

## Classroom Resource 4

This classroom resource accompanies the article “Teaching *Gojira*: Godzilla in Japanese History, Folklore, Culture, and Film” by William M. Tsutsui

# The Inner Life of Monsters *Gojira* and Noh Theater

Noh theater emerged in the fourteenth century as a favored art form of Japan’s rising warrior elite of the time. The staging of Noh includes a chorus (reciters) and an ensemble of instrumentalists; it is chanted (somewhat like opera), incorporates dance and very stylized forms of acting, and the performers wear distinctive carved masks. Today, Noh is very much an acquired taste: it can be opaque, monotonous, and difficult to understand and appreciate, not just for American students, but for many Japanese as well. Noh is an important literary and performance form in Japanese culture, with a profound influence on the development of Japanese aesthetics and deep relevance to Japanese history, but it is not highly accessible to contemporary audiences.

Relating Noh theater to Godzilla may seem like a bit of a stretch. But monsters, ghosts, spirits, and deities frequently appear in Noh and one of the main genres of Noh plays focuses on demons. Several scholars have suggested that traditional Japanese theatre, especially Noh and *bunraku* puppet theatre, may have inspired the structure, aesthetics, and special effects of giant monster films, including *Gojira*. Although this is difficult to document, there do seem to be some direct influences from Noh on kaiju cinema: in the 1984 movie *Godzilla*, for instance, the director instructed the actor playing the monster to study the stylized gestures of Noh performers in order to give Godzilla an otherworldly and dignified presence on screen. At the very least, there are cultural resonances between Noh and Godzilla that can be explored in the classroom and can allow for deeper and richer understandings of both an ancient and arcane theatrical form (Noh) and a cinematic form (giant monster movies) not generally associated with great artistry or sophistication.

In 2021, I taught an undergraduate elective course entitled “Japanese Monsters” which surveyed Japan’s bountiful monster culture from the mythology of the *Kojiki* through the folkloric traditions of yōkai to the contemporary monsters of pop culture like Godzilla and Pokémon. One of the readings I assigned for the course was the Noh play *Nue* (sometimes translated as “Monster Nue”) written in the early fifteenth century by the most famous of Noh playwrights, Zeami. It proved to be an exceptional classroom source: it revolves around the engaging story of a monster and a hero; a translation of the very concise play is readily available online; and numerous videos of productions of it are available on YouTube. The play is based on a famous tale (included in the thirteenth-century historical epic *The Tale of the Heike*) involving the warrior Minamoto no Yorimasa. The story goes that Japan’s Emperor was suffering from a debilitating nervous illness, caused (his doctors decided) by a monster called the Nue, which appeared over one corner of the imperial palace every morning at 2 a.m., hidden in a black cloud. Medicine and prayer having failed to cure the Emperor, a hero was sent for, in the person of Yorimasa. When the black cloud appeared one morning, Yorimasa shot a magic arrow into it and hit the monster, which had a monkey’s head, a raccoon dog’s body,

a tiger's legs, and a snake's tail, as well as a haunting bird-like cry. Struck by the arrow, the Nue fell to the ground, where Yorimasa's servant finished it off with a sword. A cuckoo then sang out through the night, the Emperor was instantly cured, and the palace staff, not knowing what to do with the corpse of a dead monster, placed it in a small boat and sent it downriver toward the sea.

Zeami's Noh play picks up the story there, although, as with most Noh plays, the plot is minimal: a traveling monk stops for the night at a remote temple by a river, where he encounters a ghostly boatman headed downstream. The boatman reveals that he is the spirit of the monster Nue and proceeds to recount his suffering and death at the hands of Yorimasa. He implores the monk to pray for his salvation before floating despondently out to sea.

What is striking about *Nue* (and about the treatment of monsters more generally in Noh), is the way in which it focuses not on the hero, but on the creature—not on the victor, but on the vanquished—and the way it explores the monster's inner torments, revealing the Nue's sorrow, pain, remorse, and intense longing for forgiveness, redemption, and peace. In this, of course, Noh differs profoundly from most traditional European tales (and many Japanese ones) of heroes and monsters, which generally focus on the strength and bravery of the stereotypical knight in shining armor rather than the suffering and regret of the dragon he slays.

The emphasis in Noh on the anguish of the monster and its interiority resonates in productive ways with the Godzilla series, and above all with the film *Gojira*. That movie ends with Godzilla being killed by a new super-weapon called the Oxygen Destroyer, obviously in a very painful fashion. While the assembled Japanese scientists and sailors cheer the destruction of the monster, their celebrations are tempered by a real sense of sadness. In fact, it is very hard for viewers not to feel tremendous sympathy and grief for Godzilla at the end of *Gojira*, as the filmmakers effectively convey that Godzilla was a victim too, one who had not asked to be irradiated by American H-bomb testing or suffer an excruciating death from a new Japanese technology.

To encourage my students in “Japanese Monsters” to reflect on Noh, on the characterization of Godzilla in that original film, and on cultural understandings of monstrosity in Japan, I assigned them the play *Nue* and screened *Gojira*. After a classroom discussion, I gave them what I called a “creative assignment” (of which there were several in the course, as well as “analytical assignments” and a final research project) asking them to write a short Noh play based on the narrative and characters of *Gojira*. The students enjoyed the project, and many wrote very imaginative and thoughtful scripts. One, for example, developed the idea that the real monster in *Gojira* was not Godzilla but Dr. Serizawa, the Japanese scientist who invented the Oxygen Destroyer. Another student framed her play as a conversation between the ghost of Godzilla and a seagull; yet another explored the feelings of guilt shared by Godzilla and the scientists who studied and eventually helped slay the monster. All the students were challenged to think about the content and structure of Noh plays, consider the sophisticated approaches to monstrosity in both *Nue* and *Gojira*, and reflect on the continuities in sensibility in two rich primary sources, created about 500 years apart.

