

# Authorial Intent in Shounen, Part Two

Aug. 24th, 2007 at 4:31 AM

I'M AFRAID I  
HAVE TO  
**THINK**  
ABOUT THIS



 [debbiechan](#)

## Authorial Intent in Shounen Manga Or Why Recent Chapters Don't Mean Luuurve for IchiOri, Part Two. by debbiechan

This part of my essay will discuss the Tanabata theme in *Bleach*. Part One, which discusses the concept of unrequited love, is [here](#). Part Three will discuss upon the efficacy of panel-interpretation without using text and what it means when *Bleach* characters touch.

Thank you all for your long posts and thoughtful responses to Part One. I'm encouraged by them; maybe fandom shippin doesn't haven't to have resort to the drama of professional wrestling and junior high clique rivalries. Maybe we can agree and disagree with enthusiasm but no maliciousness. Maybe I can make my barrettes develop supepowers....

ANYWAY. This essay contains spoilers for the manga *Bleach* unto chapter 288, references the musical play *Into the Woods*, the manga *Dragonball Z*, the Chinese and Japanese versions of the Tanabata myth, the Chinese story *Journey to the West*, and the Japanese story *Kwaidan - The Story of O-Tei*.

## Authorial Intent in Shounen Manga Or Why Recent Chapters Don't Mean Luuurve for IchiOri, Part Two. by debbiechan

This part two of my essay wasn't in my original outline; it happened unintentionally while I was looking through collected images from the manga.

There are countless panels in *Bleach* of characters touching--by accident or intent, with or without sexual tension. Romance being a vital part of my girly interest in manga, I took note of what all the touching could mean vis a vis the *Bleach* plot, Japanese attitudes and my personal bugaboo, *authorial intent*. (I'll touch upon this touching business in Part Three of my essay. Patience, patience--this essay is getting to be longer than my authorial intent intended).

It was while scrolling through touching scenes that a scene of *almost touching* reminded me of what IchiOri shippers pair to as the one, true trellis of indisputable support for their coupling: *the Tanabata story*.

This scene didn't touch my emotions; the panels clobbered me on the head: ***Kubo is alluding to the Tanabata myth indeed!***



I remember first coming across those panels in the manga and thinking *woo, boy, Ichigo and Orihime are supposed to be the lovers in the story!*

It's interesting how now, four years later, I believe anything but.

Tanabata is a bittersweet romance about separation. The lovers are separated and can meet only once a year. If it rains, they can't meet. The very picture of Orihime and Ichigo in the sky recalls Vega and Altair, the stars associated with the Tanabata story. The allusion is as heavy-handed as the drawings of Ichigo and Orihime's hands are detailed with fingernails and knuckle-wrinkles. Two people reach for one another only to miss the opportunity. A black cat rides on Ichigo's shoulder (intentional allusion--why not?), and Orihime is holding (with the hand that isn't reaching for Ichigo) onto her other friend Uryuu. Maybe Uryuu, whose name means *rain dragon* put the damper, ha ha, on the magical reunion between Tanabata stand-ins. After all, Orihime crash-lands in Soul Society with Ishida Uryuu.

If I were a narrow-sighted, newbie IshiHime shipper, I'd take that little connection and run towards a canon conclusion all the while shouting "MEANT TO BE! MEANT TO BE!" (I think I may have done exactly that at one point in my fangurly appreciation of *Bleach*--I can't remember, exactly, because fangurly moments, by definition, are ecstatic moments of irrational over-interpretation that don't last the tests of time and more considerate analysis).

Symbol-hunting is a poor way to foretell plot resolutions in a story. I repeat: *symbols don't predict plot*. What I intend to show in this part of my essay is that the Tanabata myth, while overwhelmingly significant to *Bleach*, is not a series of a clues through which a reader can decipher true meanings, understand the one and only authorial intent **or** predict events the story. Tanabata, I will show, may be irrelevant to romantic pairings in *Bleach*, even those I favor. There's no symbol k that reveals authorial intent; in fact, authorial intent (unless the author is an allegory spinner) always runs contrary to this sort of "Uryuu means the one who will put the damper on IchiOri" analysis. Mythical allusions have an altogether different

time-honored literary purpose--and that is to enliven a story with *theme* (I'll explain theme later within this part of the essay).

