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An Analysis of Hawthorne and Akutagawa

Once upon a sunset, a pink ribbon flutters in the wind as Goodman Brown departs Salem village for an errant journey into the forest. At the same hour of sunset, though five centuries and a world apart, a servant climbs up a ladder into the gloom of the gate Rashōmon, in search of a safe place to spend the night. The short story “Young Goodman Brown” (1835) by Nathaniel Hawthorne is set in Salem, MA, a Puritan society of precolonial America, whereas “Rashomon” (1915) by Ryunosuke Akutagawa takes place in Kyoto, Japan, in the last years of the Heian Period. Because the works differ greatly in plot, setting, and cultural and historical background, the tales seem disparate; however, when taking formalist perspective, both texts evince Gothic and Dark Romanticism while sharing similar themes, symbols, and character development.

Famous for writing *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) is the most prominent Romantic novelist from the American Renaissance, and he published more than twenty short stories such as “The Birthmark,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” and “Young

Goodman Brown.” On the other hand, Ryunosuke Akutagawa (1892-1927), who may sound unfamiliar to most Americans, is typically called the “Father of the Japanese short story.” Among admired short stories like “In a Grove” and “Yam Gruel,” Akutagawa’s most well-known piece is “Rashomon,” which is still popular to this day and is often taught in schools as one of the most important works of modern Japanese literature. The original “Rashomon” is written in Japanese; thus, the text translated by Takashi Kojima is used for this paper. However, the translated version values beauty over accuracy, disrupting the actual meaning of the original work. The protagonist, for example, is called the “genin” in the original text which directly translates to a low-ranking person or a menial, but the translated text calls the protagonist a “samurai servant” although the original text does not mention whether the servant was hired by a samurai. Similar translation issues can be seen throughout the source; therefore, vigilance in reading is necessary, given the unreliableness and ambiguity of the translated version.

The Rashōmon gate illustrated in “Rashomon” is based on Rajōmon, the actual gate of the ancient Kyoto: “It was 106 feet wide and 26 feet deep, and was topped with a ridgepole; its stone wall rose 75 feet high. This gate was constructed in 789 when the then capital of Japan was transferred to Kyoto” (Akutagawa 31). The story “Rashomon” did not entirely originate from Akutagawa’s own inspiration, but most of the plot was taken from one of the folktales composed in the *Konjaku monogatari shū* [*A collection of Tales from the Past*]. Henry J. Hughes, who

explores the Gothic in Japanese literature, states that Akutagawa “rediscovered the *Konjaku* as a rich source for Japanese Gothic literature in the early twentieth century” (65) by dramatizing a folktale into a more complex, creative piece of literature. In the process of doing so, a Gothic, Dark Romantic touch effectively portrays the distressing theme of hypocrisy.

Although Gothic and Dark Romanticism are often thought to be used interchangeably due to similar conventions, a slight difference exists by definition. According to Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, the authors of *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*, Gothic refers “to a genre characterized by a general mood of decay, suspense, and terror; action that is dramatic and generally violent or otherwise disturbing; loves that are destructively passionate; and landscapes that are grandiose, if gloomy or bleak” (205). Romanticism, on the other hand, values “emotion over intellect; the individual over society; inspiration, imagination, and intuition over logic, discipline, and order; the wild and natural over the tamed” (Murfin and Ray 450). In other words, Gothic highlights terror and supernatural powers while Dark Romanticism focuses on dynamic emotions of the protagonist along with the imaginative, mysterious atmosphere.

Neither Hawthorne nor Akutagawa are epitomes of Gothic or Dark Romanticism; however, among many of their other works, “Young Goodman Brown” and “Rashomon,” in particular, demonstrate darkness throughout the story. For example, both works begin the story at dusk which suggests gloom and premonition: “Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset”

(Hawthorne 178), and “It was a chilly evening” (Akutagawa, “Rashomon” *and Other Stories* 31).

Also, ill omens can be observed in both works, foreshadowing the mysterious plot: “Rashomon” includes “flocks of crows” (32) and the old man in “Young Goodman Brown” carries a “staff, which bore the likeness of a great snake” (179). Furthermore, Hawthorne’s exquisite use of imagery and word choice such as “a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees” (179) and a “black mass of cloud” (183) wonderfully illustrate the shades of the forest and the bleakness of the night. Akutagawa, too, initiates darkness not only by setting the story on a rainy day of fall, but also by painting a vivid picture of the horrific interior of Rashōmon: “dull, yellow, flickering light which made the cobwebs hanging from the ceiling glow in a ghostly way” (35).

Besides the shadowy ambience as a whole, “Young Goodman Brown” and “Rashomon” share an ambiguous, dream-like ending which displays the combination of both Gothic and Dark Romanticism. In the end of “Rashomon,” the servant absconds, stealing away the clothing of the old woman: “Beyond this was only darkness . . . unknowing and unknown” (40; ellipsis in org.). Here, the last sentence “unknowing and unknown” is imprecisely translated, and the sentence should have been translated into “No one knows where the servant had gone.” This ambiguity of the ending provokes suspicion. Similarly, in “Young Goodman Brown,” the presence of witches and devils, the sudden disappearance of the congregation, and Goodman’s errand itself are all ambiguous factors, therefore, creating a supernatural, dreamlike sequence.

