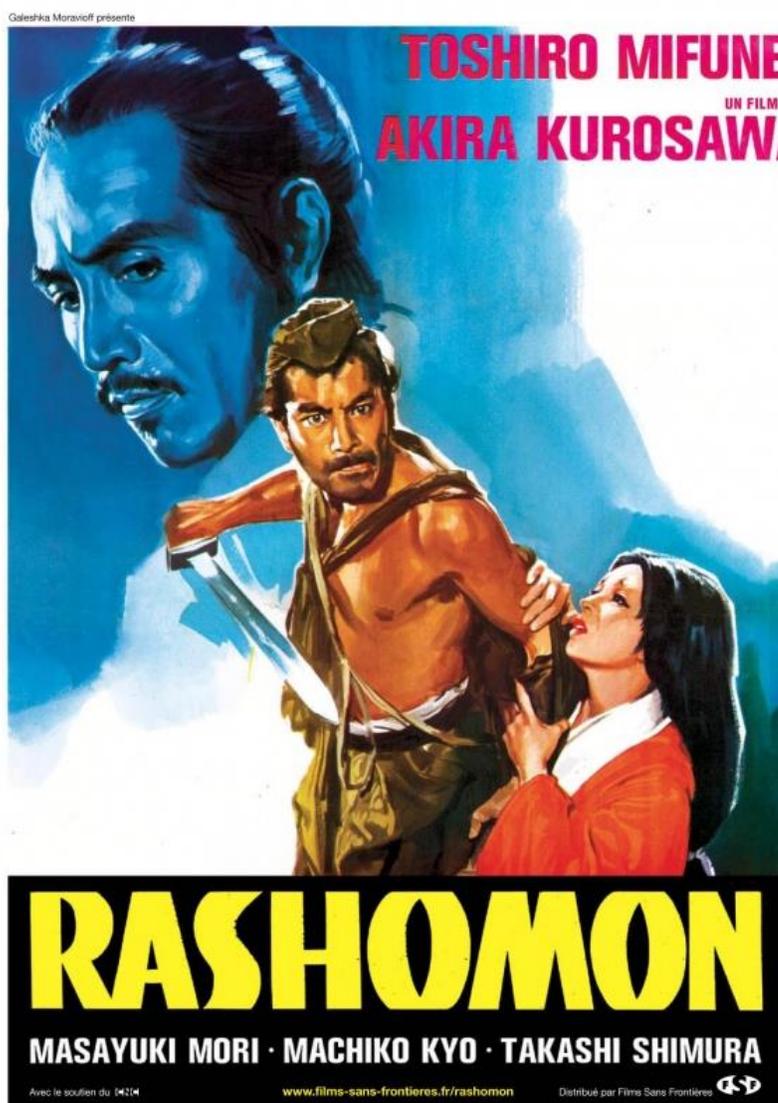


# Rashomon



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed and edited by Akira Kurosawa. Produced by Minoru Jingo. Screenplay by Akira Kurosawa & Shinobu Hashimoto. Based on 'In the Glade' by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa. Cinematography by Kazu Miyagawa. Production design by Takoshi Matsuyama. Original music by Fumio Hayasaka. Cinematic length: 88 minutes. Distributed and produced by Daiei Film. Cinematic Release: August 1950. DVD release 2002. Check for ratings. Rating 95%. All images are from the public domain