### Tanabata Days

Okay, so what's up with *Bleach*

character names alluding to the Tanabata myth? What's up with all the rain? It rains in the Tanabata story, and it rains all over *Bleach*--in Ichigo's inner world, in the Memories in the Rain chapters, over Orihime's umbrella in the "One-sided Sympathy" chapter, and Ichigo at the end of the Soul Society arc tells Rukia that because of her, the rain has stopped. Clearly, Tanabata is a theme, and frisky readers can't help but see the connections and feel encouraged to look for more

*Bleach* names in particular are irresistible for the puzzle-lover in me.

Usually, shounen names are vaguely symbolic but totally irrelevant to plot. In the manga tradition of naming groups of characters after innocuous objects that have no apparent connection to plot, characterization, or theme (e.g., in *Dragonball Z*,

villains are named after fruits and most characters are named after foods), Kubo names Isshin's children, Ichigo, Karin, a Yuzu, after popular cough drop flavors, and he gives the Espada the names of architects and designers.

Now enter the names that resonate with what appear to be deliberate mythological significance. Orihime is the star goddess of the Tanabata myth, the one separated from her Earth-bound lover by rain. As we're introduced to Kubo Tite's Orihime early in the manga, she speaks the poem "*If I were rain, could I connect two hearts the way rain connects eternally separated Earth and Sky?*" Hmm, rain *connects* instead of separating as in the original myth? And what about Uryuu, whose name means *rain dragon*? (To Westerner that name sounds fierce; to the Japanese dragons are benevolent and powerful beings and rain grows crops). Or Tatsuki whose name also contains the dragon kanji? To complicate matters, in the current Hueco Mundo arc, Ulquiorra is given the last name Shiffer. Shiffer means *boatman* in German and it is the boatman of the Tanabata story who reunites the lovers once a year (Ah, what could it mean that most Hollow names are Spanish and that German is associated with the weapons and techniques of the Quincy?). Speaking of boats, *Ulquiorra* is the name of an oil tanker that disastrously sunk off the coast of Spain. Speaking of disasters, *Shiffer* is the name of a Jesuit monk who miraculously survived the Hiroshima bombing. (Given that Kubo was born in Hiroshima, does this last detail have significance? Probably so. There are too many biographical yummys for a *Bleach* fan to seize in this story--the word *kubo* in Japanese literally translates to *hollow*).

And what about all those other too obvious not to be deliberate signs of the Tanabata myth in *Bleach*? The hairpin (the angry mother's hairpin dug a trench between the lovers in one version of the myth). The fact that Kubo's Orihime character can, metaphorically, cry a river (as the tears that make the rain in the myth). Mythological Orihime being a weaver of the sky and Inoue Orihime being a sewing expert at Karakura High's handicrafts club. The obvious settings of *Bleach* being Earth and Sky, the two separated worlds from which the Tanabata lovers hail.

Sometimes I wonder what game Kubo is playing with his readers--or if he's playing an elaborate game with himself. His authorial intent seems to be to make his audience crazy trying to unravel his intentions.

Kubo's been known to make the releases of chapters coincide with real time events like characters' birthdays (Hitsugaya got a battle victory last year on his birthday; Ishida Uryuu got a brief flash-back panel on his birthday after having been AWO from the story for months). Recent chapters, ones that featured Ichigo and Orihime prominently, coincided with Tanabata festival dates this year. The chapters began with the modern Tanabata observance of Early July and continued through to more traditional festival observance of early August. "Tanabata days," the IchiOri fans noted with glee. It was as if Kubo was saying, *here, I bring you clues*.

But they're not clues--they're symbols.

Crime cases require clues; literature operates on symbols. A video-game programmer gives you clues; A manga-ka gives you poetry.

Kubo is a poet; his small verses at the beginning of his volumes are fine examples of true poetry. They are un sentimental; they transcend ordinary detail; they are Japanese in density of meaning and economy of language.

