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Lesson Plan 2: Japanese Poetry

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 students will learn about the origins of and practice writing a variety of Japanese poetry: waka, tanka, renga, haikai, and haiku.

Time Period:

The lesson will take place over two class blocks. As this course is team taught there are usually a variety of activities and lessons on a given day, however these will be the focus of the class period during both days.

Materials:

Handouts: What is Waka; Haikai: Comic Linked Verse; and The Poetry of Bashô
Text books: World Literature and Readings in World Literature
Whiteboard/markers
Paper
Pen/Pencil

Assessment:

Students will be assessed on their participation in their group and class discussions, written responses to the handouts, and original poetry they write.

Instructional Procedures:

Day One

1. After historical instruction on Japan students will be introduced to a variety of forms of Japanese poetry. The teacher will quiz the class in an open discussion about existing knowledge of haiku and other knowledge of Japanese poetry. Handouts will be distributed and the students will be instructed to read only the “Essay” of the handout called What is Waka? After reading students will be asked to discuss the information they have learned and how it differs from previous study of haiku. The guided discussion will focus on the waka as the origins of haiku and why this form of poetry is so important to our understanding of the Japanese.

2. Students will then be instructed to form into their reading groups (4) and complete the exercises on the page. The teachers will circulate through the groups observing and discussing/redirecting as needed. After 20 minutes (timing figured as needed) the students will be asked to share their thoughts, answers, or poetry.

3. On the whiteboard write RENGA and TANKA. Give notes regarding the use and background of these forms of poems (details can be found in the Schirokauer text page 321). Have students in the group pair off and compose a renga/tanka poem and then share them with the other set of partners. As a final class discussion the teacher will ask students to share their experiences of composing a poem with a partner. Possible discussion questions: Was it challenging to make the ideas have cohesion? Does this form of poetry lend itself to more or less creativity?

Instructional Procedures:

Day Two

1. The students will be given the handout about Haikai.

2. In the same reading groups students will be asked to read the selection silently. After discussing the poems and how they are formed have students respond to the exercises at the bottom of the handout. Each member of the group will participate together to respond to #3. Volunteers will be asked to share their poem with the class.

3. Students will be instructed to open their World Literature text and complete the short reading about Haiku poetry and poets on pages 572-574. As they read the handout, The Poetry of Bashô, will be distributed. Both the handout and both textbooks have a variety of haiku from several poets: Bashô, Buson, Issa, Onitsura, and Shiki (modern). Students are to familiarize themselves with the poems. After each student reads several selections aloud to their group members they will complete the exercise questions on the handout. Possible discussion questions: Can you detect any Zen influences in the haikus? What is the reason for the suggestiveness of the poems?

4. As a wrap-up activity have students respond to the following prompt: Discuss in several paragraphs the differences and similarities of Japanese poetry when compared to other world poetry that you have read. Consider all things: subject matter, tone, style, purpose, etc.

5. Further instruction: students will be given 2 days to turn their haiku poems into works of art (linking a previous lesson about culture, art, and literature of Japan). These creations will be displayed in the classroom.

What is a *Waka*?



The form of Japanese poetry most familiar to Americans is the *haiku*, the 17-syllable poem that reached the height of its development in the seventeenth century. But the *haiku* derived from an older, but still popular poetic form, the *waka*, which had been used for a thousand years before the *haiku*. The word *waka* means "Japanese poem," and it is a form so basic to Japanese literature that Japanese still study and write it today. It is also known by the name *tanka*, which means "short poem."

Essay (1)

About a thousand years ago, a poet named Ki no Tsurayuki wrote:

"The poetry of Japan has its roots in the human heart and flourishes in the countless leaves of words. Because human beings possess interests of so many kinds it is in poetry that they give expression to the meditations of their hearts in terms of the sights appearing before their eyes and the sounds coming to their ears. Hearing the warbler sing among the blossoms and the frog in his fresh waters - is there any living being not given to song!"

The "song" he meant (*uta*) was a *waka*. It is a poem in thirty-one syllables, arranged in five lines, of 5/7/5/7/7 syllables respectively. For example, here is a poem written by a famous Heian-period woman, Ono no Komachi:

The flowers withered, (5)
Their color faded away, (7)
While meaninglessly (5)
I spent my days in the world (7)
And the long rains were falling. (7) (2)

The *waka* is often said to have an "upper verse," which refers to the first three lines, and a "lower verse," the last two. The *haiku* form is based on the "upper verse"; another form, called a *renga*, is made from alternating the two — first a three-line, seventeen syllable verse, then a two-line, fourteen syllable one, each by a different poet for up to a hundred verses!

