

## Lesson Plan for Japan: The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon

**Purpose:** This lesson is intended to use literature of its time to help students understand Heian court culture.

**Target grade level:** 12

**Topic:** Heian court culture

The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon

*zuihitsu* (miscellany) and *waka* (31 syllable poetry)

**Concepts:** secular and sacred traditions

aesthetic self-cultivation--gardens, clothing, poetry

comparisons to British court traditions--Anglo Saxon (Beowulf) and English Medieval (Sir Gawain and the Green Knight)

**Materials:** The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon translated and edited by Ivan Morris. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

teacher background information: East Asia: A New History. Rhoads Murphey. New York: Pearson Education Inc. 2004. 190-206.

**Key Idea:** Heian court culture, as portrayed in The Pillow Book by a lady-in-waiting to the empress, reveals the importance of secular traditions, sacred traditions and aesthetic self-cultivation.

**Skills:** Knowledge--Students will understand The Pillow Book literally, including the nature descriptions, religious and court traditions, occurrences in the lives of various courtiers and common people;

Students will know the definitions of *zuihitsu* and *waka*.

Interpret--Students will deduce the motivation behind and meaning of certain behaviors, conversations and poetry.

Analyze--Students will analyze this culture's value system.

Students will compare and contrast Anglo Saxon court culture, Medieval court culture, Medieval religious attitudes and traditions, and Heian court culture.

Synthesize--Students will produce original writings in the style of Sei Shonagon.

**Procedures:**

1. Discuss with students what they remember from Beowulf about Anglo Saxon court life--the significance of a beautiful and sturdy central hall, brave warriors, the benevolent king, lineage; and from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight about Medieval court life--the significance of the code of chivalry, fealty to king, courtesy toward women, a central hall.

2. Give background information on Heian court culture, drawing from East Asia: A New History and Morris's Introduction to The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon.

3. Hand out text, Evan Morris's translation of The Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon. Examine Appendix 4a-d concerning court architecture and layout, clothing, etc. Assign first readings: #1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 11,12, 22. Begin reading aloud. Reference the myriad footnotes.
4. Small groups list generalizations concerning traditions, court life, religious life, and attitudes to nature. Using #11, examine the poetic form *waka*. Whole class discussion of readings and generalizations.
5. Assign reading of various lists: #13, 47, 79, 80, 81, 148, and 45, 46.
6. Discuss favorites, surprises, universals and unique.
7. Students add to any 3 of Shonagon's lists--1 each for a typical Anglo-Saxon, Medieval, and contemporary time period.
8. Students share their best additions as they compare and contrast Anglo Saxon, Medieval, contemporary and Heian.
9. Students read anecdotes of Shonagon's life at court: #51, 56, 185.
10. Discuss inferences they can draw concerning Shonagon's motivation, values, and other characteristics. Discuss what about her is universal and what unique, and what about her culture is universal and what unique.

**Evaluation:** Write 2 pages typed minimum of descriptions, lists, anecdotes, poems and/or insights in the style of Sei Shonagon. Attach a page of analysis explaining how your writings suit Heian culture and Shonagon herself.

**Relationship to English Language Arts Standards:**

Reading Applications: Informational, Technical and Persuasive Text

5. Examine an author's implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions and beliefs about a subject.

Reading Applications: Literary Text

1. Compare and contrast motivations and reactions of literary characters confronting similar conflicts, using specific examples of characters' thoughts, words and actions.

2. Analyze the historical, social and cultural context of setting.

7. Compare and contrast varying characteristics of American, British, and world and multi-cultural literature.

**Grade Adaptation:**

Designed for grade 12, this lesson can easily be made suitable for lower grades by tailoring the amount and complexity of background information and by choosing fewer and more age appropriate selections from The Pillow Book.

Although sexual license was a part of Heian court culture, many interesting selections do not allude to that, e. g. #8 "The Cat Who Lived in the Palace" and the many nature descriptions.


 menu

Author's reflections

## Waka

The most popular poetic form in the Heian period was the 31-syllable waka. Its phrasing consisted of 5 lines in the sequence of 5 syllables, then 7, then 5, (the body) followed by a cap of two lines of 7 each. The body of the waka is what eventually became the haiku.

An educated person's sensibility was on display every time he or she composed a waka. Not only was the content and sensitive use of images appreciated, but the handwriting was carefully scrutinized as well. Murasaki's hero, Prince Genji, was of course a paragon in this regard, and every lady in Murasaki's tale is judged on her skill in writing waka.

This waka is one of Murasaki's own, as represented in the 13th-century collection "The Thirty-six Immortal Women Poets." In my tale, she composes it sometime after the death of her husband.

*Mishi hito no  
keburu to narishi  
yûbe yori  
na zo mutsumashiki  
Shiogama no ura*

[Since that evening when the one I loved turned into smoke, the name Shiogama Bay always reminds me of him.]