### The Tanabata myth resonates within *Bleach*, but *Bleach* is not the Tanabata myth retold or analogized.

One can not say that because Orihime has a namesake in the Tanabata myth that the two Orihimes will have perfectly coinciding stories anymore than one can say that the Cinderella of Stephen Sondheim's musical *Into the Woods* married

the right man (The prince cheats on the princess in that story). There are **often** allusions to mythology in manga; *Dragonball Z's*

Goku character was based on the monkey king of Chinese legend, but the original story didn't predict where the *Dragonball Z*

plot would go. The little monkey-tailed boy in that manga was revealed to be an alien from outer space. No one familiar with *Journey to the West*,

in which the Monkey King's travels are detailed, could've predicted Goku's true identity based on the older story. There are elements of medieval chivalry, various world religions including Santeria and Shinto, and

Japanese-Chinese-French-German-Yiddish-Spanish language-puns in *Bleach*. There are allusions to Japanese comedians and actors. There are puns based on the names of Heavy Metal bands. **These various allusions together do not constitute a code: literature, unless it is pure allegory, doesn't work like that.**

Writes on the board: *Allegory is a form of extended metaphor in which objects and persons within a narrative are equated with meanings that lie outside the narrative. Allegory implies two levels of meaning -- the literal (what happens in the narrative) and the symbolic (what the events stand for, outside the narrative).*

When I first encountered the Tanabata myth and other clues in *Bleach*, my literature teacher detective self got on the job. The multifarious allusions had to mean *something*--Kubo seemed sharper than your average manga-ka when it came to poetic devices: parallelism, repetition, allusion, metaphor, imagery. He was stronger at these than at sustaining plot suspense (the problem when a story has as many characters as *Bleach* does is that it can drag, and plot scenarios risk being forgotten before they're resolved). I looked and looked for a key to a master plan; I suspected that that Kubo, with all his eclectic knowledge, made a chart before he began to write and that he connected all the dots. Allegory! Allegory! My sanity for allegory!

But in over-estimating Kubo's ability to hide a story within a story, I over-looked one key component of creative story-telling: improvisation. *Bleach* isn't Edmund Spenser's *the Faerie Queene*; it doesn't have that level of dense allegory and tidy symbology.

The pilot chapter of *Bleach*

and the official first release of chapter one show that there are major differences between authorial intent, plan A, and its revision--authorial intent, plan B with editorial input. A brief stroll through the chapters of *Bleach* and a close reader finds the inconsistencies and plot-holes common in shounen stories. Why isn't Byakuya wearing his captain's robe when he comes to the Living World to take back Rukia? Is it because Kubo hadn't yet devised a system of captains or finalized details about their character design and roles in the story?

There are two aspects to authorial intent: one is that the author has a plan and the other is that the author can not have a perfect plan. In other words, he's making some of it up as he goes along. Improvisation is part of the creative process.

If Kubo's anything like the poets and writers I've heard speak of the creative process, he had an outline and a plan before beginning to create, but the symbols, the allusions, the dots connected *themselves*.

I must be getting old. Here I was looking for allegory in *Bleach* when for years I taught that allegory was a strict form. What appear to be clues in literature aren't clues; they're symbols and resonances. The theme of any story is more important than "what means what" (Patience--I'll explain *theme* later). I used to teach this in poetry-writing classes and can't believe I forgot this basic tenet. It's a bad poet who begins with "I'm going to write about an apple tree in which the apples mean my love for my girlfriend, the snake is that guy in third period, the roses are...." I once had a student say of a rather bland story of his, "I think it needs more symbols"--to which I responded, "It needs more story, stronger characterization, and more detailed description."

Archibald MacLeish wrote, "a poem should not mean but be" and this quote was the segueway into my lecture on how literature, from the creator's point of view, happens.

Describing how he creates a story, Kubo Tite has said in interview that he starts with a drawing. The drawing then determines the character's history. For example, Chad wasn't Mexican until Kubo noted that he looked like one, so there goes the theory that there was some intentional connection between the Day of the Dead mask-wearing Hollow, the Spanish speaking Espada, and Chad's heritage. If anything, the connection grew organically out of elements in the story rather than having been plotted from chapter one.

