

## Remarks on *Ugetsu Monogatari* To the memory of the late Prof. Louis Forsdale

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### Introduction

The best of silk of choicest hue  
May change and fade away  
As would love...

This poem captures the overall tone of *Ugetsu Monogatari* (雨月物語), best described by the term “mujo (無常)”. Buddhism teaches us: Nothing in this world is eternal. Everything has an end. This is roughly what “mujo” (i.e., ‘the evanescence of life’) is all about. Buddhism teaches us to accept mortality as it is.

Attachment to “bonno (煩惱)” (‘worldly desires’) is inevitable but only causes anxiety, doubt, conflict, anger, or jealousy in human minds. It only makes people restless and unhappy. In order to reach a peaceful state of mind (“satori (悟り)”), one has to get rid of or overcome this “bonno”.<sup>1</sup> To have “bonno” is to have a bad dream. One has to be wakened from this bad dream to attain a peaceful state of mind: this is often called “satori” in Buddhism, which means ‘spiritual enlightenment’. “Bonno” is a problem and “satori” is its solution. “Satori” is the product of the most exalted human mind illuminated by wisdom to the point where all shadow of “bonno” has been dispelled. The goal of Buddhism is “satori”. The follower must perceive the ultimate reality by searching within himself. No writing, no master, no teaching can help one achieve “satori”.

*Ugetsu Monogatari* seems to follow, in part but in an important way, the spirit of Buddhism. “Mujo”, the tone of this film, highlights the sad nature of human beings, which derives from the inevitability of “bonno”. Salvation comes only from the overcoming of “bonno” by realizing “mujo”, and accepting it (“mujokan (無常観)”). This is what Buddhism teaches. However, man is a weak being. There is hardly a man without “bonno”. One knows that it is useless and vain to pursue worldly desires and yet one is inevitably enthralled to them. I think that the central theme of this film is the cause-and-effect relationship between man and “bonno”.

### Characters

Two villagers, Genjuro (源十郎) and Tobei (藤兵衛), are eager to earn big money by making pots. Genjuro wants to buy kimonos and food for his wife and child so as to prove, I think, his “kaisho (甲斐性)”. A man’s “kaisho” may be translated as a man’s

<sup>1</sup> Overcoming one’s “bonno” is sometimes called “gedatsu” (‘emancipation’) in Buddhism.

“power” or “ability” to supply for the needs of his family or company. Often a man who can afford to buy expensive luxuries (e.g., cars, yachts, furs or jewelry) for his woman is regarded as having “kaisho” and he is somewhat respected, if not openly and if not by all people, in Japan. The concept may be becoming old-fashioned but it may still be a dream for many Japanese men to have “kaisho”, to be able to afford expensive things for their women. I think that Genjuro, too, wanted to show this by buying his wife beautiful kimonos. Also, possibly, he wants to have his pot-making skills recognized by others as well as his wife.

On the other hand, Tobei wants to buy a suit of armor to become a warrior, possibly, to prove that he is a worthy man. He is always scorned by his wife, being a loser. And he wants to rise in the world. Also, living in a small village, both Genjuro and Tobei are rather attracted to the flamboyant city. What does all this mean? When they devote themselves to making pots, they become enslaved to “bonno”, which is the major point I want to emphasize throughout this paper.

What about their wives, Miyagi (宮木) and Ohama (阿浜)? Genjuro’s wife, Miyagi is a ‘perfect’ mother and wife, perhaps too perfect to be true. She is the only person (except her child and the Buddhist monk), who is impeccable, buddhistic and moralistic. Miyagi appears to be a weak and frail woman. However, she is spiritually the strongest (most stable and consistent) and the healthiest of all the characters. She has firm faith. For example, she took her child back to her village and saved him despite her fatal wound. This was possible because of her firm faith. Her spirit came to see Genjuro after her death, which led him to his “satori”. She is the only buddhist and she becomes a buddha in the end.

She is against Genjuro’s earning money, but helps him make pots as a faithful wife. By contrast, Tobei’s wife, Ohama, is not against earning money. She says, “It’s O.K. if they’re trying to earn money, isn’t it?” Genjuro, Tobei, and Ohama are ordinary people and have their weaknesses as humans. These weaknesses lead them to have misgivings which we will discuss later. Ohama is attached to her man. Later, in the house of prostitution, she cries, “How many times I tried to kill myself! But I couldn’t, until I saw you once again!” She hates the man who brought her misery and hates herself because she cannot forget that man. Her heart is filled with love and hatred for Tobei. She, too, has the sadness of human nature (“saga (性)” or “go (業)” in Japanese). In this sense, she is closer to Wakasa. (Mizoguchi seems to have been attracted to the mystery and depth of love, of a woman’s “saga”, but there is no space to discuss this matter here.)