Just as Hawthorne and Akutagawa apply similar Gothic and Dark Romantic features into their writing, they also happen to convey almost identical themes. A major theme Hawthorne communicates through “Young Goodman Brown” is the hypocrisy within an individual and also throughout society. As Paul J. Hurley states in his analysis of Hawthorne’s work, ““Young Goodman Brown’ is a subtle work of fiction concerned with revealing a distorted mind” (411), so that Hawthorne reveals the flaws of human nature through characterization. The protagonist Goodman Brown displays the hypocrisy of an individual while the overall Puritan community presents hypocrisy throughout society. As Goodman proceeds on his journey into the forest, he encounters Goody Cloyse and the other supposedly pious people, Deacon Gookin and the minister of the church. Though Goodman wends deeper into the forest by his own free will and is entirely conscious of his errand which involves a meeting of the devil, he refuses to accept the moral turpitude of his fellow townspeople when he discovers they, too, are heading for the secret meeting. When hearing the voice of Faith, his wife, Goodman cries in despair: “My Faith is gone!” (184). Because Goodman overlooks his own sin and cannot accept the imperfection of others, at denouement he became “A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man . . . for his dying hour was gloom” (188).

The same theme of hypocrisy could be perceived through the protagonist although “Rashomon” is often interpreted as a tale concerning egoism. Like Goodman, the servant is

naïve, self-centered, and oblivious of his own imperfection. After losing his job, the servant rests under the Rashōmon from idleness, indulging in “Sentimentalime” (Akutagawa, “羅生門” [Rashomon]) while pondering for a long time whether or not he should become a burglar. Conversely, the old woman confronts the reality, working to make a wig. Thus, the servant is unfit to condemn the old woman; however, as soon as the servant spots the old woman, the servant judges and vilifies her at once: “His hatred toward evil flared up like the piece of pine wood which the old woman had struck in the floor . . . in his eyes, pulling out the hair of the dead in the Rashōmon on this stormy night was an unpardonable crime” (37). In addition, the servant utters harsh, offensive language, “Wretch! Where are you going?” (37), and physically abuses the woman: “He tore her clothes from her body and kicked her roughly down on the corpses” (39). In “Rashomon,” the servant’s unawareness of his own sin and the unfounded hatred, disrespect, and cruelty toward the unfortunate woman present the theme of hypocrisy within an individual.

This theme of hypocrisy is not only portrayed within both works, but also expands among the readers, provoking awareness of the readers’ own hypocrisy and imperfection. David Leverenz, one of the modern critics who takes a reader-response approach to Hawthorne’s work, writes: “His tolerance for human frailty, his addiction to multiple interpretations, and his veiled hints at self-disgust deflect his fear that anger destroys a lovable self. In claiming that art should

veil self-exposure, he invites both sympathy and self-accusation” (464-465). Leverenz’s article critiques *The Scarlet Letter*, but the readers of “Young Goodman Brown” are also immersed in sympathy and self-accusation. The symbolic but hackneyed name “Goodman Brown” provides evidence. By creating a monotonous identity and excluding descriptions of Goodman’s physical appearance, any reader can substitute in the role of Goodman Brown. The same technique is used in “Rashomon,” for Akutagawa only offers a few descriptions about the servant, not even a name. Consequently, in both works, the protagonist ultimately represents the individual reader, inviting the readers’ sympathy as well as their admission of guilt.

Other parallels in theme include the corruption of religious mortality eventhough Hawthorne and Akutagawa probe different religions. In “Rashomon,” the instance of religious corruption is expressed through the devastating conditions of Kyoto: “broken pieces of Buddhist images and other Buddhist objects . . . were heaped up on roadside to be sold as firewood” (32). Compared with Hawthorne’s work, however, the absence of religion in “Rashomon” is understated and is less important in terms of the plot. In “Young Goodman Brown,” the theme of depravity is emphasized, for Hawthorne criticizes Puritan traditions and questions the idea of perfectionism. Nonetheless, the recurring theme of moral corruption does not entail Hawthorne’s belief that “Evil is the nature of mankind” (187). Through his works, Hawthorne aims to point out the fact that perfection does not exist: everything has its good and evil. Every character,

every object, and even nature -- such as the sky, the wind, and the trees -- has its own pros and cons.

