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Tales Grotesque and Curious

Ryūnosuke Akutagawa · *1915–1923 · Glenn W. Shaw translation (1930)*

Eleven short stories by one of Japan's great modern writers, who died in Tokyo in 1927 at the age of thirty-five. The tales draw on medieval Japanese legends, Chinese stories, and the modern world, and many have a sharp irony at their end. This guide takes them as a set of eleven small stories and gives the outline of each.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What do human beings do when pride, fear, hunger, or faith pushes them, and what does the quiet irony of these stories reveal about them?

Akutagawa's answer is told in small cases. A priest is made unhappy by a cure for his nose, a servant chooses theft, a thief calls on a thread from Paradise and loses it by his own selfishness. The author often lets a legend tell the case and leaves the reader to draw the moral, and some of the tales mock the very idea of a moral. The set shows a writer who is learned, cool, and strongly aware of how weak people are.

KEY CHARACTERS

the Naigu
A priest of the long nose.

the lackey
A dismissed servant at Rashōmon.

Kandata
A thief in Hell who once spared a spider, in The Spider's Thread.

Professor Hasegawa
A scholar who reads Strindberg's drama.

Mōri Sensei
A teacher of English remembered by the narrator.

Liu
A man whose life is ruled by his drinking.

Grades 10–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
Legends of the Foreign and the Old
TOBACCO AND THE DEVIL; THE BADGER

In the first tale a devil is said to have brought tobacco to Japan. In The Badger, Akutagawa discusses old records of badgers who took the shape of men and asks what belief is worth.

- The devil's later movements are, the author says, unknown.
- The story reads like a historian's note.
- The badger tale ends with a question of belief, comparing it with Mary on the lake.

02
The Nose
THE NOSE

A priest with an enormous nose is ashamed of it. When he finds a cure, he is relieved, but then people laugh at him more than before.

- The Naigu's long nose is the center of the tale.
- Others' amusement at his cure shows what people like in each other's misfortunes.
- The nose grows back, and he feels light-hearted.

03
The Handkerchief
THE HANDKERCHIEF

Professor Hasegawa is reading about drama when a visit from the mother of a dead student leaves him uneasy about the manners of bushidō.

- The professor is a scholar and educator.
- The scene turns on a small gesture.
- The ending leaves him uncomfortable.

04
The Gate and the Thread
RASHŌMON; THE SPIDER'S THREAD

In Rashōmon, a lackey who has been dismissed shelters at a ruined gate in Kyoto and decides on theft. In The Spider's Thread, the Buddha lets down a thread from Paradise to a man in Hell.

- The lackey's choice is made in the dark.
- The thread of the spider is a test of mercy.
- Paradise, in the last lines, is unmoved.

05
Lice and the Wine Worm
LICE; THE WINE WORM

Samurai on ships bound for a campaign nearly come to blows over lice. In The Wine Worm, a man's drinking is cured and with it his health and fortune.

- The samurai's war is a comedy of the body.
- Liu's fortune goes with his wine.
- The author calls his moral an imitation of Chinese novelists.

06
The Ball and the Pipe
THE BALL; THE PIPE

At a Rokumeikan ball, a young woman meets a foreign naval officer. In The Pipe, a lord's gold pipe teaches him a lesson.

- The Rokumeikan is the show-piece of the new Japan.
- Madame H. recalls the man by his real name, Julian Viaud.
- The pipe is a quiet moral about an object.

07
Mōri Sensei
MŌRI SENSEI

A narrator walks at evening and recalls a teacher of English, Mōri Sensei, whom he finds at last teaching in a café.

- The teacher is a figure of loneliness and dignity.
- The café is a modern setting for an old teacher.
- The last line is a lesson on pronouns.

Irony | Pride and Fear | Mercy | Legends

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 10–12

1. Each tale is short. Notice where each one ends.
2. Several stories draw on old records. Ask why Akutagawa uses them.
3. Rashōmon and The Spider's Thread are among the most famous. Compare their endings.
4. Look for the narrator's voice, often cool, sometimes comic.

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