The last of the five main characters is a lustful woman, Wakasa (若狭). She is the daughter of a warrior who was killed by Oda Nobunaga and whose spirit cannot rest in peace because of his anger and hatred for Nobunaga. His spirit lingers around Wakasa’s mansion. Wakasa is also enthralled to “bonno”. She is a child of desire, a phantom attached to this world after death because she did not know “onnarashii oshiwase (女

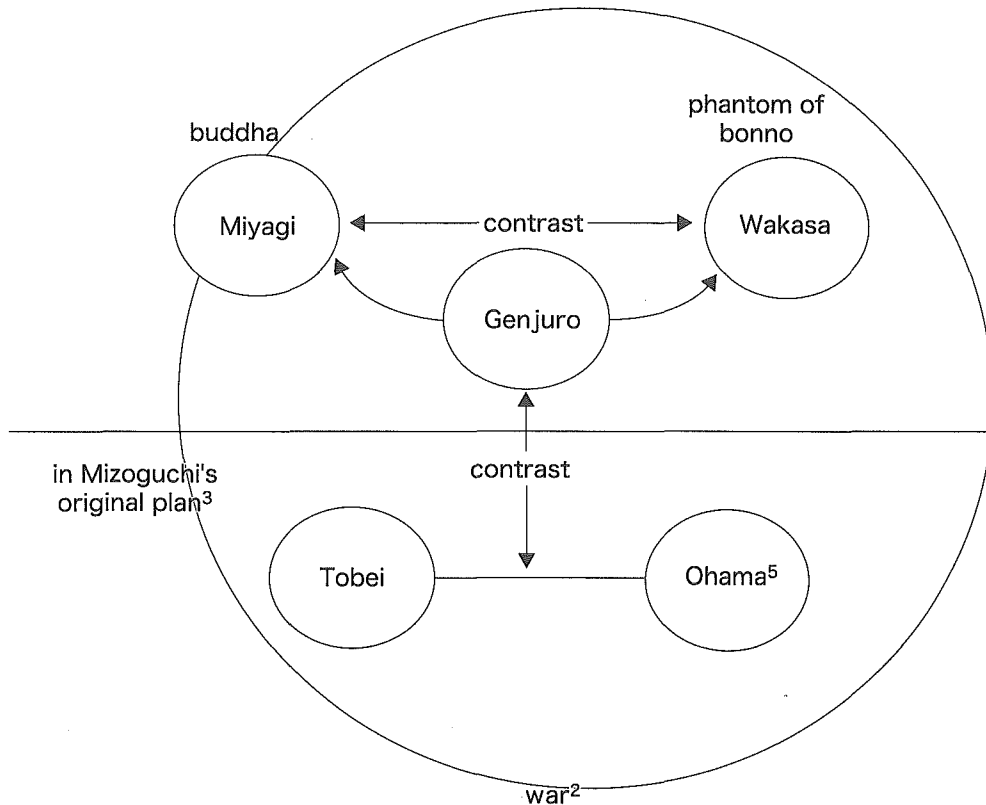


chart 1

らしいお幸せ)” (which means “the happiness of being a woman” or “of married life”). She tries to lure Genjuro to fulfil her desires (because he was just the kind of man she was looking for, another person full of desire). Wakasa and Genjuro are like a (+) and (–) of an electrode.

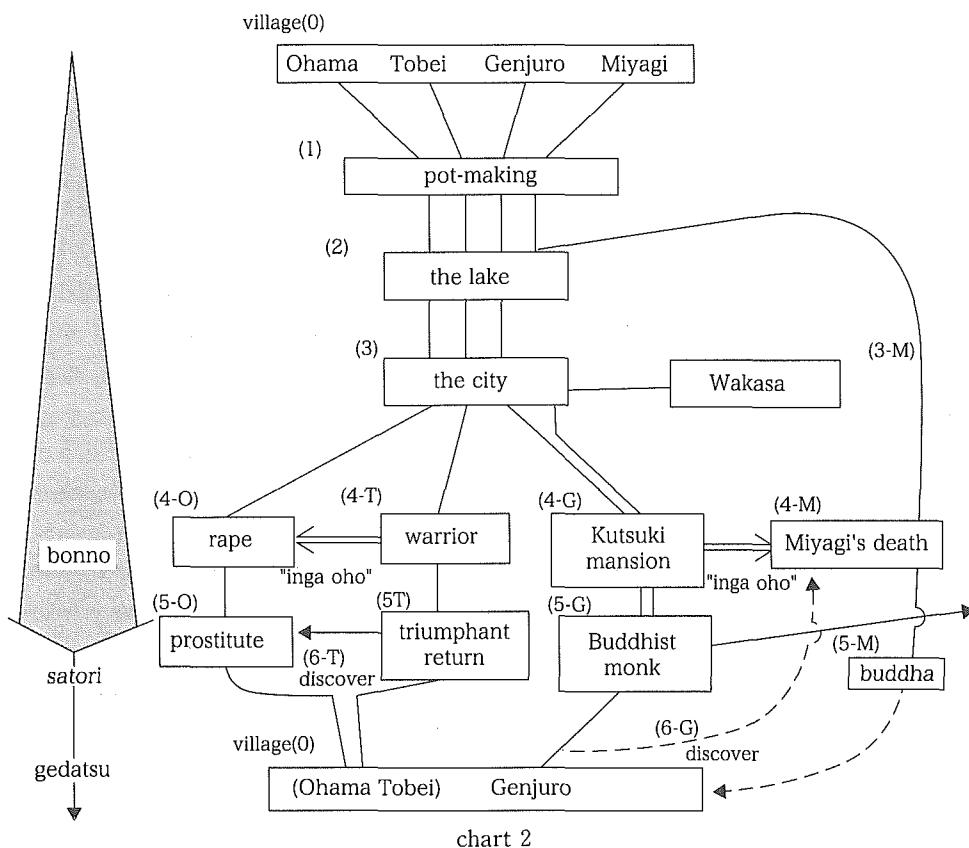
The relationships between the main characters in this film can be illustrated in a chart as follows: Tobei, Ohama and Genjuro are ordinary people with human weaknesses. Miyagi is rather a godlike person, ideal and ‘perfect’. Miyagi and Wakasa represent two opposite poles, so to speak. Genjuro swings between moralistic Miyagi and immoral Wakasa. The characters of Tobei and Ohama, both victims of “bonno”, were conceived to establish a contrast between Genjuro and Miyagi in Mizoguchi’s original plan but the dramatic contrast between the saved (Genjuro and Miyagi) and unsaved (Tobei and Ohama) is somewhat weakened in Daiei’s version.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Again, this film is about a man enthralled to “bonno”. We may note that the social background is that of the war, during which everyone seeks their own selfish goals. Everyone is obsessed by “bonno”.

