

Moonshadow: The Wrath of Silver Wolf

Teachers' Notes, Discussion Topics & Exercises By Simon Higgins

The backdrop of this fantasy adventure is a definable period of real Japanese history, the early Edo or **Tokugawa Era**. The social groups represented in the drama's intrigue and action are perhaps familiar to the young reading audience from their appearances in pop culture, particularly the world of anime/manga. In the novel they are vested with a degree of historical accuracy (the Shogun, and beneath him the samurai, the ruling warrior class, are depicted much as they were) but there are also elements of the period's 'romance' and magic. Genuine **historical figures and groups**, as in the case of the shinobi or ninja, are either plucked from real history, or, for drama, the reader is shown the 'legendary' version of them, based on their mythos: superstitions that grew up around their abilities.

One of the purposes of the Moonshadow books is to introduce young readers to the complex, alien and culturally rich world of medieval Japan, delivering accurate snippets of its fascinating customs and thinking, as well as showing its constant political tremors and tensions. Another major goal is to enthral readers with the danger, chivalry and complex spirit-world beliefs of the era, particularly the intriguing world of the **yokai** (the quirky and highly specialized ghosts, beasts and goblins of Japanese folklore). Some scholarly estimates hold that both in medieval times and today, Shinto-Buddhist Japanese people acknowledge the existence of over 800,000 gods, sprites and magical creatures.

Yokai entities, along with the **kami**, which may be actual beings or simply forces of nature, are sometimes compartmentalized to (what we in the West might call) a hilarious degree. Take the Tanuki, a racoon-dog spirit-being with a bloated stomach, straw hat, and inane expression: he is the god of gluttons and literally, the patron of 'party animals.' There are also particular entities who can be invoked to help one wash, cook, and even successfully make babies. Think of a function, and it's likely that Japan already has a god or spirit-creature allocated to help you with that task, as long as you ask them politely and in line with the appropriate (and in many cases quite regionally specific) customs. This feature of diversity coupled with specialization reflects the fact that Old Japan was not really one empire at all, but around 250 separate fiefdoms of divergent agendas and dialects, with extremely varied economies and leadership styles.

In *The Wrath of Silver Wolf*, I chose to focus on some of the more ancient and menacing Yokai, since they answer the young audience's endless appetite for 'monsters' and can be useful in **parallel culture studies** (i.e. is the water-dwelling Kappa of Japan really also the Bunyip of Australia? Is the cannibal Yamamba of mountain Honshu perhaps a cousin to the blood drinking vampire of the Carpathians?) ...

Readers analysing the book, or its prequel, *Moonshadow: Eye of the Beast* should perhaps initially research or at least review succinct **definitions** (from credible sources) of the following **key words** or phrases: feudal society, samurai, shogun, Battle of Sekigahara (1600), Tokugawa, ninja, yokai, Shinto, Buddhism.

The **premise** of the Moonshadow epic is that at some point, the Shoguns, mainly in order to keep one step ahead of the many disgruntled warlords plotting to overthrow them, assembled a secret service, an elite spy unit, staffed with personnel who –for one reason or another- had acquired secret, unusual skills usually found only among the ninja clans, those extended family groups whose ‘cottage industry’ was spying or assassination. These varied and bizarre skills, thought by the ignorant to be magical powers, were actually ancient sciences (‘Old Country skills’) that had been lost eons ago to most of mankind, yet secretly nurtured and developed by generations of ninja trainers.

Therefore ironies abound, as young Moonshadow and the masters he serves are shown harnessing ancient preternatural abilities in a feudal world, to preserve a controversial ‘new age of peace’ in an empire run by men whose identity revolves around war.

Now, did *any* of this actually happen, or even anything like it? Apparently! According to scrolls, maps and their translations on public display in the Iga Ninja Museum in the mountain city of Iga Ueno, Honshu, Japan, the ninja indeed played a **decisive historical role** in keeping the first Tokugawa Shogun in power.

The Iga ninja apparently supported him against his scheming warlord enemies, and on one occasion, it is alleged, even intercepted Tokugawa Ieyasu’s forces in mountainous terrain and led them *around* a waiting ambush which if successful, would have brought down the Shogun and changed the course of history.

