

The Pillow Book – Sei Shonagon

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Grades 11-12
British Literature Restoration Unit
2 Lessons of 1 hour each

Summary

The Pillow Book is a book of observations and thoughts recorded by a lady-in-waiting in the late 10th Century Japanese court. It begins with a poetic appreciation of the four seasons and then goes on to portray aspects of court life. Section 14 provides a hilarious list of pet peeves, entitled “Hateful Things” such as tiresome visitors, crying babies, snorers and barking dogs. The writer can’t bear it when lovers interrupt her, sneeze, talk about other women in front of her or leave without closing the panel behind them. She detests people who are too casual in their conversation or pretend to be more elegant than they are, and she ridicules men who make clumsy exits from her bedchamber. Sections 45 through 48 describe the secrecy and excitement of clandestine visits, providing details of the footsteps, tapping, rustling and fanning. The selection also includes lists of rare things, annoying things, embarrassing things (including being overheard when bad-mouthing someone) and squalid things (such as unattractive women with lots of children), and ends with a poetic appreciation of snowfall. The lists, diary entries and personal reflections all give an impression of the writer’s keen powers of observation, her enjoyment of the aristocratic lifestyle, and her intellectual personality and wit.

Historical/literary context

Sei Shonagon was born in about 966 and after a failed marriage she entered the service of the Emperor’s consort, Teishi in 993. She was a lady-in-waiting in the court of the Japanese Empress Sadako during the last decade of the tenth century in what is now Kyoto. Her mother had compiled an anthology of poetry and Sei herself won a reputation in the palace for her familiarity with the Chinese classics. She was also known for her wit. After Teishi died, Sei left the palace and little is known of the rest of her life, although she probably spent the final years of her life in solitude (The Japanese Literature Homepage).

The Pillow Book was first drafted in 996 and a second draft appeared in 1000. Additions were made to a final version which followed by 1021. The book is composed of more than 300 sections of varying length, grouped into three categories: lists, diary entries and personal reflections. A pillow book is an informal collection of notes composed when the writer has retired to his or her bedchamber. It is thought that the title could refer to a real pillow, a notebook serving as a pillow, or a notebook kept near a pillow. A pillow book reveals person’s life, and in this case, Sei portrays the confined but hedonistic lifestyle of the nobility at the height of the Heian period (Japan’s ‘Golden Age’) in which women of high social status had plenty of leisure time to spend reading and writing, flirting and gossiping (The Japanese Literature Homepage).

Discussion questions and answers

1. What does the writer find beautiful about each of the four seasons?

- **Spring:** *She finds dawn the most beautiful in this season - as the sun rises, the hills are outlined in faint red and “wisps of purplish cloud trail over them.”* (reader page 33)
- **Summer:** *She finds night the most beautiful in this season – even when it rains, the fireflies “flit to and fro” and the moon shines; “how beautiful it is!”* (reader page 33)
- **Autumn:** *She finds evening the most beautiful in this season – the wild geese are “charming”; “When the sun has set, one’s heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.”* (reader page 33)
- **Winter:** *She finds early morning the most beautiful in this season, especially when snow has fallen during the night – “...splendid too when the ground is white with frost.”* (reader page 33)

2. Categorize all selections into the three categories of entry (lists, diary entries, personal reflections) in *The Pillow Book*.

- **List:** *Hateful Things; Insects; Rare Things; Annoying Things; Embarrassing Things; Squalid Things; People Who Seem to Suffer*
- **Diary Entry:** *When I Make Myself Imagine; To Meet One's Lover; A Lover's Visit; The Women's Apartments along the Gallery*
- **Personal Reflection:** *In Spring It Is the Dawn; In the Seventh Month; When a Woman Lives Alone; When a Court Lady Is on Leave; It Is Delightful When There Has Been a Thin Fall of Snow*

* These are not definitive categorizations – students will have different interpretations which should prompt valuable discussion about genre definitions

3. From the writer's comments in 'Hateful Things,' what can you infer about forms of etiquette in the imperial palace?

- *Do not keep chattering when your host is in a hurry to leave*
- *Do not warm your hands over the brazier*
- *Do not fuss with your clothing once settled*
- *Do not drink too much, or encourage others to drink too much*
- *Do not complain about your lot in life or speak badly about people*
- *When leaving a secret lover, exit the bedchamber silently*
- *Do not butt in to other people's conversations to outsmart or correct them*
- *When you are with a lover, do not talk about other women*
- *Do not sneeze in front of people*
- *Always close the panel behind you when leaving*
- *Show respect to your social superiors and use titles where appropriate – do not use 'I'*
- *Use formal language in direct conversation and letters (unless you are not proficient)*
- *Do not travel alone in your carriage to social functions*