<sup>3</sup> Sarris, A. “Ugetsu; A Meditation on Mizoguchi.” In P. Nobile (Ed.), *Favorite Movies: Critic’s Choice*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1973: p.67.

### The Plot

Let us briefly look at chart 2 (a simplified story of the film, *Ugetsu Monogatari*) and see how “bonno” becomes increasingly dominant in the minds of Genjuro and Tobei. Genjuro and Tobei are enthralled to “bonno” (to earn money to show a man’s “kaisho” in the case of Genjuro, and to become a worthy man or a warrior in the case of Tobei). In (1), they devote themselves to making pots.<sup>4</sup> In (2), they cross the lake and in (3), they go to the city to sell the pots. In (4-G), Genjuro is seen by Wakasa and is led to her mansion. He lives with her, forgetting everything else. He is on top of the world and here, his “bonno” is greater than ever. He is trotting down the road to disaster. In (5-G), however, with a little help from a Buddhist monk, he is saved. And in (6-G), after Miyagi’s death, he learns a lesson and attains the state of “satori”. In (0), he devotes himself to making pots quietly in his village. It seems that the monk saves Genjuro, but, more precisely, I think the monk has given a chance to Genjuro to reach the stage of “satori”. Before reaching salvation, he has to wait for Miyagi’s death.



<sup>4</sup> The background music for the pot-making scene is the kind of music played at a “matsuri” (‘festival’) in which an “oni” (‘ogre’ or ‘devil’) dances. The term “oni” is often applied to someone who is absorbed in doing something.

By contrast, in (4-T), Tobei becomes a warrior in an unjustified way and wants to return home triumphantly (5-T). In (6-T), he finds out that his wife, Ohama, has become a prostitute. He gets rid of his “bonno”. In (0), he returns to his village and works harder than ever.

In (1) both Miyagi and Ohama help their husbands make pots (but for somewhat different reasons as mentioned before). Ohama is not against her husband’s making money whereas Miyagi is against it, though she obediently helps her husband as a typical Japanese wife. This difference leads to different consequences. In (2), Ohama crosses the lake with Tobei and Genjuro, and in (3), goes to the city. She loses sight of Tobei in the crowd and finds herself alone, which results in her having misgivings. In (4-O), she is raped and in (5-O), becomes a prostitute (“inga oho (因果応報)”, discussed later). Miyagi does not cross the lake (2). She remains alone. In (3-M), she heads for her village with her child and in (4-M), is killed by a soldier (“inga oho”). However, in (5-M), she becomes a buddha and meets Genjuro again in the village. She gives salvation to Genjuro. The woman who desired money (Ohama) is disgraced and becomes a prostitute (and is never saved in Mizoguchi’s original plan). The one who was opposed to earning money, Miyagi, is killed but becomes a buddha and saves her beloved husband.

## **1. Bonno and Man**

In the beginning of the film, the village master observes Genjuro, who is filled with insatiable desires to make money, and says to Miyagi, “When he gets money, it’ll only make him want more.” Once enthralled to “bonno”, you never know when your desire is completely satisfied.

### **1.1 The Pot**

In the pot making scene, Miyagi says, “War changes men.” Here, ‘war’ is used in close relation to “bonno”. In wartime, people pursue their own desires. Everyone is enthralled to “bonno”. In the film, villagers are separated from their families and forced to become soldiers. Women are raped. Rice is taken away. People become selfish and concerned only with their own welfare, ignoring others’ feelings and rights.

Miyagi also says that Genjuro “is restless as if his character has changed...” A person in pursuit of his desires becomes restless because he is eager to fulfill his desires. He never knows when to stop. Once he has satisfied one desire, he has another, and another so that he can never rest as the village headmaster says. He has endless desires. This is the nature of “bonno”.

Genjuro and the villagers hide themselves in the mountains to escape the battle fire, which was spreading over the village. Yet, Genjuro cannot give up his pots, saying, “I can’t let the fire of the kiln go out.” He dashes back to his village. When one is enthralled to “bonno”, one cannot easily put out the fire (of “bonno”); he only thinks of his desires

