centers wafted forth each time a never-ending fragrance wonderful beyond description. I think it must have been close to noon in Paradise." (The Spider Thread, page 41)

"Almost no one spoke ill of Yoshihide after that—at least not in the mansion. Could it be because all who saw the screen—even those who had always hated him—were struck by strangely solemn feelings when they witnessed the tortures of the Hell of Searing Heat in all their reality?
By then, however, Yoshihide numbered among those who are no longer of this world. The night after he finished the screen, he tied a rope to a beam in his room and hanged himself. I suspect that, having sent his daughter on ahead to the other world, he could not bear to go on living here as if nothing had happened. His body lies buried in the ruins of his home. The little stone marker is probably so cloaked in moss now, after decades of exposure to the wind and rain, that no one can tell whose grave it is anymore." (Hell Screen, pp. 72-73)

"She would not accept my repeated refusals and finally threw herself down, sobbing, in my entryway. Then, angrily, she said, 'I thought it was the duty of doctors to cure people's illnesses. I tell you that my daughter is gravely ill, and yet you ignore me. This, I cannot understand.'
'What you say is perfectly reasonable,' I replied, 'but my refusal to perform a pulse examination is not devoid of reason either. Your behavior of late is truly offensive. In particular, I have heard that you often vilify the people of our village—including me; you say that our worship of the gods and Buddhas is an act of heresy, that we are possessed by the devil. If you are such a pure follower of the path of righteousness, how can you now ask someone like me, possessed by evil spirits, to cure your daughter of her grave illness? Instead, you should ask for help from your own 'Deus Come Thus' in whom you believe so deeply. If you want me to perform a pulse diagnosis, you must first renounce your faith in the Kirishitan sect and never go back to it. Unless you agree to do so, I absolutely refuse to perform the pulse diagnosis. Medicine may be, as they say, a compassionate art, but I also fear the dark punishments of the gods and Buddhas.'" (Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum, p. 78)

"If I follow the will of my master, the House will be placed in danger. If I act to support the House, I will have to contravene the will of my master. Rin'emon, too, was caught in this dilemma. But Rin'emon had the courage to cast his master aside for the sake of the House. Or rather, he placed far less importance on his master to begin with. And so it was easy for him to sacrifice his master for the House.
For me, however, that is impossible. I am far too close to my master to think only of what is best for the House. How could I possibly force this master of mine into retirement for the sake of the 'House'—a mere name? Shuri may no longer have the toy 'devil-quelling bow' I gave him at New Year's long ago, but in my eyes he Is still that

same little boy. I still have vivid memories of explaining picture books to him, of holding his hand in writing practice, of putting the tail on his kite . . .
And yet, if I simply let my master have his way, the House is not the only thing that will perish. Terrible things may happen to my master himself as well. In calculating what is best for everyone, the policy adopted by Rin'emon was undoubtedly the wisest—indeed, the only course to take. I see that perfectly well. And yet, for me it is an impossibility." (Loyalty, pp. 98-99)

"He felt unbearable sorrow to be leaving this world forever. He also felt deep resentment toward the men and events that were hastening his departure. He was angry, too, at himself for having allowed this to happen. And then—each one calling forth the next—a multitude of emotions came to torment him. As one gave way to another, he would shout, 'I'm dying! I'm dying!', or call out for his father or mother, or curse the Japanese cavalryman who did this to him. As each cry left his lips, however, it was transformed into a meaningless, rasping groan, so weak had he become.
'I am the unluckiest man alive, coming to a place like this to fight and die so young, killed like a dog, for nothing. I hate the Japanese who wounded me. I hate my own officer who sent me out on this reconnaissance mission. I hate the countries that started this war—Japan and China. And that's not all I hate. Anyone who had anything to do with making me a soldier is my enemy. Because of all those people, I now have to leave this world where there is so much I want to do. Oh, what a fool I was to let them do this to me!'" (The Story of a Head That Fell Off, p. 113)