Both “Young Goodman Brown” and “Rashomon” contain prolific symbolism. For instance, Faith’s pink ribbon portrays the theme of imperfection through symbolism. Darrel Abel states in his article, which examines Hawthorne’s use of metonymic symbols, “The pink ribbons which adorn the cap which Faith wears on her pretty little head are a badge of feminine innocence, which they inevitably suggest in consequence of the immemorial custom of decking baby girls in pink ribbon” (169). Along with the obvious symbol of the feminine, an important factor to notice about the color pink is the mixture of red and white. If white represents purity and red alludes to guilt or lust, the pink ribbon supports the nonexistence of perfection; even Faith, the seemingly innocent character in the tale, is not perfect. The fluttering ribbon Goodman finds in the forest may be a reinforcement of the theme, imploring Goodman to overlook the sin of others because perfection is impossible.

Other major symbols in “Young Goodman Brown” include the names of characters and the forest. Among the names of characters, Goodman Brown is the most significant in meaning; “Goodman” implies a naïve, seemingly just, and religious nature, while “Brown” may indicate the dull, stubborn personality as well as depression and decay. As the forest may serve as a “symbol of Brown's retreat into himself . . . associated with images suggestive of evil” (Hurley

413), the forest may also represent hell. Shuna Xing states analyzes the symbolism, allegory, and characterization, “The forest is like a hell where witches gather, where souls are signed away to the devil” (161). Moreover, the imagery of raging fire, “surrounded by four blazing pines . . . their tops aflame . . . on fire, blazing high into the night” (185), resembles the scene of hell. Similarly, the Rashōmon can also be interpreted as a symbol of hell. The old woman declares, “these that are here deserve no better” (39), referring to the unclaimed, abandoned corpses. From this remark, one could infer that the corpses were rather evil or sinful individuals when they were alive, and because the evil ones go to hell after death, the Rashōmon may represent an existing, tangible form of the underworld.

Along with the theme of hypocrisy, one of the most important themes broached in “Rashomon” is the definition of humanity — what makes a human, a human. For readers to ponder over this question, Akutagawa scatters a number of symbols and similes to explore the meaning of humanity throughout the work. The cricket perching on the column (31), for example, can be interpreted as a symbol implying human frailty or perhaps human egoism and greed. Akutagawa may have used a cricket to suggest human beings, like insects, are tiny, powerless creatures. Another possibility is the cricket’s serving a symbol of egoism and greed. Because crickets are known to feed on each other, the cricket on the column may be foreshadowing the servant’s imminent attack against the old woman.

In “Rashomon,” the servant and the old woman are given animal-like qualities the servant is described as “a cat” (35) and “a lizard” (35) while the old woman is animalized as “a monkey” (36), “a chicken” (37), and “a crow” (38). The similes not only present their untamed, barbaric nature, but also communicate the immutable fact that human beings are primarily animals; the servant and the old woman, like Pearl from *The Scarlet Letter*, serve as symbols representing intrinsic human nature. The servant and old woman also function as symbols which is similar to Hawthorne’s approach to characterizing Pearl in *The Scarlet Letter*. Pearl, the capricious, untamed child of Hester and Dimmesdale, is often described as being elvish, impish, and bird-like, for Pearl is the symbol of the true, instinctive human nature.

Another similarity of “Rashomon” and “Young Goodman Brown” is the dynamic character development in which both protagonists experience a negative epiphany, resulting from their young age. Although Akutagawa does not specify the age of the servant, the “red, festering pimple visible under his stubby whiskers” (35) and the “worn blue kimono” (32) may indicate his youth, for in Japan, the color blue (or green) typically symbolizes immaturity. Because the prototype of youth entails traits such as ignorance, boldness, and recklessness, the youth of Goodman and the servant may be a key characteristic that explains their unwise behaviors leading toward their negative epiphany.

As Goodman leaves for his journey into the wilderness, he bears an unwavering faith:

“Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste” (179). However, in the forest, Goodman undergoes an epiphany, losing his faith and justice. As a result, Goodman reaches a level of insanity: “In truth, all through the haunted forest, there could be nothing more frightful than the figure of Goodman Brown” (184). Because Goodman changes into a depressing, somber individual, the epiphany is clearly a negative one. In “Rashomon,” on the other hand, the servant’s negative epiphany functions in the opposite direction from Goodman’s account. In the beginning, the servant lacks confidence and cannot make up his mind, but the epiphany allows him to gain confidence: “As he listened, a certain courage was born in his heart — the courage which he had not had when he sat under the gate a little while ago” (39). Although the servant justifies his crime, “Then it’s right if I rob you. I’d starve if I didn’t” (39), his reasoning is completely irrational, for the old woman, who is compelled to make wigs out of corpse hair for survival, is clearly more desperate than the servant. The epiphany incited by the servant’s young and feeble mind changes him into a cruel, mischievous being; thus, like Goodman, the servant’s character development exemplifies a negative epiphany.

“Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne probes the problems of the Puritan practices in precolonial America regarding their belief in perfection. Conversely, “Rashomon” by Ryunosuke Akutagawa is derived from a tale in *Konjyaku monogatari shu*, attracting attention to corruption and egoism of a servant of the Heian Period. The works greatly vary in plot, setting,

and cultural and historical background; however, when taking a formalist approach, many similarities can be identified such as the Gothic and Dark Romantic features, themes, symbols, and character development.

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