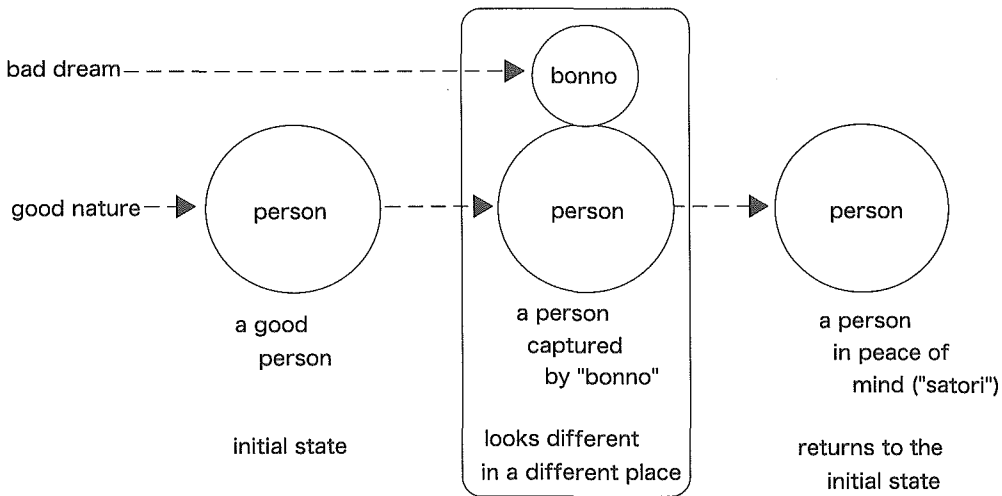


chart 3

and forgets everything else. Genjuro runs the risk of being killed and returns to his kiln. Miyagi says, "He has thrown his body and soul into the kiln." The fire of the kiln went out. Yet, strangely enough, the pots were baked. It is as if they were baked by the fire of Genjuro's strong "bonno" ('passion'). There is a cliché: "bonno no honoo ni mi o yakitsukusu (煩惱の炎に身を焼き尽す)", which is literally translated as "the flame of 'bonno' burns one out".

What does the pot mean in this film? Genjuro says "I feel pots are like my children." Indeed, pots are the children who mirror his soul enslaved to "bonno". They are the products of Genjuro's "bonno"; they glitter with his desires. Wakasa says, "They glitter as if encrusted with crystals." She continues, "Such a beautiful thing could only be made by an able person like you." Such a 'beautiful' pot could be made only by a person filled with desires like Genjuro. And Genjuro's pot caught Wakasa's attention in the crowd; she couldn't believe her eyes when she found another man enthralled to "bonno". From Wakasa's point of view, she has finally found the man she had been looking for. When Wakasa says that she wants to "drink sake from a vessel baked by a man like Genjuro," she wants Genjuro himself and wants to share life and desire with him.<sup>5</sup>

"I've never seen my pots looking so beautiful," says Genjuro. He continues, "how men and things look different in different places!" In Buddhism, a person is good by nature. He is the same good person whether he has "bonno" or not. Having "bonno" is like having a bad dream or being captured by a bad spirit. His deeds may be bad but it is not because he is a bad person. He is only weak. Therefore, when he wakes from his bad dream and

<sup>5</sup> It is usual to drink sake in turn at parties and feasts in Japan. Also in the Shinto wedding ceremony, a bride and groom drinks sacred sake as the nuptial oath. Drinking from the same cups, the couple vows to lead a happy life together. Here, exchanging drinks with Wakasa metaphorically meant a wedding from her point of view, although Genjuro might not have noticed it.

gets rid of his “bonno”, he returns to his initial state, the same good person.

Genjuro’s pots look so beautiful because they are in Wakasa’s mansion. It is as though the pots glittered in response to Wakasa’s desires.

## 1.2 The Lake

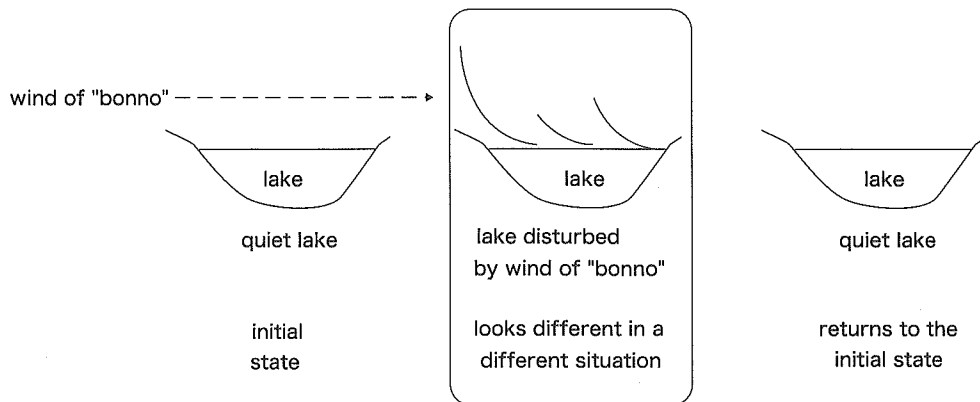
The lake scene is metaphoric and symbolic. This scene symbolizes the entering of the dream world.<sup>6</sup> Yet, what kind of a dream? A bad dream? A dream of “bonno”? The lake is foggy and misty as if the mind were clouded with “bonno”. A human mind enthralled to “bonno” is often referred to as a clouded mirror<sup>7</sup> or, possibly, as a lake whose water is stirred by the wind and whose surface is not clear. It cannot reflect things properly.<sup>8</sup> To reach the state of “satori”, the wind has to die down and the fog has to clear up. And the surface of the lake must be still and clear with nothing disturbing it. The lake has to return to the initial state of peacefulness and silence.<sup>9</sup>

