

JAPAN 345

Essay 1

Aaron Bame

2/9/2018

By the end of World War I, only 50 years had passed since Japan lifted its isolation, and Japan's view of themselves and the world was immature. Japan was, compared to countries in Europe and even the United States of America, a young country. Similarly, Seita, the 14-year-old main character of *Grave of the Fireflies*, is young and immature. *Grave of the Fireflies* is a film centered around Seita and his 4-year-old sister Setsuko in Kobe, Japan at the tail end of World War II. The children themselves are used as symbols of wartime Japan. As teenagers do, the plot and movie are constructed to solicit sympathy for the children and paint their circumstances as unfair. When Seita and Setsuko move in with their aunt after their mother dies in an air raid, their aunt is portrayed as being inconsiderate and judgmental. The children are often seen as victims, but a scene from the movie shows the director is suggesting that they are, in fact, a nuisance and that their aunt's complaints are legitimate. The editing and design of the frames gives the aunt power, exposes the children, and criticizes Japan's decisions before and during World War II.

This clip opens with a close-up shot of Setsuko's toys. There is a doll, buttons, and a newspaper illegible among drawings presumed to be Setsuko's. There is no order or pattern in the toys, hinting at clutter and inaction reinforced by the jump cut to Seita reading and Setsuko cutting up another newspaper. The ensuing conversation between Seita and the aunt clearly illustrates the differences between them. The dialogue is followed by a series of shot-reverse shots, forcing the viewer to focus on each character individually. However, during this sequence, rather than show both characters at a neutral angle, Seita's dialogue is captured from a high angle and the aunt's is from a low angle. These contrasting angles show the contrast in power and makes Seita appear diminished and chastised.

After the discussion with the aunt, the scene moves to the dinner table. At first glance, the setup suggests a standard Confucian family with the father dominating at the head in a casual, cross-legged posture, and the rest of the family in proper kneeling *seiza* with the mother serving food to each member. This image is undercut, however, by the lighting and the attention to the food distributed. The room is dark to reduce power consumption during the war, but also elicits a feeling of tension between the characters. When the film zooms in to the food being distributed, it is carefully noted that the man and young girl are given hearty portions of what can be presumed to be rice, meat, or other ingredients that constitute a stew while Seita only received broth and some leaves or seaweed. The aunt seems to justify this when she says the man and young girl work so hard for the war effort and expresses clear disdain for Seita.

In addition to editing effects, the symbolism throughout this sequence solidifies the critique of wartime Japan. During the film, Japanese newspapers were surely full of information regarding the global conflict. However, the aunt walks in to find the newspapers being used as nothing more than playthings. The children have disregarded the world issues and are focused on themselves. This is prevalent throughout the film and reflects Japan's position in the world after the 1920's. Japan saw global empires like the United States of America, England, France, Germany, etc. and, like a teenager unaware of the complexities of adult life, sought to build its own empire despite the agreement reached in the United Nations to cease expansion by invasion. The world was only 20 years removed from an unspeakable war when Japan and Germany began their respective conquests. Rather than helping the world rebuild, Japan was committed to expand their power by any gruesome means necessary. Thus, Setsuko defacing the newspapers is an image of Japan ignoring the needs of the world for their own personal gain.

The aunt's conversation with Seita is a much more direct reference to Japan. She asks Seita why he is not off working or at school. Seita gives excuses that would seem air-tight to a 14-year-old, but

really his excuses are still deeply rooted in his victimization. He claims he cannot work or go to school because the factory and school are both out of commission for different reasons. While he is not completely wrong, a more mature person might instead say, "I cannot work *at the same factory* or go to *the same school*." There were surely still opportunities he could have found had he looked. The aunt's perspective was shared by many Japanese people regarding their government at the time. Particularly at the end of the war, resources, including food, were scarce and people were starving. In the book "Black Rain" by Masuji Ibuse, a propaganda poster is described as encouraging the lay citizens to continue the fight. The poster, however, is vandalized by a citizen who wrote to the effect of, "How can we fight when we are so hungry?" The Japanese wanted to know why their government was so committed to supporting the military when the average citizen was starving. Why did they abandon industry that was not directly involved in producing guns or airplanes? Why did they abandon education? Why was the government rationalizing imperialism when it was taking such a massive toll on the people, even beyond the thousands killed in the military? Seita and the young government found justification in their decisions despite the crippling and, eventually, fatal effects those decisions had on their constituents. The aunt was only saying what the countless people who died of starvation during the war could not.

It is easy to see Seita and Setsuko as victims. Setsuko's death by starvation elicits strong emotion in many viewers. Seita draws pity as he slowly meets the same fate. Sad though it is, a closer look and a little creative thinking reveals that Seita's immaturity was what led to his sister's death. From there, it follows that the film is commenting on the effect of Japan's decisions on its people. Though many Japanese people died from direct causes of the war by bombings, fires, and hunger from food shortages, it all stems from Japan's global immaturity. *Grave of the Fireflies* expertly shows how the Japanese people suffered, but also subtly points a finger to the source of all those problems.