

**Cristal Brown
Tyner Academy
132 Pembroke Lane
Chattanooga, TN 37421**

The Pillow Book

Level/Class:

This lesson is designed for World Studies – an honors course combining team teaching of World History and World Literature in the 10th grade.

Objectives:

The student will learn about life during the Heian Period in Japan. Students will also learn the importance of primary sources in literature and practice writing/journaling skills of their own.

Time Period:

The lesson will take place over a period of several days. The first part of the lesson will be a small 10 minute instructional period to assign the journaling portion of the lesson. The second part of the lesson will take approximately 30 minutes.

Materials:

Handouts of *The Pillow Book*
Paper
Pen/Pencil
Journaling assignment

Assessment:

Students will be assessed on their participation in class discussions and written responses to the text and on their journal writing assignment. Students will also be required to make connections to this primary source document and historical teachings of the time period in related assignments.

Instructional Procedures:

This lesson is divided into two sections:

Day One will require approximately 10-15 minutes of instruction on journaling. Students will be instructed to keep a personal reflection journal for approximately 3 days. Students will be instructed that this does not have to be a narrative style of writing and can simply be thoughts or reflections of things that happen in their daily lives as they see it. Students will be informed that

their reflection journals will be shared with other students and to plan accordingly as they are writing.

Day Two (3 days later) students will have their reflection journals and be armed with lessons about Japan – up to, at least, the Heian Period. Students will be asked to share their journals with at least 2 other students at their table (tables consist of 3-4 students). After reviewing each other's journals they will make observations (comparison and contrast) about each others experiences and reflections.

The teacher will then direct class to a discussion about the importance of primary source documents in the recording of historical data. “What could someone 20/50 years in the future learn from your journal?” This portion of the lesson can be team taught with importance given to literature serving as good reference for historical learning.

The handouts of *The Pillow Book* will then be passed out to each student. Students will be instructed to spend a few minutes reading the excerpts silently and answer the questions following the reading. Next, students will be asked to discuss their answers to questions 1 and 3 in their group.

After a few minutes of group discussion the teacher will guide a class discussion based on the excerpts and student responses. Connections will be made to historical study as part of this class discussion.

The Pillow Book

The Pillow Book, written about 1002, is a collection of impressions of court life by the court lady Sei Shônagon. A contemporary of Murasaki Shikibu, who wrote *The Tale of Genji*, she reflects the same concern with style and taste typical of the period. Unlike the wistful and sometimes tragic mood of *The Tale of Genji*, however, the author of *The Pillow Book* expressed the feeling of *okashi*, or a delight in the novelty of life at court. Sei Shônagon's perceptive eye allows little to slip by; her writings have taught later generations much about the daily life of the aristocracy - and of women - during the classical period. [\(1\)](#)

Reading

...I set about filling the notebooks with odd facts, stories from the past, and all sorts of other things, often including the most trivial material. On the whole I concentrated on things and people I found charming and splendid; my notes are also full of poems and observations...It is written entirely for my own amusement and I put things down exactly as they came to me... I am the kind of person who approves what others abhor and detests the things they like.

THINGS THAT CANNOT BE COMPARED

Summer and winter. Night and day. Rain and sunshine. Youth and age. A person's laughter and his anger. Black and white. Love and hatred.

THINGS THAT HAVE LOST THEIR POWER

A large boat which is high and dry in a creek at ebbside.

A woman who has taken off her false locks to comb the short hair that remains.

A large tree that has been blown down in a gale and lies on its side with its roots in the air...

A man of no importance reprimanding an attendant. (2)

STRAY NOTES

One has been expecting someone, and... there is a stealthy tapping at the door. One sends a maid to see who it is, and lies waiting, with some slight flutter of the breast. But the name one hears when she returns is that of someone completely different, who does not concern one at all. Of all depressing experiences, this is by far the worst. (3)

Notes

(1) Introduction written by Dr. Amy Vladeck Heinrich, director, C.V. Starr East Asian Library, Columbia University.

(2) First three selections taken from Ivan Morris, tr., *The Pillow Book of Sei Shônagon* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971) pp. 263-4, 88, 145.

(3) "Stray Notes" taken from Donald Keene, *Anthology of Japanese Literature from the Earliest Era to the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Grove Press, 1955) p.137.

Exercises

- 1) Compare Sei Shônagon's observations with those you may have written in a personal diary. Do you find her humorous? Insightful?
- 2) Select a category from the excerpts above and try to add your own example. Can you think of another example of things that cannot be compared? Things that have lost their power?
- 3) Based on the journal of your thoughts and observations that you completed over the past few days, compare your entries with those of your classmates. What kinds of things seem to be most interesting to students in your class? How are they different from the interests of Sei Shônagon?