If the lake in the film is the lake of “bonno”, crossing it means entering the world (or dream) of “bonno”. Japanese people might associate this scene of crossing the lake with crossing the “sanzu no kawa” (‘river of death’). The scene anticipates something wrong when a wounded man in a boat warns them; “Be careful because the fog is heavy”. “Pirates are everywhere.” It implies that people with “bonno” are awaiting them. And those who cross the lake - Genjuro, Tobei, and Ohama - undergo hardship afterwards. Genjuro is attracted to Wakasa; this causes Miyagi’s death. Tobei seeks fame and commits murder; this causes Ohama to be raped and to become a prostitute. Ohama, having been raped, becomes a prostitute, filled with love and hatred for Tobei. Miyagi,

<sup>6</sup> Yoda, T. “Letters Written by Mizoguchi to Yoda Yoshikata”. Cited in Morris, P., Mizoguchi Kenji. Ottawa : Canadian Film Institute, 1967, p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> Yanagida, S. Zen Shiso. Tokyo : Chuokoronsha, 1975, pp. 62-106.

<sup>8</sup> This idea comes from “Daijokishinron” (cf. Umehara, T. Bukkyo no Shiso. Tokyo : Kadokawa, 1980, pp. 183-188).



The essential nature of the lake remains the same throughout. (See also chart 3.)

Chart 4

who did not cross the lake, becomes a buddha.

There are several instances implying that “bonno” is a dream. At the beginning of this film, Ohama complains, “He’s (Tobei’s) only dreaming!” It is like having a bad dream when one is entranced to “bonno”. He becomes blind to reality. Incidentally, in the city, Tobei is attracted by the warriors on horseback. Ohama tries to stop him but in vain. Tobei grabs the money and dashes off to buy a suit of armor. (He, too, thinks only of his desire and neglects her safety as Genjuro does, and this leads to Ohama being raped.) Ohama cries, “Don’t look at them!” (You’ll go blind!) There is a Japanese expression “kane (or diamond) ni me ga kurami...” which means “become blind because of the desire for money (or diamonds).” A person with desires cannot see anything but money (or diamonds). He is not able to see the truth or what is more important in life. Money (or diamonds) become his truth.

Genjuro, too, twists reality and sees only what he wants to see. “Bonno” creates an illusion. In Wakasa’s mansion, Genjuro “sees” two maids lighting candles in one room after another, but it turns out to be an illusion afterwards. Indeed, Genjuro’s whole experience with Wakasa is a dream, a dream of “bonno”. To get rid of “bonno”, Genjuro has to be ‘awaken’ from the dream. Yet, Wakasa does not want him to wake up. When Genjuro wakes after spending the first night at her mansion, she says, “It’s too early to wake. You should sleep more.” And so he does; he indulges in his dream. However, Genjuro finally ‘wakes’ from his dream, waving a sword crazily in the air. A sword was believed to have spiritual power in Japan. “Fudo-myō-ō (不動明王)” (Aryacalanatha) who conquers devils holds a sword in his right hand. “Monju Bosatsu (文殊菩薩)” (Bodhisattva) has a sword with which he destroys greed in human beings.<sup>10</sup> Genjuro waved the sword as if attempting to get rid of his “bonno”.

## 2 Salvation<sup>11</sup>

### 2.1 Satori

Genjuro himself does not fit in with Wakasa’s beautiful mansion as “his pots do not”. At first, Genjuro might have been suspicious of Wakasa, thinking that she may be an evil spirit, but he soon becomes hers, as Wakasa says. Wakasa captured Genjuro’s soul. He indulges in Wakasa and forgets everything else. He thinks that this is heaven on earth. Miyagi is ‘perfect’ as mother and wife, but she does not display any sexuality. Wakasa is, in contrast, a voluptuous woman. This is, I think, why Genjuro was attracted to

<sup>10</sup> cf. Suzuki, D. *Zen and Japanese Culture*, 1977; p.63, translated by Kitagawa, M.

<sup>11</sup> Quite symbolically, rape takes place in a small buddhist shrine in the mountains. In this scene, a “Miroku bosatsu” image appears and a Noh chorus which sounds like a sutra is recited in the background. Why was Ohama raped in such a place? Two interpretations are possible. It may be an irony that men are behaving so immorally in a sacred place. Interpreted this way, the sutra may be a funeral song for the immoral men. A second interpretation is that the rape scene has something to do with salvation. “Miroku bosatsu” is said to come down to earth to save all the people at the end of this world. Even men like rapists should be saved and so should disgraced women. Buddhism is a religion of “jishi”, (‘love’ or ‘compassion’), which forgives and saves every being. Salvation is an underlying theme of this film.



Wakasa. Genjuro wanted Miyagi to make herself noticed as an attractive and expensively dressed woman, as a possession which other men might covet. He wanted to dress Miyagi with beautiful kimonos. He did not buy anything special for himself. He does not seem to be attached to money alone; he is willing to spend money to buy Miyagi expensive kimonos. Genjuro was perhaps somewhat unsatisfied with a 'perfect' mother and wife, Miyagi. He wanted a 'woman' and I think, this is why Wakasa, the woman of women, saw him and crept into his mind. When Genjuro was daydreaming at a kimono shop, Wakasa and her nurse appeared. Genjuro's daydreaming was part of his "bonno" or desire for womanly Miyagi in a beautiful kimono. One way to show a man's "kaisho" may be, it is considered, to escort a gorgeous 'woman'. Genjuro's desire begot desire when Wakasa appeared.<sup>12</sup>

However, Genjuro "desired what he should not," as a Buddhist monk says. Genjuro does the opposite of what he should do, according to Buddhism. Indeed, he is heading towards death. A monk happens to see Genjuro's face, his "bonno" and a sign of death on his face. The monk wrote buddhist scriptures on Genjuro's body. Genjuro awakens from his bad dream and returns to his village; thus, he is saved from the clutches of death.