Often when we read Japanese poetry in translation the syllable count seems wrong. One reason is that Japanese words often cannot be translated by a single equivalent word in English. More important, however, is the fact that English poetic forms are not usually based on syllables, but on stress. Where Japanese poems rely on internal rhythms and sounds for their effects, English poems often use rhyme. Each language uses its special characteristics to form poetry - but all poetry "has its roots in the human heart."

Traditionally, it was the heart responding to nature that was most sung about: Ki no Tsurayuki asked, "Hearing the warbler sing among the blossoms and the frog in his fresh waters - is there any living being not given to song?" Even in modern times, nature - and our response to it - is a frequent topic, as in this poem by Saitô Mokichi (1882-1953):

Is this what
quietude is like?
On a winter night
the sounds of the air
which surrounds me. (3)

Modern poets are less likely to write exclusively about the "beauties of nature" than their ancestors were, however. At one time the topics to be treated by a *waka*, and even the words a poet was allowed to use, were subject to strict regulations. In modern times, however, any topic is acceptable, and any of the "countless leaves of words" may be used. A good example is this poem by Ishikawa Takuboku (1885-1912):

give me
the creeps
some memories
like putting on
dirty socks. (4)

These "short poems" have been important to the Japanese throughout their history. These have been used to celebrate special occasions since ancient times, and indeed, still are. The Imperial family still runs an annual poetry-writing contest open to all, and many Japanese are amateur poets. In the Heian period especially, *waka* were a most important form of communication between lovers, and a person's skill in poetry was a major criterion in determining his or her standing in society, even influencing political positions. Throughout its history, the *waka* has had an importance in Japanese society unparalleled in the West.

What is a *waka*, then? It is a short poem, with specific structural requirements, written to express feelings. It differs from poetry in our own tradition both in form and in influence. There is yet another general difference: Over the centuries, *waka* were written more to capture emotions than to explain or define them. Ono no Komachi, in the poem above, did not mention why her days seemed meaningless; Takuboku did not tell us what those memories were that made him feel so awful. In contrast, much Western poetry has been concerned with the reasons for a particular feeling, as well as the emotion itself; it has told stories, created allegories, and even discussed theology. But the "Japanese poem" has traditionally treated the "what" rather than the "why" of experience, and opens a wealth of subtle emotions to us. It is an especially rich source for increasing our understanding of the Japanese experience, in reading poetry and, as in the exercises that follow, trying to write some ourselves.

Notes

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

(2) Poem translated in Donald Keene, *Anthology of Japanese Literature from the Earliest Era to the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 81.

(3) Amy Vladeck Heinrich, *Fragments of Rainbows: The Life and Poetry of Saitô Mokichi, 1882-1953* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

(4) Carl Sesar, trans., *Poems to Eat*, by Ishikawa Takuboku (Tokyo, Palo Alto, CA: Kodansha International, 1966).

Exercises

1) Japanese poetry is often written in groups - for instance, people will gather together and write poems on a chosen topic, or they will write poems to commemorate a special occasion. The topic might be something like rain on a spring evening, or the waning autumn moon. The occasion might be New Year's, or an excursion to view the cherry blossoms. Form small groups and decide on a topic — anything, not just nature images, will do. Each student in the group should try to write one *waka* poem, without being too concerned about the number of syllables. But keep in mind that the *waka* is a short form, so each word is especially important. Then discuss the poems you have written in terms of form and content - the difficulty of writing within a particular structure, and on a set topic.

2) Work in pairs, with one student writing the "upper verse," and the other finishing the poem with the "lower verse." Compare the results, and discuss the ways the two parts work to form a whole. How was writing a poem alone different from writing in response to another person?

3) Choose an English poem – any that we have used in class or in the textbook - and a *waka* for comparison. Consider how they are alike and how they are different, treating both form and content. Do these poems illustrate the differences between English and Japanese poems as discussed in the text? If so, how? If not, why not?

4) The same word, *uta*, is used to mean both "song" and "poem." What do you think are reasons for this? Is there anything in our own tradition that relates songs and poems?

Haikai: Comic Linked Verse

Haiku is derived from the opening verse of *haikai*, or "comic linked verse." As the name implies, *haikai* often dealt with contemporary subjects in humorous ways. One person would begin the *haikai*, and others would add on, creating a continuously evolving poem. *Haikai* was a popular social activity from the medieval period onward. In the following examples, each verse was written by a different famous poet; in *Haikai* #1, for instance, the three poets Bashô, Bonchô, and Kyorai took turns writing the linked poem.

