
Akutagawa Ryunosuke and the Taisho Modernists

by [About Japan Editors](#)

Grade Level

[Secondary](#)

Historical Period

[Taisho \(1912-1926\)](#)

Subject Area

[English and Language Arts](#)

Theme

[Imperial Japan](#)

Topic

[Art](#)

[History-Modern](#)

[Literature](#)

Background Information.

In strict terms, the "Taishō period" refers only to the brief reign of the Taishō Emperor between 1912 and 1925. Much as "Meiji" often refers to a period of reform and social change that began before the Meiji Restoration, however, "Taishō" often is shorthand in discussions of Japanese culture and history for a period of democracy and flourishing popular culture that began in the 1910s and lasted until around 1930. During this era, after the Meiji reforms and before military factions began to exert heavy power over politics and culture, political parties had the balance of power, and mass audience magazines, recorded music, and films propelled a cultural exuberance that American scholars sometimes compare to the Roaring Twenties. (Some signs of the role of mass media in popular culture can be found in the lesson ["The 'I' Novels in the Context of Early 20th Century Japan"](#) in the references to songs and films in Hayashi Fumiko's *Diary of a Vagabond*.)

In literature, new currents appeared alongside the currents of realism seen in the work of Kunikida Doppo and Natsume Sōseki and the personal fictions of "I-novelists." The new currents included modernist experimentation and leftist writing—"Proletarian Literature"—intended to foment a revolution in Japan on the model of the recent revolution in Russia. Although writers of Proletarian Literature tended toward socialist realism, and the modernists toward experiments in language and form, they shared an acute awareness of literary developments outside of Japan. Their sensibility was not entirely new: Doppo, as noted in the lesson ["Changing Times"](#), was inspired by Wordsworth, while Sōseki was well-versed in both English literature and the Chinese classics. What differed in the Taisho period was a sense of "contemporaneity," that is, a sense that Japanese writers could be at the forefront of the latest developments in the literature and culture of the world. Akutagawa Ryunosuke, whose story "In a Grove" is the material for this lesson, was among the greatest of Taishō modernists.

Learning Goals.

1. Students will learn that the Taishō period was a time when modernist writing flourished, and that Japanese modernists considered themselves the contemporaries of modernists in other parts of the world.
 2. Students will explore Akutagawa's experiments with point of view and literary form.
 3. Students will consider ways that "In a Grove" raises questions about the conventions of both realistic literature and writing that focuses on an author's personal experiences.
-

Standards.

Language Arts

1. **McRel Standard 5.** [Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.](#)
2. **McRel Standard 6.** [Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of](#)

literary texts.

3. **McRel Standard 8.** Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

World History

1. **McRel Standard 38.** Understands reform, revolution, and social change in the world economy of the early 20th century.
2. **McRel Standard 42.** Understands major global trends from 1900 to the end of World War II.

Key Concept.

Taishō period modernist literature was consciously part of a more global modernist literary movement, and included numerous experimental styles and almost revolutionary themes common to modernist literature.

Essential Question.

What are the most important themes of Taishō modernist literature, and to what extent are they common to a larger modernist movement in literature from that period?

Thought Questions.

1. What does Akutagawa accomplish by telling the same story from seven viewpoints?
2. What are the motives behind the different characters' accounts of what happened in the grove?
3. What attitude does the story reveal toward writers who put personal experience at the center of their works?

Activities

Focus Activity Ideas.

Have students think of a specific experience from their own lives in which two witnesses (or participants) of the same event recalled it quite differently. To start them toward thinking about the deeper implications of modernist literature, ask which account is "true."

Main Lesson Activity Ideas.

1. Lecture on the literature of the Taishō period and Akutagawa's place in it
 - A. cultural atmosphere of the era
 - B. new currents in literature, including modernism
 - C. Akutagawa's interest in experiments with point of view and narrative form
2. Discussion of the story based on thought questions
 - A. What does Akutagawa accomplish by telling the same story from seven viewpoints?
 - B. What are the motives behind the different characters' accounts of what happened in the grove?
 - C. What attitude does the story reveal toward writers who put personal experience at the center of their works?
3. Show Kurosawa's film *Rashōmon* (88 minutes)
Have students consider the same questions as above based on the film, and consider the differences in their answers based on reading versus viewing.

Summative Activity Ideas.

Ask students to list at least one modern institution in which its philosophical basis is undermined by

the questions raised by modernist novels, and why. (For example, the court system based on eyewitness testimony.)

Resources.

Yu Beongcheon, *Akutagawa: An Introduction* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972). If Yu's book is not available, see Donald Keene, *Dawn to the West: Japanese Literature in the Modern Era* (New York: Henry Holt, 1984), vol. 1, 556-89. Either book provides an introduction to Akutagawa for the general reader.

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke, "In a Grove," trans. Takashi Kojima, *The Oxford Book of Japanese Short Stories*, ed. Theodore W. Goosen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95-102.

Akira Kurosawa, director. *Rashomon*. Criterion, 2002 (originally released 1951). 88 minutes. DVD. *Rashomon* is Kurosawa's film adaptation of "In a Grove."

Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892-1927) was the most prominent protégé of Natsume Sōseki and perhaps Japan's most prominent modernist. Perhaps because he wrote his first story in 1914 and his last in 1927, shortly before his suicide, his career is closely identified with the Taishō period (1912-1924). Akutagawa's work consists mostly of stories, many of which are set in earlier periods. A great number of the stories draw their basic events from other works (both Japanese and European), which has led some critics to regard him as an "unoriginal" writer. Akutagawa seems to have had a greater interest, however, in how stories are told as opposed to what they tell. From this point of view borrowing from other works freed him to experiment with point of view and other aspects of narrative form. He shared his taste for experimentation with many modernists, not only in Japan but also in Europe and North and South America. (Among others, Argentine writer Jorge Borges was especially interested in Akutagawa.)

"In a Grove" ("Yabu no naka," 1922) is among Akutagawa's best known works, in part because it was one of two Akutagawa stories that the director Kurosawa Akira combined in the celebrated film *Rashōmon* (1950; the other story is "Rashōmon," 1915). "In a Grove" consists of seven subjective accounts of the same events. Each account is detailed and thus appears to be accurate, but taken together they suggest that the "witnesses" may have personal motives for giving their versions of the chain of events. Close reading reveals discrepancies among the accounts—for example regarding who killed the husband, how and why the woman fled the grove, and what happened to the husband's short sword.

The kaleidoscopic view of the robbery, murder, and rape is a modernist tour de force. "In a Grove" is not only a work of virtuosic experimentation, however. By choosing three crimes (rather than more trivial affairs) as the story's central events, Akutagawa underscores the importance of the philosophical problems the story raises. If one cannot determine which version of a story—if any—is truthful, then determining guilt is impossible. Moreover, while "In a Grove" demolishes the reliance of literary realism on an omniscient narrator, the story also displays skepticism toward the narrative devices of "I-novels" by Shiga Naoya and other contemporaries, which rely on confession and testimony to present the writer's experience to the reader. Although such writers drew on personal experience to explore issues beyond themselves, the contradictory confessions of Akutagawa's characters warns against mistaking the apparent sincerity of a writer's account of his or her experiences for truthfulness.

[Discuss \(0\)](#)

[Contribute to this Lesson \(0\)](#)

[Printer Friendly](#)

[Email This](#)