Yet, Genjuro's awakening from his dream comes only after he has lost his money and sword. This is known as "honrai muichibutsu (本来無一物)" in Buddhism, which means that in order to reach the state of "satori", one has to return to the starting point, a time when one had nothing. One has to purify oneself by getting rid of any "kegareta mono (汚れたもの)" (or 'dirty things') such as money, beautiful clothes and fame. A similar thing is said of Tobei. He too enters the village and returns to what he was before, discarding what he had yearned for and treasured so much, swords and all.

If we view the process through which Genjuro rids himself of Wakasa in terms of these themes in the film, then we see Wakasa symbolically as a phantom or monster of "bonno". However, this interpretation may be too simplistic from Wakasa's point of view.<sup>13</sup>

Wakasa is also enslaved to "bonno". She is attached to this world so much that she awakes from her death to satisfy her desires as a woman. She finds her prince, Genjuro, and enjoys her dream thoroughly. Yet a happy dream does not last for ever. Wakasa's beloved man tries to go away. Even if she is a phantom, she is very human. Her feelings about Genjuro are typically a woman's feelings for her lover.<sup>14</sup>

In one scene, Wakasa worries about Genjuro's coming home late. She might have

<sup>12</sup> Attitudes such as these, which were prevalent in the male-dominated society of the time, now appear old-fashioned.

<sup>13</sup> Katsukura, T. Ugetsu Monogatari Kosoron. Tokyo: Kyoiku Shuppan Center, 1977, pp.282-310.

<sup>14</sup> Though Wakasa is a phantom, her feelings represent those of all women who are in love or, more generally, those of all human beings. We may interpret the scenes from Genjuro's viewpoint or Wakasa's, and our interpretation differs depending on which viewpoint we take. Human feelings in general are, I think, what is explored here. After all, does not every one of us have a little of Genjuro and a little of Wakasa in us?

imagined all kinds of bad things. Is he seeing another woman? Has he changed his mind? Has he gone? For ever? No, no, he will be back. He loves me... Wakasa is overjoyed when Genjuro comes back with beautiful presents for her. Being flattered, she knows that her worry was unnecessary. This is now the happiest moment of her life.

Yet, the very next moment, she senses that something is wrong. Again, she starts worrying; she fears losing Genjuro and wants to take him back to her homeland, which means 'death' to Genjuro. Soon, she knows that she was betrayed by him. She was denied, feeling ashamed. Wakasa's feelings go back and forth between love, hatred, anger and shame. She knows that Genjuro no longer loves her. Yet she cannot stop wanting him. Wakasa is very attached to Genjuro, to the desires which she could not satisfy when she was alive. She wants to stay with Genjuro 'for ever and ever'. And yet she knows that nothing lasts for ever - beautiful kimonos, woman's beauty, youth, life and man's affection.

Incidentally, the word "Wakasa" corresponds phonetically to the word for 'youth' in Japanese. Mizoguchi might have used this name intentionally but we cannot be sure. Also, where she lives is "yamakage no Kutsuki yashiki (Kutsuki mansion in the shadow of the mountains)." In Japanese, "kageno kutsuki" means 'die or decay without being known to the world', which expresses her lot.

Wakasa sings,

*The best of silk of choicest hue  
May change and fade away  
As would love...*

Wakasa knows that everything in this world is mortal and yet she cannot accept it. She cannot overcome her "bonno". This is the sad nature of Wakasa. Man's heart filled with desires is like a barren field. The scene where Genjuro is led to Wakasa's mansion symbolically expresses this. Three people, Wakasa, her nurse, and Genjuro (all slaves of desire), pass through the deserted field filled with "susuki" and reach the desolated and decayed mansion. To "susuki" (eulalia), Japanese attach the image of autumn, sadness, or something decayed or deserted. Incidentally, Wakasa's mansion is called Kutsuki mansion. Written in Japanese, kutsuki looks like this: 朽木. The first character means 'decay' or 'rot'. The second means 'tree'.

The subsequent scene beautifully expresses the idea that "bonno" is a 'shadow' cast on the human mind. (Three shadows pass by.) Also, when Wakasa comes into the room from behind the screen, she pauses where we see her shadow first. And the scene becomes dark and shadowy when Wakasa's father, another slave of "bonno", starts singing.

Wakasa's song is heard once again when Genjuro wakes from his dream in the tumble-down mansion. It arouses even more sadness when we think of her feelings and her

strong attachment to her dreams. All her hopes are dashed, as her mansion is torn down. This scene reminds me of the “haiku (俳句)” : Summer grasses- / All that remains / Of soldiers’ visions.<sup>15</sup> Basho wrote this at the ‘Castle on the Height’ where Yoshitsune, a Minamoto General and his faithful followers were killed by the armies of his jealous brother. This “haiku” again sings about “mujo” in this world : there are only grasses now where once warriors flourished and pursued their “bonno”.

Has Wakasa’s soul been saved? We do not know. Her soul may still be wandering in this world, hopeless, as her father’s soul is. Genjuro saw Wakasa’s vain effort to cling to her desires. He saw himself in her. He, perhaps, realized the sadness of “bonno”, of the man who lives in the evanescent world. And his realization deepens with Miyagi’s death.

