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Introduction to World Myth

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Analysis of *Seven Samurai*

German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn once stated, “The analysis of concepts is for the understanding nothing more than what the magnifying glass is for sight” (Mendelssohn). In other words, analyzing something helps to gain knowledge as well as support concepts of a certain subject. Film has the ability to expose and explore various ideas. The 1954 film *Seven Samurai*, directed by Akira Kurosawa, tells the tale of traditional samurai in feudal Japan and their attempts to save and protect a local village. There are several components of this film that may be referenced to components learned in mythology. Themes such as gender roles may be exemplified in this film, the idea of the effect of modernization in a traditional culture, as well as societal classes in feudal Japan.

The Japanese myth of Izanami and Izanagi suggests the gender roles in Japanese mythology. The female, Izanami, hastily greets her husband, Izanagi, without waiting for him to greet her first. As a result, Izanami is punished by giving birth to a monster-like child in which she releases into the sea (Willis). This story depicts the notion that gender roles in traditional Japanese society were unequal. Men had superiority over women. In the movie *Seven Samurai*, the male characters can be seen as having dominant roles of protectors and fighters as samurais, along with being leaders in their villages. A scene at the end of the movie that exemplifies this idea is during the harvesting of rice in the wet field. The women continuously pick the crop to

the beat of the male farmers drumming and singing. This scene is perhaps symbolic of the dominance that the men have over the working women because rather than working, the men look over the women. There are also characters that represent evil and power in this film, those happen to be the men. The women carry the fear of being raped by samurai that may be evil. Manzo, a farmer in the village, forces his daughter Shino to chop all of her hair. This action therefore gives Shino the impression of being a boy. This is Manzo's way of protecting his daughter from the attraction that the samurai may have toward her.

Japanese tradition was the foundation to the village featured in *Seven Samurai*, until it is exposed to the modernizations of the western world. In a battle against the bandits, the samurai are faced with the realization that their weapons are difficult to compete with the modern weapons that the bandits possess. The consequences may be seen when the well-liked samurai, Heihachi, is killed by one of the bandit's bullets from their gun. This leads to a series of events in this battle. One of the samurai decides to steal a musket, further stirring up feelings of jealousy from one of the youngest samurai, leading him to leave his post in search for another musket. This allows the bandits to attack, slaying several farmers, as well as one of the greatest samurai's death by gunshot. This fighter was a significant samurai who helped lead the battles to defend the village. The new components of modernizations are ironic and help to symbolize the destruction of the older traditions and culture of ancient Japan. Military history has been forever affected after the gun was introduced to the Japanese culture, as well as other cultures around the world.

A theme in mythology that may also be seen in *Seven Samurai* is that of rank in society. This movie takes place in the 16th century, a time period where feudalism ruled the nation of Japan. Feudalism helped to shape the culture and traditions in Japanese society. This pyramidal

form of societal ranking is shown throughout the movie. It was atypical for someone of higher class to personally associate themselves to someone in a lower class. However the movie quotes, “The deepest friendship comes through the chance of meeting” (Seven Samurai). A fine example of this is the relationship between Shino, a farmer’s daughter, and Katsushiro, a young samurai. The two fall in love with each other, knowing that it is socially unacceptable. Their forbidden love creates a struggle for them throughout the film. This struggle is caused by Katsushiro being a part of a higher class compared to Shino. The ancient Japanese suggests that individuals should stay within their class in order to be accepted into the society.

Akira Kurosawa does fantastic and creative work in the creation of the 1954 film *Seven Samurai*. As Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn once stated, it is important to analyze things such as film in this world just for the simple reason to explain components of life (Mendelssohn). *Seven Samurai* displays notions of male superiority, the modernization and its effects on traditional cultures, and the division of classes in society. Elements of the film are influenced by various aspects of the culture of mythology. Analyzing this film may help better understand connections to mythology, as well as the ability to create an understanding of Japanese culture in the 16th century.

Works Cited

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