Such facts don’t appear in standard texts on the politics and history of the time, because, allegedly, they were ‘deleted from history’. Why? Because many commentators didn’t wish to admit that at one point, the highest and noblest in the land had been kept safe and in office by the most hated and feared professional assassins in the empire, so loathed that they were usually considered below even the lowest **feudal** rung of ‘official’ Japanese **society**:

High nobility (samurai warlords and nobles)

Lower nobility (‘petty’ or ‘rank and file’ samurai)

Farmers

Merchants

Artisans

Untouchables (the ‘Eta’, social outcasts whose work, such as tanning leather or burying the dead, was deemed to have made them permanently ‘unclean’)

Shinobi – spies and hired killers

Themes in the book, which students can hunt for in the text, include the following:

-the power of **loyalty** between friends or adopted family, especially in adverse situations, as epitomized by the relationship between Moonshadow and Snowhawk.

-the **danger of bitterness**, resentment and hatred leading inevitably to bad karma, (see below) a thwarted destiny, and terrible, self-destructive consequences, as inferred by Snowhawk's angry issues concerning her harsh upbringing at the hands of Clan Fuma.

-the idea of **destiny**, that some things are written, and will simply come to pass no matter what, or that each person, group or even nation has several possible destinies available to them and waiting to be claimed. The notion that an individual or corporate decision can thwart one particular destiny yet empower another to come to pass...the albino **White Nun**, an immortal being whose special knowledge is coveted but who is loath to tamper with the affairs and ambitions of men, is a focal point for this idea. She represents a mind-set which looks at life 'from the outside' and from a position of wry wisdom, a side-effect of her unnaturally long life (which is the result of Old Country sciences).

-connected to this concept, the idea of **karma**, that one's choices and actions produce a 'cause and effect' series of consequences in this life and those to come, for good or for bad. Snowhawk, the White Nun and **Brother Mantis**, Moonshadow's duelling coach who is laden with regrets over men he once killed in combat, draw the reader's attention to this philosophy.

-the historical **rise of the mercantile class**, and the overtaking of the centuries-old 'warrior's way' and 'warrior's code' by purely financial interests and methodology.

-the **subjective nature of conflict**: Moonshadow acts out of his sense of loyalty and devotion to his trainers and surrogate family, the Grey Light Order. The Shogun believes himself to be saving Japan from endless war, ushering in a golden age of culture. Conversely, Lord Silver Wolf believes the Shogun is misguided and has betrayed the 'true and pure' path of the warrior. Hence he seeks to oust the Shogun and 'save' Japan from modernism, weakness and compromise. Though foreign influence is a threat, Silver Wolf can even justify the use of foreign support and technology, should it give him the strategic advantage he needs to seize power. His ultimate agenda is that of the typical would-be dictator. Today Japan, tomorrow the Korean Peninsular, then next...the world!

These opposing **belief systems** of the 'good' and 'bad' guys in the novel reflect the complexity of the modern world too. Then or now, one can be sincerely wrong, and sincerely dangerous as a result. Patriotism and spiritual zeal can cross that line into fanaticism. The 'holy warrior' phenomena has always existed, and in so many cultures and forms, that perhaps one is forced to call it a latent tendency of human nature.

-the mythology of monsters and creatures in Old Japan which, though most unique, still reflects a number of **universal** traits in **folklore** and **imagination**, such as the idea that every goblin or ghoul has a specific and specialized motivation, unique powers, strengths and weapons, and –like the ancient Greek heroic principle of *intrinsic hamartia*- a **built-**

in flaw, a weakness or defect (physical, magical or character-based, like pride and overconfidence) which on discovery, can be exploited to bring about their defeat.

Subjects for Class Discussions

1. Early in the book, we learn that Snowhawk harbours great anger against Clan Fuma who raised her and trained her as a shinobi. This **unresolved emotion** leads her to offer to slay a ninja pursuing her and Moonshadow. Is the story offering us some message or comment about anger, bitterness and dark emotions?

What do you think that message is? Do you agree or disagree with it, and why?

2. Lord Silver Wolf, a **daimyo** or warlord, treats his social inferiors with brusque disregard or outright rudeness, and is also clearly free to threaten them at his whim. Who was at the top of the social stack in feudal Japan? Who came next, and who was after them, and who at the very bottom?

As a group, assemble a chart of feudal Japanese social classes and explain what each 'rung' did. Discuss Silver Wolf's behaviour and ambitions in the light of the saying 'power corrupts'. Who could one compare Silver Wolf to, in later or even modern history?