## 2.2 Miyagi’s Role

In the lake scene, Genjuro left Miyagi alone and in danger, which is why he is partly responsible for her death. His going after his selfish desires brought about unhappiness. This cause-and-effect relation is known as “inga oho (因果応報)” in Buddhism. “Inga oho” represents the negative side of one’s bad deeds (i.e., ‘seeking “bonno”’). However, from Genjuro’s point of view, Miyagi’s death means something more.

In Buddhism, there is a saying : “bonno soku bodai (煩惱即菩提)”, which means that a person who has experienced “bonno” can have “buddhahood as a state of supreme enlightenment transcending worldly desires and evil passion”.<sup>16</sup> Genjuro has experienced “bonno” and reached a state of “satori”.

A similar thing is said of Tobei and Ohama. Tobei gives up his fame when he confronts miserable Ohama. He notices his deeds caused unhappiness on the part of Ohama. Tobei follows Ohama’s words : “Don’t waste my ordeal.” I am not sure if Tobei has reached the same stage of “satori” as Genjuro has. However, Tobei knows he was wrong. He has learned a lesson.

What about Miyagi? I think that Miyagi has become a buddha. She did not, however, go through the “bonno-satori” process because she was a buddhistic person throughout. Let us recall the discussion of Miyagi’s character ; that is, she is a “perfect” mother and wife but does not flaunt her sexuality (whereas Wakasa is a coquettish woman, good and weak, lustful yet attractive). Miyagi is a buddhist, ‘perfect’ in a moral sense ; she is not a woman with all kinds of human weaknesses. She never does anything wrong. She is happy with beautiful kimonos not because she likes luxury but because of her husband’s thoughtfulness. Perhaps we may say that Miyagi was not totally correct when she refused to give food to hungry soldiers. This might be the reason that Miyagi had to die. Yet, she refused, because her child was also hungry.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Bownas, G. and Thwaite, A., *The Penguin Book of Japanese Verse*. Middlesex ; Penguin Books Ltd., 1964.

<sup>16</sup> Yamaguchi, M. and Kojima, S. *A Cultural Dictionary of Japan*. Tokyo : The Japan Times, Ltd., 1979, p.305.

At this point, it might be useful to compare the last scene with Ueda Akinari's original text<sup>17</sup> (although I will not go into detail here because it is not my purpose to offer a systematic comparison of the film with the original text). Both in the original and in Mizoguchi's film, Miyagi's spirit appears to welcome her husband and he believes that she is still alive. But in the original, Miyagi is described as a sexier woman (Katsukura, 1978), and she lies next to him when he returns. In the film, she mends (probably her husband's) kimono until dawn. Also Miyagi in the film is always with her child, which, I think, emphasizes her role as a mother, while in the original, Miyagi does not have a child:

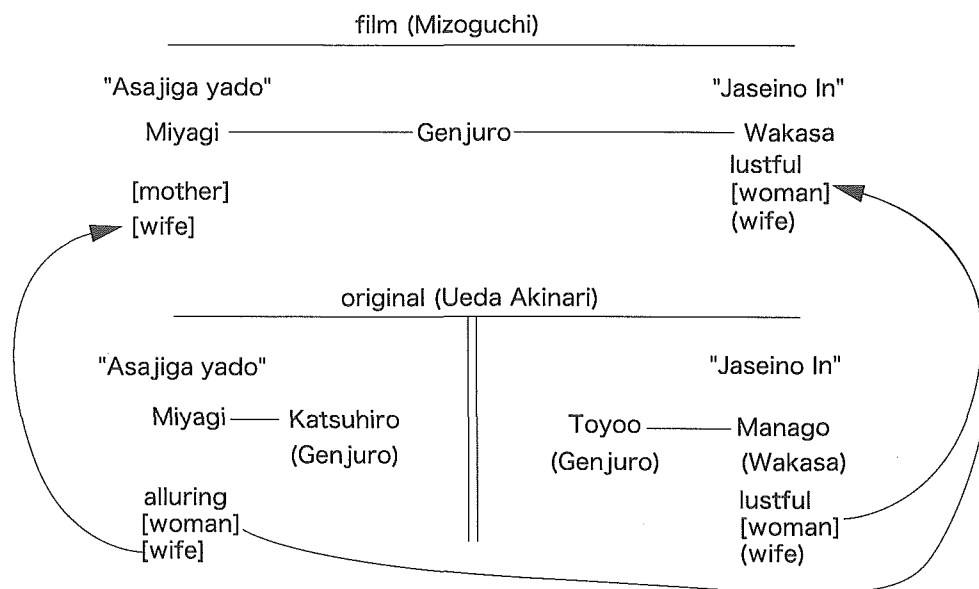


chart 5

In the original "Asajiga Yado (浅茅が宿)" (by Ueda Akinari), Miyagi is portrayed as a wife and a woman. In the film, combining the two stories into one and introducing Wakasa, the lustful 'woman' character (from another story, "Jaseino In (蛇性の淫)"), Miyagi's sexual character is de-emphasized and her non-sexual side as mother and wife is emphasized. This technique is more effective, I think, in the film.