Authorial intent (unless you're Edmund Spenser) is nothing so staid as determining which of your characters are supposed to stand for what virtue or what sin. Kubo, in fact, transcends a lot of the typing of shounen manga when he creates characters who are morally ambiguous--Urahara is my particular favorite in the morally mysterious category. Sure, Urahara is the mentor type, Ichigo is the headstrong hero type, Ishida is the rival, Renji is another rival type, Kon is the anthropomorphic comedy relief, and Orihime is the giggly, clumsy girl with very big breasts. These types are staples of shounen, but a good manga-ka will invest each character with individual quirks that keep said character from being a cliché. Not to say that cliché characters don't abound in *Bleach*, but given that Kubo is working within a very stylized form,

he manages to make his characters believable---it's one of his great strengths as a manga-ka. In fact, Kubo's trick with Aizen is a novel one within the genre; instead of a bad guy turning good, we have a very sympathetic good guy show his true "evil" side. Byakuya, the apparently heartless brother intent on killing his own sister, is given a backstory and *voilà*--true motives are revealed. The man is not who he appeared to be.

The expected occurs over and over in *Bleach*--the hero fails, the hero trains, the battles are one on one, friendships are tested and the young learn lessons. But Kubo is famous for pulling surprises. His favorite trick appears to be the one of hidden identity (Aizen, Isshin) or identity in which ominous behaviors invert themselves as more backstory and motive is revealed (Tousen, Byakuya, Soi Fong, Hirako).

Inversion. Way to go, Kubo. Turn the story upside-down and the audience turns with it. This brain-thrill, for me, is the best treat in literature of any kind. Especially within a shounen form, which is so predictable and the hero confronts challenges standard to the genre, it's quite a job for a manga-ka to keep up the suspense with more than the usual cliffhangers.

Kubo's investment in "I'll reveal this one hundred chapters later" style of story-telling can be tedious but it gives the manga a sense of whole-ness one doesn't find in chapter after chapter of episodic adventures. *Bleach* is truly a story in which arcs mirror and contribute to one another as well as adding onto the story en toto (I beg for your patience once more--parallelism is another literary device which I'll use in a shipping argument but that's all in Part Three).

Did Kubo want to re-tell the Tanabata myth within his story? Note that when myths are retold within other stories, there is a literary precedence for *inverting the myths*. Orihime in *Bleach* may be so named because, instead of suffering a separation from her lover, she indeed becomes the rain (a symbol for a tragedy? A grief or sadness?) that connects Earth and Sky (Human and Shinigami, Ichigo and Rukia?) Or maybe she becomes Mrs. Uryuu Ishida? (I think this scenario is unlikely but it would tickle the IshiHime shipper in me to no end) Maybe instead of representing the goddess Orihime, she's meant to represent qualities of her namesake--the yearning and pining that caused the goddess to neglect her duties. The unnatural kindness of a deity that reached with love and compassion to a mortal below her realm.

We could play this game all day. We could get as busy as a gaggle of fangurls trying to decipher the Rosetta Stone. The truth is that no matter how many allusions we google, the puns and word-plays and references will tell us more about what Kubo Tite has been reading and listening to than tell us what will happen in *Bleach*.

*Bleach*,

at its heart, is a character-driven, not mythology-driven narrative. No matter how much evidence one can come up with that the Arrancar in the Hueco Mundo arc represent the magpies that will reunite the two separated lovers, Ichigo and Orihime, the behaviors of these two human teenagers for the past two-hundred chapters is more important than symbology.

I'm not ruling out the possibility of an eventual IchiOri pairing, but I do believe it's slight. In order for the pairing to even begin to become a literary likelihood, an audience needs a plausible plotline and consistent characterization to get there--not allusions to a myth. Plot, characterization and theme do not point to an IchiOri coupling. Symbology MAY. I could probably devise a scenario in which the tarot and occasional chapter titles in *Bleach* foretell that Keigo will marry Ikkaku, but any reasonable reader will tell you: that ain't likely to happen. Even if there were subtext behind any shared-panel time in canon between the two, the characters appear to orbit different spheres in *Bleach* and their personalities don't seem like they would hit it off.