Hanzaburo had to remain on guard, first of all, against arousing the suspicions of his colleagues. This was perhaps among the less taxing of his efforts, but if we examine his diary, we find that he was continually struggling with some threat.
July —. Damn that young Chinese guy for sticking me with these damn legs. I'm walking around on two fleas' nests! The itching drove me crazy today at work. I can see all my energy going into this for a while: I have to rig up something to get rid of these fleas.
August —. Went to the manager's office to talk about sales today. Manager sniffing the whole time. I guess the smell is seeping out of my boots.
September —. Controlling horse legs is a lot harder than horseback riding itself. Had a rush job before noon today, trotted down the stairway. Like anyone at a time like this, I was only thinking about the job, forgot about my horse legs. Next thing I know, my hoof goes straight through the seventh step.
October—. I'm finally getting my horse legs to behave the way I want them to. It's all in the balance of the hips. I botched things today, though. Not that it was entirely my fault. I caught a rickshaw to work around nine o'clock this morning. The fare should have been 12 sen, but the rickshaw man insisted on 20. Then he grabbed me and wouldn't let me go in through the company gate. I got furious and gave him a quick kick. He flew through the air like a football. I was sorry about that, of course, but at the same time I couldn't help laughing. I really have to be more careful when I use my legs. . . ." (Horse Legs, p. 135)

"Shinsuke hated his poverty. Indeed, the unquenchable hatred he felt then continues to reverberate deep in his heart even now. He could never buy books. He could never go to summer school. He could never wear a new overcoat. His friends got all those things.

He envied them—sometimes to the point of jealousy. But he would never admit to himself that he harbored such envy and jealousy because he was contemptuous of their abilities. His contempt, however, did nothing to change his hatred for his own family's poverty. He hated their old tatami mats, their dim oil lamps, their paper-covered sliding doors with peeling pictures of ivy—everything that made their house so shabby. Still worse, merely because of this shabbiness, he hated the very parents who gave him birth. He especially hated his father, who was bald and shorter than Shinsuke himself. His father would often attend school-sponsor meetings, and Shinsuke felt shame at the sight of his father in his friends' presence. At the same time, he was ashamed of his despicable nature for being ashamed of his own flesh-and-blood." (Daidoji Shinsuke: The Early Years, pp. 151-152)

"The hall was hushed, the mourners still. The Headmaster read on, the sorrow in his voice deepening—'a man of inborn brilliance, affectionate to his brothers and sisters'—when someone in the family group stifled a laugh. Once it started, it grew in volume. Yasukichi felt a rush of horror and strained to see past Captain Fujita's shoulder. But what he had taken for desecrating laughter, he discovered, was in fact the sound of weeping.
It was Lieutenant Honda's sister. Half hidden beneath the swirls of an old-fashioned hairdo, the lovely young girl pressed her face into a silk handkerchief. The brother, too, so stolid-looking a moment ago, was now sniffling and fighting back his tears. The father quietly blew his nose in one tissue after another. Yasukichi's first reaction to this scene was one of surprise. Then came the satisfaction of the playwright who has succeeded in wringing tears from his audience. But in the end he felt an emotion of far greater magnitude: a bitter self-reproach, a sense of wrongdoing for which there could be no penitence. All unknowing, he had tramped with muddy feet into the sacred recesses of the human heart. Yasukichi hung his head for the first time in the hour-long course of the funeral. . . . You, Lieutenant Honda's family, could not know that this English instructor even existed. But in Yasukichi's heart a Raskolnikov in clown's costume has been kneeling in the muddy roadway these eight long years, begging your forgiveness." (The Writer's Craft, pp. 169-170)

"Something was out to get me. The thought increased my anxiety with every step I took. Then, one at a time, translucent gears began to block my field of vision. Afraid that my final moments were nearing, I yet managed to walk on with head erect. The number of gears increased, and they began to spin ever faster. At the same time the interwoven branches of the pines on the right began to look as if I were seeing them through finely cut glass. I felt my heartbeat rising and kept trying to make myself stand still at the side of the road, but someone seemed to be pushing me from behind: stopping was out of the question. . . " (Spinning Gears, p. 235)

Topics for Discussion

Choose a story with an unreliable narrator. Provide specific examples when this unreliable narrator is present in the story. How do these instances alter our understanding of the core story?

Based upon "Dr. Ogata Ryosai: Memorandum" and "O-Gin," how does Akutagawa feel about organized religion?

What values does Akutagawa seem to value or hold in high esteem?

What about the structure and content of "The Life of a Stupid Man" and/or "Spinning Gears" is the result of a modernist approach?

Is there a lesson to be learned from the conclusion of "The Writer's Craft"? What is Akutagawa stressing about the nature of writing?

"The Nose" and "Dragon" feature protagonists with ridiculously huge noses; similarly, "Horse Legs" features a man with horse legs, and "The Story of a Head That Fell Off" features a deep neck wound and unnerving decapitation. What are the meanings of these physical deformities? Are they indicative of some inner quality of the person, are they simply absurdist, or is there another meaning?

Setting is especially important to the short story "Rashomon." Describe how the setting relates to the story and to the unnamed servant protagonist.