## Objectives

- Gain a basic understanding of Noh theater and its traditions.
- Use the film *Gojira* to better understand and appreciate an ancient and often inaccessible theatrical form.
- Appreciate *Gojira* and other Godzilla films in the cultural context of ancient Japanese warrior tales and theatrical forms like Noh.
- Explore continuities in Japanese understandings of monsters and monstrosity over a span of more than 500 years.
- Encourage engagement with Japanese traditional art forms by drawing upon the creativity of students and the relevance of those forms to contemporary concerns.

## Student Readings

In my “Japanese Monsters” course, I screened the full film *Gojira* (1954) and assigned the students the following readings:

- *The Tale of the Heike*, Helen Craig McCullough, trans. (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1988), Chapter 4, Part 15 “The Thrush Monsters” (Nue), pp. 160–163. There are several English translations of *The Tale of the Heike* (Heike monogatari) available.
- Zeami, *Nue*, available in translation and with a useful synopsis at [https://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program\\_052.html](https://www.the-noh.com/en/plays/data/program_052.html). The play as translated here is only ten pages long. A more thorough (and longer) translation is included in Chifumi Shimazaki and Stephen Comee, *Supernatural Beings from Japanese Noh Plays of the Fifth Group* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012), pp. 271–297.

During our classroom discussion, I showed the students clips of productions (in Japanese) of *Nue*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jFRjsUfzTOc> (full play); [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu\\_ab8wYkxI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lu_ab8wYkxI) (highlights). These videos provided the students with a basic introduction to the staging, aesthetics, and experience of Noh theater. I also played the call of White’s thrush, a migratory songbird of Northeast Asia, which is believed to be the inspiration for the haunting call of the Nue: <https://ebird.org/species/scathr2>.

## Written Assignment

I subsequently assigned what I described as a “creative assignment” that required students to engage with both Noh conventions and the story of *Gojira*, exploring how both encouraged audiences to reflect on the inner lives of monsters:

- **Godzilla, the Noh Play.** Write a short Noh play based on *Gojira*. The play should follow the basic style and format of Zeami’s *Nue* and draw on the narrative and characters of *Gojira*. You may take some creative license with both Noh drama and the film, but keep in mind how monsters (and heroes) are treated in both forms. Aim for 750–1,000 words total. Your play should be titled and include essential stage directions.

## Discussion Questions

- What is the story of Minamoto no Yoshimasa and the Nue?
- How would you compare the presentation of the Nue in *The Tale of the Heike* to that in Zeami’s Noh play? How does Zeami’s approach complicate, enrich, or undermine the story of the Nue as told in *The Tale of the Heike*? How do you feel about the Nue at the end of the narrative in *The Tale of the Heike*? How about at the end of *Nue*?
- What does the play *Nue* tell us about how monsters were perceived and the role they played in traditional Japanese culture?
- How would you compare the depiction of the monster in *Gojira* to that in Zeami’s *Nue*? Zeami evokes sympathy for the Nue in his play: do you feel similar sympathy for Godzilla in *Gojira*?
- Do you see any influence from the staging and performance traditions of Noh on *Gojira*? Some commentators have suggested that the stylized movements of the performers in Noh may have influenced the actors who portrayed Godzilla in *Gojira* and later films in the franchise. What do you think?

## Sample Student Work

Two examples of student work from the 2021 course “Japanese Monsters” are available, with permission of the authors, [Nicole Araya](#) and [Katrina Gonzalez](#) (please click on each student’s name to view/download a PDF). They demonstrate the creativity that students brought to this written assignment, the sensitivity

they showed toward the traditions of Noh and the story in *Gojira*, and their ability to link their short plays to contemporary concerns about human nature, nuclear proliferation, and environmental degradation.

### **Instructor Resources**

The Japanese website the-noh.com (<https://www.the-noh.com/en/world/index.html>) has a variety of accessible resources on the history and performance traditions of Noh theater. For a detailed scholarly treatment of Noh plays focused on demons, spirits, and monsters, see Chifumi Shimazaki and Stephen Comee, *Supernatural Beings from Japanese Noh Plays of the Fifth Group* (Ithaca, NY: East Asia Program, Cornell University, 2012).

Several authors with backgrounds in film and popular culture have explored the influence of Noh on the *Godzilla* films, including *Gojira*:

- Rick Wallach, *In Search of Godzilla: Myth, Stagecraft and Politics in Ishiro Honda's Masterpiece* (McFarland, 2025), Chapter VII.
- John E. Petty, "Stage and Scream: The Influence of Traditional Japanese Theater, Culture, and Aesthetics on Japan's Cinema of the Fantastic" (Master of Science thesis, University of North Texas, 2011), <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc68031/>.
- John E. Petty, "Godzilla: Just Say Nō," *G-FAN* 99 (Summer 2012): 20–28.

On the story of Minamoto no Yoshimasa and the Nue, see Zack Davisson, *The Ultimate Guide to Japanese Yokai* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2024), pp. 202–205 and Michael Dylan Foster, *The Book of Yokai*, 2nd Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2024), pp. 243–24.