

Studying the *Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon

Purpose: Social behavior in *The Pillow Book* can be compared to expected social norms of today.

Essential Questions:

1. How do Sei Shonagon's observations regarding social behavior compare to today's social expectations?
2. What can readers infer about authors based on their chosen content and style?
3. Specifically, what can readers infer about Sei Shonagon and Heian Japan based on *The Pillow Book*?

Rationale: Students can see the universality and applicability of early Japanese literature in their own lives.

Materials: Excerpts from Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*
Biographical information about the author (see attached outline)
Basic classroom supplies

Activities:

1. Begin class discussion with a general question regarding journals/diaries. Students should respond to the following questions:
 - What general topics would you (or do you) record in a personal journal?
 - What would someone be able to infer about you if they read your journal?
 - Conversely, what would you want to find out about someone through their writing?
 - If you were to write a journal for others to read, what would you include? How would this change your writing?
2. Students will then write a journal entry about what is the best aspects of each season of the year. (This will connect then to the first entry of *The Pillow Book* which describes the seasons.) Remind the students to use at least three specific traits of the season and one has to be tied to nature. They should try to use specific descriptive language and imagery.
3. Depending on time, students could share these or the teacher could read them and the students could guess the author.
4. Use this discussion and writing as a bridge to an introduction to *The Pillow Book*. Students should take notes on Sei Shonagon's life, the structure of the work, and its influence on later Japanese literature. (see attached outline)
5. The class will then read "In the Spring it is the Dawn" together and draw comparisons with their own seasonal writing.
6. For outside reading, students should read several extracts from *The Pillow Book* to have an adequate experience with the style and content of the work. The selection of extracts may vary but some to consider are the following sections:
 - When I Make Myself Imagine
 - Depressing Things
 - Hateful Things
 - Annoying Things

- Elegant Things
 - Things that Cannot be Compared
 - Insects
 - Embarrassing Things
 - It is Getting So Dark
7. Students should read the selections and be prepared to answer and discuss (perhaps in a Socratic seminar) the following points of consideration:
- What do these extracts tell you about the author?
 - What do they reveal about societal life in Heian Japan?
 - With what do you agree and disagree?
 - How do these observations compare to today's society?

Assessment: Aside from discussion and seminars, the major assessment would be that the students would create their own pillow books that would address societal expectations and observations of today.

Grade Adaptations: Target grade: 9-12 literature/humanities class

Adaptations could include making a class *Pillow Book* rather than individual books. Each student could be assigned a separate entry.

Also, the amount of reading could be altered for the grade level, but students should have a good understanding of what the original work was like.

State Standards:

Reading Process, Reading Applications: Literary Text, All writing standards, and Oral Communication

Works Consulted

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Ramusack, Barbara N. and Sharon Sievers. Women in Asia: Restoring Women to History. Bloomington, Indiana UP, 1999.

"Sei Shonagon." The Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces: Expanded Edition, Volume One. Ed. Maynard Mack. New York: W.W. Norton, 1995. 2188-2218.

Introductory Notes to Sei Shonagon and *The Pillow Book*

Sei Shonagon (966-1017)

- daughter of an outstanding poet and provincial governor during the Heian Period of Japan (784-1185)
- After the failure of her first marriage, Sei entered the service as a lady-in-waiting of Emperor Ichijō's consort, Teishi (or Sadako), in 993 and was thus closely involved in courtly life
- Sei Shonagon was “known for her quick wit and sunny disposition, and won a reputation for her familiarity with the Chinese classics, considered an unusual accomplishment for a woman.”
- Heian women dominated the literature of the time because the men were focused on replicating Chinese Confucian-influenced poetry and proving themselves “cultured” by writing in Chinese
 - aristocratic women were free from these concerns and enjoyed a relatively high status in society
 - wrote in kana (the native Japanese language)—often deemed intellectually inferior as “women’s script” but is often noted as the language of sentiment (Men would also use it in writing private poetry.)
- “After Teishi died, Sei left the palace; virtually nothing is known of the rest of her life. She is usually supposed to have spent her final years in solitude.”

The Pillow Book

- First draft was in existence around 996 but the earliest extant version of the work dates to 500 years later, so the order of the entries may have changed from the original
- acts as a record of stray thoughts and impressions in a journal style
- believed to be the only source left of a popular style of writing from the time period—called a pillow book because it was to be kept by the pillow
- contains 300 entries of varying lengths
 - These include lists and classifications of random things and eyewitness accounts of actual events, anecdotes, and perceptions of courtly life. Also, contains musings on nature and its beauty and the meaning of life.
- structure is very free and random with no narrative plot
- language and topics are informal and highly opinionated (and thus more truthful)
- This free associative, almost stream of consciousness style evolves into the Japanese literary form of *zuihitsu*, which translates into “following the brush.” (just write whatever your brush inspires you to write)
 - Modern Japanese realist writers trace their roots to this literary form