## Cast

The Woodcutter: Takahi Shimura

The Priest: Minoru Chiaki

The Commoner: Kichijiro Ueda

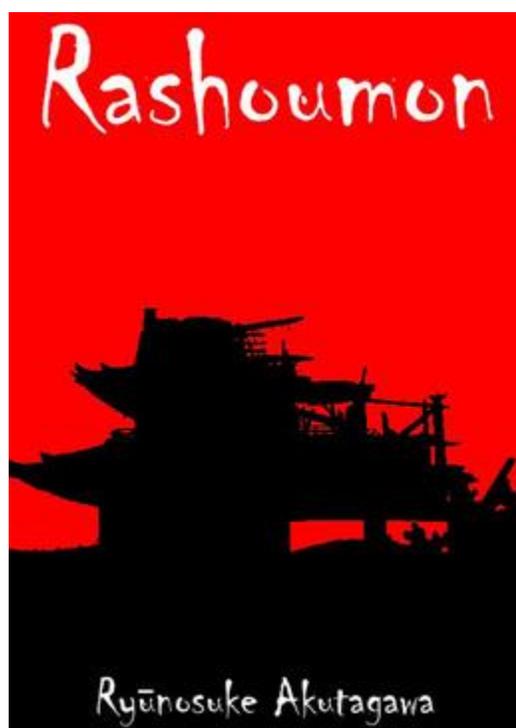
Tajōmaro the bandit: Tishiro Mifune

The wife: Machiko Kyō

The husband: Masayuki Mori

The medium: Noriko Honma

The Policeman: Daisuke Katō



## Review

During a downpour a priest, a wood cutter and a pauper seek shelter in a dilapidated Japanese temple gatehouse named Rashomon. This set has significance that westerners might miss. In Japanese culture the gate functions not so much as an entrance but as a border and a marker between two worlds, the material and the spiritual, the everyday and the otherworldly. The way half the gatehouse has been devastated suggests a shattering of traditional belief, relevant both to the story and to the loss of faith in traditional ways, in certainties and in social structures in Japan after 1945. The gatehouse looks more like something bombed in World War Two than a medieval ruin and this had resonance for 1950 audiences.

Although a subtext involving the post WW2 loss of belief in samurai codes, law, religious belief and edicts from elites can be quickly discerned, the film does not serve as an allegory or a modern tale in Medieval dress, it has its own authentic ambience and creates a believable past world.

The first words spoken in the film are “I do not understand” and the film unfolds as an attempt to understand what really happened in a rape/murder case that has just gone before the courts. *Rashomon* contains many deceptions, ironies and subtle touches, starting with those words, for the character saying them understands more than anyone else in the film. The beginnings of the case unfold as the woodcutter who appears to be puzzled by the case has just testified about finding the murder victim. He narrates to the other two men sheltering at Rashomon how while searching for firewood in the forest he found the evidence for what had happened. Then his narrated flashback begins. The camera goes where his eyes would as he slowly walks, through a beautiful, sometimes sunny, sometimes dappled, yet too quiet forest. The prior narration creates a sense of mystery and trouble and Kurosowa then skilfully builds up a mood, using his editing against his images to create a sense of danger, even sinister mood. The woodcutter finds a woman’s hat and veil and then in a forest glade, he finds cut ropes and a samurai’s hat on the ground. The trail then leads to a dead samurai.

When he finds the samurai’s corpse he screams in horror and in his recounting his urgent tones match the horrible visual image. Kurosawa then plays one of his cinematic tricks as the film goes back to the three men at Rashomon before going to the courts. At this stage we think we have seen and heard everything important that the Japanese woodcutter had to convey but we have

not... His testimony seems only an introductory comment on the trial but really becomes much more.

The story then goes back to the trial. We never see the judge and jury for that is what we are. As the witnesses give their accounts they are frequently placed *almost* centre screen testifying to us. Kurosawa works too cleverly to make his process obvious. The witnesses seldom face the camera directly or look at us levelly, but move around, tilt their heads or avert their gaze. The woodcutter's account comes first, most of this comes to us verbally. Other accounts follow. Everybody initially seems to be telling us the truth. Everything sounds so plausible, but then contradictions between the supposedly true stories emerge and the witnesses disagree among themselves...



*The three men in the ruined temple gatehouse who act as a dramatic chorus*

The longest recounting is the second, that of Tajòmore, the captured bandit turned killer/rapist goes through his testimony as he faces execution.