In a traditional Japanese marriage ceremony, the bride wears a big white cloth around her head. It is called "tsuno kakushi (角隠し)" which literally means 'horn concealer'. "Tsuno" is a woman's jealousy and "tsuno kakushi" is to hide the bride's jealousy and other passionate feelings a woman has, perhaps, toward men and perhaps, connected with sexuality, which, I think, are again "bonno". I do not know if I can relate this to Miyagi's covering her head, but it is interesting to think that she does not show any such feelings: jealousy, sexual feelings, i.e., "bonno". She appears without a covering before Genjuro in

<sup>17</sup> Ueda, A. *Ugetsu Monogatari* (Nihon Bungaku Zenshu 13). translated by Onchi, A. Tokyo: Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 1961, pp.17-25, pp.42-59.

the end but then she has become a buddha.

Miyagi's role in relation to Genjuro is to offer salvation to him as a buddha. Miyagi saved Genjuro's soul. However, her attitude is rather passive throughout. She does not force him to stop making pots nor to stop going to the city. It seems that she does not do anything special to save him. Perhaps this is due to the following : in Buddhism, one has to learn the lesson by oneself as mentioned before. Perhaps Miyagi, besides being a typically obedient wife, knew this.

Miyagi sheds tears when she meets Genjuro again in their home. What do her tears mean? Perhaps they were a mixture of relief and sadness. She was happy because Genjuro became the ideal person she always wanted him to be. She was also relieved to see him come back safely to his village. And yet, at the same time, her tears were an expression of sorrow. Genjuro came back when he woke from his illusions. And when they were able to start life over, she was no longer alive. Miyagi says, "Perhaps, that's what life is." Perhaps, that's what the evanescent life is. Miyagi lamented. And Genjuro realizes this to be the 'meaning' of her death.

Genjuro's pursuit of his "bonno" caused Miyagi's death, which, in turn, led Genjuro's soul to a state of salvation. Genjuro returned to the 'village' - i.e., to the initial stage in which he did not have any worldly desires. The last shot, which is the same as the opening shot, suggests this point symbolically. It is seen through the eyes of Miyagi who (along with other ancestors) are watching and protecting Genjuro and her village as a buddha.

### **Final Remarks**

Why do we sympathize with Wakasa, who is an evil spirit and lures poor Genjuro to his downfall? Traditionally, Japanese people tend to see mortal things as beautiful. For example, they praise the beauty of cherry blossoms ; cherry blossoms are beautiful especially when they are scattered by the wind. I think that they are beautiful because they silently accept, in the eyes of Japanese, mortality. Metaphorically, cherry blossoms have the courage to cut the ties to "bonno". On the other hand, it is said that the way camelias fall is "ugly", because camelias, it is said, refuse to die until the last moment.<sup>18</sup> Cherry blossoms accept 'death', camelias cling to 'life'. We praise cherry blossoms because we know that to accept mortality is difficult. We praise the capacity in a person to cut ties to worldly desires. "Bonno" is a human desire to turn the 'beautiful' mortal into the 'ugly' immortal. However, "bonno" is the weakness of all human beings. We know that it is easy to fall for worldly things. This is, I think, why we sympathize with Wakasa in this film. (Perhaps, Mizoguchi sympathizes with Wakasa, who is a symbol of all passionate women enthralled to "bonno", for similar reasons.)

Finally, what is the message of this film? Life is fleeting but we must accept it, no matter how difficult it is, because it is only when we accept the evanescence of life that

<sup>18</sup> Along with this, camelias remind us of a head cut off before falling to the ground.

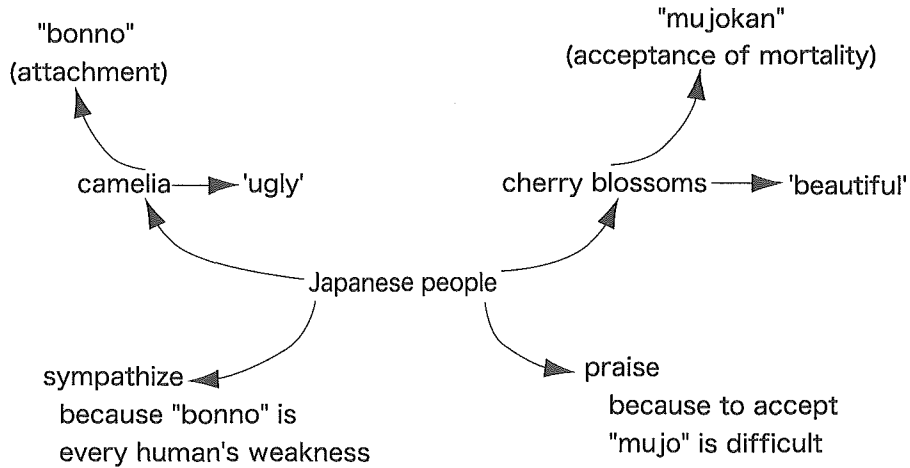


chart 6

we are saved. I think that Ugetsu Monogatari suggests this point. Back in 600 A.D., Yamanoue no Okura (山上憶良) wrote ;

We grudge life moving on  
 But we have no redress  
 I would become as those  
 Firm rocks that see no change  
 But I am a man in time  
 And time must have no stop<sup>19</sup>

The theme of this poem is in sympathy with that of Ugetsu Monogatari encapsulated in Wakasa's song :

The best of silk of choicest hue  
 May change and fade away  
 As would love...

This film tells of the sadness in man, and sadness comes from "bonno" in the impermanent world of "mujo". Yet, it also tells us that realization of the fleeting impermanence of life can bring salvation.

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<sup>19</sup> Bownas, G. and Thwaite, 1964, p.40.

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