It's possible, yes, but in answer to post-modernists who drone "my interpretation is as good as yours" and to readers who, in all their eagerness to avoid a shipping war or animosity between fans, say "nothing's canon until Kubo makes it so," I say: Some happenings in *Bleach* have a greater literary likelihood of occurring than others. That is all, say I.

Along with keeping characters in character in any story, a manga-ka writing a shounen has to respect another constituent of the shounen form: Characters in shounen manga are indeed archetypes; they are less likely to be particularized individuals whose personalities are as important to the plot as the types of weapons and fighting techniques used. In other words, it may be the self-realization and "growing up" that a young character experiences but in the end, it's his or her power-up that saves the day and affects the plot outcome. No epiphany matters squat without a power-up. *We are, I must remind you, dealing with a highly limited stylized form. Like I noted in part one of this essay, a sonnet has fourteen lines; a shounen has rules too.*

Love stories are not the main plot in shounen at all; they may exist but are interwoven (a lastars into Orihime's tapestry of the sky) into a *theme*. And yes, shounen are allowed to have themes.

Long argument short: Individual symbols are not important; *theme is* important to a story. Let me explain. (At last I'm going to tell you what a theme is.)

How does the Tanabata theme play a role in *Bleach*? IchiOri shippers have made elaborate cases based on constellations and numerology to support their pairing, and IchiRuki shippers have made more economical arguments to show that

Ichigo and Rukia represent the lovers of the Tanabata myth.

I think they're both wrong.

They're wrong because they're looking at symbology rather than at theme. *Symbology, unless it's happening in a very stylized allegory, does not predict character interaction as well as theme (and neither theme nor symbology predict plot).*

But, you may argue, if you're insisting on tying Tanabata to romantic pairings in my favorite manga, isn't the theme of Tanabata separated lovers and isn't that theme present in *Bleach*?

Possibly. It would be an *a priori*

theme if Ichigo and Orihime were once lovers who are now separated in the plot. In order to assume this particular theme one would have to look at the role of reincarnation, first in Japanese Buddhism 101 and then in Japanese folklore and literature.

I'll speed through this.

A fundamental tenet of Buddhism is that reincarnation allows souls to atone for the sins of previous lifetimes by placing those souls in new life experiences; people do not reincarnate looking like their previous selves. They do not repeat their previous lives over with the same partners. Loving a person several lifetimes over is the equivalent of being stuck in the karmic mud; the soul never grows up to experience other ways of loving.

That said, there is a literary precedence for lovers overcoming karma in Japanese literature.

Ichigo equals Kaien? Let's say that he does. Let's say Orihime is Kaien's wife Miyako reincarnated. Rukia, without having died and undergone reincarnation herself in the *Bleach* timeline, interacts with Kaien and Ichigo both.

Who's got a better shot at Ichigo? (Remember, we're just playing here--I dismiss most hypothetical pre-story elements in *Bleach*

because, unlike the "Memories in the Rain" chapters and other canon flashback mini-stories, hundreds of pre-story *Bleach* scenarios can be wrought from fans' imaginations. The ability of an invented pre-story to predict the outcome of a real story is ... um, not so good, even for the most talented fanfic writer).

So, then, if we accept the invention that Ichigo equals Kaien, Orihime equals wife Miyako, and Rukia is still just Rukia, who's gonna pair up in the current story?

In Japanese folklore, the scenario in which lovers overcome karma *can* occur when one partner is alive and the other is dead. This plot satisfies the Buddhist concept of karma with out irreverence (irreverence has never been an admired quality among the Japanese in their history) for Buddhism. [Kwaidan - The Story of O-Tei](#) is a story in which the bride of a young man dies and returns to him as another person during his lifetime. Given all the strongly implied romance between Kaien and Rukia, I can't rule out the possibility that Ichigo is Kaien returned to her (and legal as all get-out because he's not married!). I doubt this resolution will occur, though, if only for the reason that Kaien and Ichigo (to me at least) don't seem like the same person. Earlier in the manga, when less was known about Kaien, I could've imagined similarities between him and Ichigo. Now, after Rukia's Hueco Mundo flashbacks, the audience acquires an affection for Kaien as an individual character--someone more mature, more relaxed and fun-loving than Ichigo.