*The woodcutter finds the corpse*



*The defiant bandit recounts his version in court*

Before beginning his flashback story he admits to being a killer, a thief and a rapist, and then says that as his life will be forfeit, he has no reason to lie and he tells the truth in the story he will recount. Initially this seems reasonable, but much of what he says, being accompanied by braggadocio, sly grins and his continual cynical maniac laugh can easily be interpreted as him seeing his testimony as a sly joke on the gullible. When he says that he had never fought a better swordsman than the husband and that they crossed swords twenty-three times and that it was a hard, prolonged battle to kill him, doubts arise and not just because it sounds like false bravado. We have seen the husband in flashbacks and he does not appear as a fierce, aggressive warrior. He seems overly calm, almost placid and not greatly skilled or daring in his sword fighting. Tajòmore has it over him: what we see here does not go with what we are told about this.



### *The Husband*

In this account the bandit has tied the husband to a tree and then grasps the wife close to him and kisses her against her will, she initially resists clutching him in

*The wife as she first appears, epitomising upper class respectability*



*The wife at the beginning of the tragedy. A pleading vulnerable superficiality quickly reverses into dominance.*



*This still captures some of the grim and sinister reality in one account and Kurosawa's ability to use close ups. His almost seamless editing has often been under rated due to his talents with directing and writing.*

He cannot recall what happened to the valuable samurai knife, which initially sounds a minor matter, but becomes a crucial piece of evidence as the differing fear and resistance, but very soon clutches him in passion while the tied up husband can only watch. The widow recounts another version and then a medium conjures up the spirit of the dead husband who tells yet another very different story. In all of these three accounts the unfolding events happen in a glade, Tajomoro ties the husband up and sees his wife defiled. Tajimoro then cuts him free to fight, but he is found stabbed dead. However what motivates, what each of the participants say and who kills the husband and why are very different in the different versions.

Many reviewers of this film say that *Rashomon* shows truth must remain unknowable, all viewpoints are valid and nothing can be how it seems on the surface. Actually if viewers go with the evidence, read body language, facial expressions and voice tones, they can work out who ultimately tells the truth. An answer to what really happened emerges. A hint... the truth turns out to be often reluctantly told, does not benefit the teller, flatters nobody and may hinge on little things. An irony emerges: the character who says that everybody lies and that it is only human to lie has the truth pried out of him.



*The last shot in the film*

When the trio at Rashomon do work out the truth the commoner becomes cynical about everyone and everything, the priest has his faith in humanity shaken and the woodcutter feels ashamed. The commoner, by taking on Tajòmorò's laugh and facial expressions shows that he takes on the bandit's cynicism, raising the possibility that he might go the same way. The film seems to suggest that nihilism and a Hobbesian view of society appears to be true and therefore justified. Everyone seems to be a self-protecting, self-deluding liar, but then the plot turns...

Upon its initial release in Japan *Rashomon* did not do well at all, either critically or commercially. It was seen as too western in its outlook and influences, a criticism which many have said about Kurosawa's other work in subsequent decades. Others went further, claiming the film was an attack on traditional Japanese values, particularly the samurai code, the virtue of Japanese womanhood, the certainties of religion, law and macho values. In fact it was an alternative to all the certainties that traditional stories upheld as they were retold. Those aspects of Japanese culture had been waning since contact with the West restarted in the 1850s; the 1945 surrender had given them a death blow. By 1950 Kurosawa was attacking faded remnants.

The film may well have been forgotten except for a few people in Europe who could see its greatness and got it shown at European film festivals. From there

*Rashomon* rapidly gained notice. In March 1952 it gained an Oscar for being the most outstanding foreign film shown in America during 1951. For decades this film has been an art house showing regular and has been frequently acclaimed as one of the greatest films ever made by the many famous cinematic filmmakers who credit this work as an inspiration. *Rashomon* was a pioneering work, a bold and welcome break from the certainties of Hollywood formula storytelling.

\*

*Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998)*