Reading

Haikai #1: "Throughout the Town"

Throughout the town
above the welter of smelly things
the summer moon (Bonchô)

Throughout the town
above the welter of smelly things
How hot it is, how hot it is
says a voice at every house-gate (Bashô)

How hot it is, how hot it is
says a voice at every farm-gate
although the weeds
have not been worked a second time
the rice comes into ear (Kyorai)

Although the weeds
have not been worked a second time
the rice comes into ear
the charcoal ash is shaken off
the dried sardine broiled at noon (Bonchô)

the charcoal ash is shaken off
the dried sardine broiled at noon
but in this back country
the use of coins is not yet heard of
what a bother to travelers (Bashô) [\(1\)](#)

(This *haikai* continues for a total of 36 verses)

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***Haikai* #2: "Beneath the Boughs"**

Beneath the boughs
the soup with fish and vegetables
flecked with cherry petals (Bashô)

Beneath the boughs
the soup with fish and vegetables
flecked with cherry petals
the sun goes gently to the west
extending the day's fine weather (Chinseki)

the sun goes gently to the west
extending the day's fine weather
the single traveler
walks on scratching where lice bit him
as spring come to a close (Kyokusui)

the single traveler
walks on scratching where lice bit him
as spring come to a close
not yet grown used to wearing
his sword in a protective case (Bashô) (2)

(There are a total of 36 verses in this haikai, composed in 1691)

Notes

(1) "Throughout the Town" was taken from Earl Miner, *Japanese Linked Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1979) p. 302.

(2) "Beneath the Boughs" was taken from Earl Miner and Hiroko Odagiri, trans., *The Monkeys' Straw Raincoat and Other Poetry of the Bashô School* (Princeton University Press) p. 82.

Exercises

1) Have each member of your group read a stanza out loud. Do you think you would find this activity an amusing way to pass the time with your friends? What word or other games might you play now that have the same effect?

2) What happens to the poems with each stanza? How do the poems evolve?

3) Write your own *haikai*. The rules are that the opening verse has to be seventeen syllables of three lines (5-7-7), the second verse fourteen syllables (7-7), and thereafter alternating verses of 5-7-7 and 7-7. Your *haikai* can be about any subject (usually humorous).

The Poetry of Bashô



Haiku, the famous short poetic form of Japan, reached its pinnacle in the works of the master Matsuo Bashô, who lived in the seventeenth century. *Haiku* remains a popular art form today.

Reading

Haiku #1: Te wo uteba kodama ni akuru natsu no tsuki

as I clap my hands
with the echoes, it begins to dawn -
the summer moon

Haiku #2: susuhaki wa ono ga tana tsuru daiku kana

housecleaning day -
hanging a shelf at his own house
a carpenter

Haiku #3: hototogisu otakeyabu wo moru tsukiyo

hototogisu (little cuckoo) -
through a vast bamboo forest
moonlight seeping

Haiku #4: kareeda ni karasu no tomarikeri aki no kure.

on a bare branch
a crow has alighted
autumn evening.

Haiku #5: akebono ya shirauo shiroki koto issun

in the twilight of dawn
a whitefish, with an inch
of whiteness.

Haiku #6: kirishigure Fuji wo minu hi zo omoshiroki

in the misty rain
Mount Fuji is veiled all day -
how intriguing!

Haiku taken from Makoto Ueda., *Bashô and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku with Commentary* (Stanford University Press, 1991) pp. 102, 314, 317, 374.

Translations for *Haiku* 4 and 5 provided by Haruo Shirane, Professor of Japanese Literature, Columbia University.

Exercises

- 1) Every *haiku* has to have a seasonal word. See if you can find the seasonal word in each *haiku*.
- 2) What qualities make the *haiku* popular? What are its strengths? Limitations?
- 3) Write your own *haiku*. Remember, it must have three lines of 5, 7, and 5 syllables respectively.
- 4) *Haiku* are very difficult to translate from Japanese into English. One of Bashô's most famous poem, below, has been translated in many different ways. Make your own translation of it; the English meaning of each word is already given in parentheses. Bashô wrote it when he visited

the site of an old battlefield, now covered over by weeds. Does knowing the context in which Bashô wrote the poem affect how you choose to translate it?

Natsugusa (Summer grass) *ya* (O!)

Tsuwamonodomo ga (warriors)

Yume no (dream's) *ato* (afterwards)

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