So, what was the purpose of this hypothetical pre-story where *Bleach* characters reincarnate as other *Bleach* characters? To show that even if the reincarnation theme does play out in *Bleach*, it doesn't necessarily spell IchiOri.

The Tanabata story, of course, has nothing to do with reincarnation, and the Tanabata story in *Bleach* is there not to retell the myth or predict couplings; it's there to inhabit the plot with a theme.

So forget separated lovers. The Tanabata theme in *Bleach*, a shounen fighting manga, isn't about separated lovers at all. We're talking innocent teenagers here, whose day to day preoccupations (with the exception of Orihime) do not involve pining for a lover.

The Tanabata theme in *Bleach* is **separation**. Period. In *Bleach* we see the separation between the Living and the Dead, Shinigami and human, Hollow and human. The police force of Shinigami within the Seireitei is separated from the messy and violent Rukongai. There are separations between fathers and sons (Isshin's past is unknown to Ichigo and Ryouken's motives are unknown to Uryuu), breaches between friends (Komamura and Tousen, Tatsuki and Ichigo, Tatsuki and Orihime), children from parents (how many orphans are there in *Bleach*?) A reoccurring image is one of a bitter spirit haunting the Living World he can no longer inhabit because he's been separated from it by some necessary, inevitable fate. This ghost turns into a Hollow, and Hollows drive the *Bleach* plot (Rukia needed a reason to be on Earth after all; she was a-Hollow-hunting).

Early in the manga, the separation theme strikes a melancholy chord with Ichigo's mother's death. Then there's Parakeet Boy who searches for his dead mother, first in the Living World and then in Soul Society. The unfairness of an afterlife in which loved ones aren't reunited echoes later in Hueco Mundo. Sympathetic, likable Hollow like the Desert Brothers live apparently out of the reincarnation cycle in an arid wasteland, and I wonder if their souls aren't separated from the some deserved karmic justice. The Tanabata story emphasizes what is seen over and over in *Bleach*: the ways of the universe are mysterious, they cause sadness and separation, people like the mythical Orihime and her husband Kengyuu deserve to be together but the indisputable rules of the universe separate them.

Or are the ways of the universe that mysterious? Separation, in the Tanabata myth, is justified by placing responsibility above love. Orihime and Kengyuu have jobs to do; namely the glorious one of weaving the sky and the earthly one of tending cows. The Japanese emphasis on duty, great or small, and the contribution of each job to the stability of the corporation is famous, so it's no surprise that the romantic Tanabata myth moved from China to Japan with a re-emphasis on obligations. In *Beyond the Blue Horizon; Myths and Legends of the Sun, Moon, Stars, and Planets*, E.C. Krupp looks at how the myth came to encourage social values in Japan. Tanabata places loyalty to one's job above loyalty to the beloved and even to family (in one version of the myth, Orihime and Kengyuu have children). Celebration of the festival emphasizes the improvement of technical ability and devotion to one's job. Only those who have honed their skills at work or school over the past year will have their wishes granted by the goddess Orihime.

What does this theme of duty trumping romance predict in *Bleach*? My refrain in the essay, lest ye have forgotten: *Bleach isn't an allegory*.

The Tanabata theme may very well predict nothing; a theme's purpose is to underscore plot happenings with significance and to call attention to universal truths outside the storyline and the particular characters.

Tanabata isn't the only theme in *Bleach*; anyone with the barest understanding of the Chinese principle of yin-yang will see black and white all over the manga pages. IchiRuki shippers like to base their pairing on the fact that Ichigo and Rukia appear to represent yin and yang and that their zanpakutou are black and white. Symbols, symbds, nice resonances, but again, *symbols don't predict pairings. They're there to make us look once, twice, at the story, think about its more universal elements and write long posts in fan forums.*

### **So, Make a Prediction, Sensei**

My belief is that Kubo, like the skilled author that he is, will turn the Tanabata myth inside out in *Bleach*. Loyalty to friends has already been shown in *Bleach* to supercede obligation to a job. Witness Renji and Rukia's defying Soul Society to help Ichigo et al in Hueco Mundo. Witness Tosen's devotion to an abstract duty rather than to the friend who originally inspired him to become a Shinigami.