3. As the cover of *Moonshadow* suggests, stories of this kind are popular material for Japanese cartoon adventures usually referred to in the west as *Manga* or *Anime*.

When you consider **Anime** and **Manga** TV shows and movies for young people about samurai and ninja, do you think they reflect much of *real* Japanese history?

Which parts are realistic or true, and which do you think are pure fantasy or for entertainment only? As a group, compose a whiteboard list of each category.

4. Review the **supernatural encounters** Moonshadow survives involving the terrifying yokai: the Kappa, Rokurokubi and the Yamamba.

Do you think these creatures really exist or perhaps once did?

If not, what could have started such superstitions? Consider mistaken identity, gossip, fear based on ignorance of natural phenomena, etc, even the possibility of fraud.

Identify a number of world cultures which have their own versions of some or all of these yokai. What about (the very unusual) Rokurokubi? Does *any* other country have a similar monster among its myths?

Exercises to Try

1. **Build your own yokai.** After reading over the sections involving the traditional monsters, and the entries about them in the novel's glossary, see if you can design your own scary yokai. It will need: a Japanese-sounding name, specific powers or strengths, motivation (i.e. the Kappa loves cucumbers) as well as its own peculiar weakness. Draw the creature and write a short story in which *you* must confront or escape it.

2. **Choose your side!** Consider the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of the following characters and, after writing their names, divide up their views between those you think are fair enough and those which you think are not. Place each in the appropriate column and briefly explain why you *do* or *don't* go along with the character's position and goals.

The White Nun: an undying visionary being who has always trained ninja masters but tries to keep out of the affairs of men, trusting that destiny will prevail. Motive: spiritual.

Warlord Silver Wolf, plotting secret rebellion to 'save' Japan. Motive: political.

Jiro the gangster, a prototypical 'yakuza' thug who burns with revenge against Moonshadow. Motive: personal.

Chikuma of Fuma, who enjoys using his devastating powers on lesser mortals, but sees himself as loyally serving his clan and simply 'doing his job'. Motive: professional.

Is there another character in the novel whose motives and actions you'd like to discuss?

3. **Connecting with a character.** Choose your favourite character from the novel and write a short story telling us of some incident in their earlier life which has helped shape them into who they are in *The Wrath of Silver Wolf*. It could be any member of the Grey Light Order, Clan Fuma, or Silver Wolf's faction. Two easy examples are:

Kagero: since she was *not* really a girl stuck working in an inn in a remote town (that was the sad cover story that went with her landlady disguise), how *did* she spend her youth?

Wada: the giant sumo wrestler turned bounty hunter feels little or no pain. How did *that* come about? Theorize in your story.

4. **Research and Reply...delving into history.** Read in your library or via the internet about Japanese warlords who invaded Korea or who displayed ambitions to broaden the empire elsewhere. How far did they really get? Were their military campaigns good or bad for Japan? Did any country try to invade Japan prior to the end of World War 2? If so, who, and how successful were they? In connection with the answer to this question, research the word **kamikaze** (divine winds) in connection with the Mongol fleet's invasion plan.

5. **The thinking of another world...?**

Look up the definitions of the following words: **honour, duty, obligation, sacrifice**. Reviewing the wording of each definition, do you think the meaning applies to the world of Moonshadow and his friends and enemies? Or had they a different 'take' on each?

Do these things mean the same today as they did back then? Do you believe personally that any of this is important? Do such things matter to modern people like us?

6. **Warriorhood across the ages** Moonshadow and Snowhawk are clearly skilled warriors fighting to ensure a lasting peace in their time. Is there a way in modern times for *us* to be warriors for good, without actually having to battle anyone in the literal sense? If so, what 'bad guys' do *we* need to fight instead of men like Silver Wolf? Global

warming? Ignorance? Racism? Secrecy surrounding bullying? And what skills would help us to be effective modern ‘warriors for peace’? How do we acquire them?

On-line resources

For more about the Author & his travels in Japan

<http://www.simonhiggins.net> (check out the Japanese Journeys and Author pages)

For Teacher’s notes on *Moonshadow 1: Eye of the Beast*

<http://www.simonhiggins.net> (The Novels page, *Eye of the Beast* entry)

For more about the Art of Iaido (traditional Japanese sword-drawing & duelling)

<http://www.seishinkan-iaido.org/>