It may be that at the end of *Bleach*, the separation Tanabata signifies will be closed. Kubo's Inoue Orihime, after all, wishes for this closure when she compares rain to a force that unites heaven and earth. She's unlike Tanabata's Orihime in that she can imagine mending this rift and healing this timeless separation.

Maybe, Inoue Orihime will hone her skills and do her duties (oh what could ever could the teenager's most valuable skill be?) so that the goddess Orihime will grant this wish. I've long wondered if heaven and earth will be reformed by the end of *Bleach*; the inadequacies of Soul Society and the absence of the king of Everything from his throne point to a very mismanaged universe. The *Bleach* plot, more than requiring lovers to be reunited, requires so many symbolic separations to be closed. I will bet you that many will be: Uryuu and his father come to some mutual understanding, Komamura fulfills his vow to restore "true sight" to his friend Tosen's eyes, Orihime closes the gap between her fantasy life and plain truths around her, Ichigo makes it up to the friend who got so mad at him that she socked his head into a glass window for ignoring her... the list goes on. Exiles Urahara and Yoruichi may finish their time of separation from Soul Society and reassume their roles as useful upholders of the universal balance.

Lovers coming together? Maybe. I'm not banking on Gin and Rangiku being reunited. This essay has told you that I'm not expecting an IchiOri coupling. There are matters more important in shounen than romance. That being the case, two central characters who come from two different worlds, Ichigo and Rukia, have steadily been closing the gap between themselves, learning to work with one another, to respect one another and to allow reciprocation of kindnesses. Two seemingly independent and separate people are coming to rely on one another--it's the buddy theme of shounen but it's also something more.

### *Bleach*

tells us that resolutions aren't magical consequences; if characters are enemies one day and friends the next, it's because a battle was fought, and characters came to a better of understanding of one another. I'd say that Ichigo and Rukia don't need to kiss and have babies for the theme of *Bleach* to be resolved; they are already an example of a resolving theme. They are characters who were separated by whole dimensions before the story, were brought together by what Kubo called "the blade of fate swinging down," and who, after extended separations in the storyline, have grown closer upon reuniting. The relationship appears to be destiny but it also caters to the beloved Japanese social values of cooperation and hard work. Ichigo and Rukia work to understand each other; the change in their relationship, as many a shipping manifesto has noted on LiveJournal, *evolved and is evolving*.

Given that the IchiRuki relationship has already come a long way in over two hundred chapters, it wouldn't surprise me to see this popular pairing mating and reproducing another generation of shounen heroes in an epilogue or even a sequel to the Bleach story. Rurouni Kenshin, Dragonball Z and other stories have shown us fast-forwards of that sort. (Kubo is a huge fan of Dragonball Z--perhaps someone needs to write the essay comparing Bleach's allusions to that beloved manga).

I predict, simply, that *Bleach* will end the way it began--with Ichigo and Rukia as the central characters and that these two characters will have grown leaps and bounds in terms of emotional intimacy and maturity.

The fact that I ship IchiRuki has little to do with my prediction for *Bleach*. I love IchiRuki and I'd like to see them married with little Shinigami rug rats, but the truth is that I can't predict that with absolute certainty. All I can do is take note of their importance to the theme of separations closing and make a wish, a la a little child on Tanabata, that they will be romantically united by the end of my favorite manga. Maybe, because I've been good at honing my writing and analytical skills since entering this fandom, Orihime will reach down from the heavens and grant my wish.

***NEXT: Part Three will discuss upon the efficacy of panel-interpretation without using text and what it means when Bleach characters touch. It will be less complicated than this part, promise. And if you people bother me, there will undoubtedly be more essays.***

As always, the pointing out of typos and grammatical errors is appreciated. So are comments, corrections of any kind, friendly disagreements and meandering posts on whatever my words have made you start thinking about--even if you're thinking about lunch. Flames and responses intended to provoke mean-spirited shipping controversy will be deleted.