(All paraphrased from reader page 34-36)

'Big Picture' prompts

1. Identify the conventions of courtly love mentioned in *The Women's Apartments along the Gallery*.

- *"we women generally stay hidden behind our screens or curtains" (reader page 38)*
- *"Sometimes the tapping will continue for quite a while without the woman's responding in any way" (reader page 38)*
- *"The man finally gives up, thinking that she must be asleep" "(she) makes a few cautious movements, with a rustle of silk clothes, so that her visitor will know she is really there" (reader page 38)*
- *"she hears him fanning himself as he remains standing outside the door" (reader page 38)*
- *"one can make out the many layers of a woman's clothes emerging from under brilliantly colored curtains of state" (reader page 38-39)*
- *"at this point he may take out an elegant inkstone and start writing a letter, or again, he may ask the woman for a mirror and comb his sidelocks" (reader page 39)*
- *"the sleeves of their robes neatly arranged" (reader page 39)*
- *"When a three-foot curtain of state has been set up, there is hardly any gap between the top of the frame and the bottom of the head-blind; fortunately the little space that remains always seems to come precisely at the face-level of the man who is standing outside the curtains and of the woman who is conversing with him from inside." (reader page 39)*

2. What picture do you get of life as an aristocratic woman in the Heian period of Japanese history?
 - *They live a life of luxury and leisure – writing, sewing, flirting, gossiping*
 - *It is exciting/dangerous – they must always be on the alert, especially at night (But I rather enjoy all this) (reader page 38)*
 - *It is very social – ‘Special Festival’; lots of visits, attendants*
 - *Reputation is important & there are lots of ‘rules’*

3. From “When I Make Myself Imagine,” what can you deduce about the writer’s feelings about her life in the imperial palace?
 - *“When I make myself imagine what it is like to be one of those women who live at home, faithfully serving their husbands – women who have not a single exciting prospect in life yet who believe they are perfectly happy – I am filled with scorn. Often they are of quite good birth, yet have no opportunity to find out what the world is like. I wish they could live for a while in our society, even if it should mean taking service as Attendants, so that they might come to know the delights it has to offer.” (reader page 33)*
 - *“Women who have served in the Palace, but who later get married and live at home, are called Madam and receive the most respectful treatment” (reader page 33)*

Activities

Lesson One

Students should have read the selections from *The Pillow Book* as homework in preparation for the lesson.

1. Re-cap the terms **satire**, **parody**, and the **mock epic** (see literary terms & images in Appendix A): 5-10 minutes.
2. Brief lecture on the Heian period and the conventions of courtly love in Japanese literature (see notes in Appendix B): 5-10 minutes.
3. In small groups, students work through the discussion questions and teacher leads a brief feedback session afterward to explore the text in depth: 20 minutes.
4. ‘Chalk Talk’- The teacher writes the ‘Big Picture’ prompts on the board (one at a time) and students are invited to silently come up and add their thoughts in a spider diagram format. The teacher then leads a plenary session to review the most significant points. 20 minutes.

Lesson Two

1. Re-cap previous lesson, focusing on the discussion questions and ‘big picture’ prompts: 5-10 minutes.
2. Group students into pairs and ask them to discuss and list their pet peeves (you could give some personal examples first, or point them to some in *The Pillow Book*). They should choose one of their partner’s to share with the class. Students may need to be reminded here about avoiding inappropriate suggestions or specific criticisms of teachers or fellow students. 10 minutes discussion/10 minutes presentation.
3. Divide students into small groups (4-5) and allocate each group a different topic from the following:
 - Rare Things
 - Embarrassing Things
 - Annoying Things
 - Hateful Things

Students should then come up with 5 ideas for their allocated topic and choose the best 5. They must include a direct quote from *The Pillow Book* that inspired their idea (possibly in the form of a chart/table). Groups should assign a scribe to write them on a sheet of poster paper and display them for the class, and a spokesperson to read/explain them to the class. 15 minutes for activity/15 minutes for plenary.

Required materials: Poster paper, markers

Extension Activity

Students could write a pillow book from the perspective of a character from the novel they are currently studying. Students should include sections of all three categories (list/diary entry/personal reflection) and should cover all four topics (rare things; embarrassing things; annoying things; hateful things). They could present their books on actual pillows for a class display. This activity would enable the students to apply an East Asian tradition to a Western work which would enhance their appreciation of both traditions.

Connections to other works

Students might benefit from a brief contextual lecture on pre-modern Japanese History and the conventions of courtly love – I would use the notes and images in the Appendix B to create a brief power point presentation.

If teaching the lesson as part of a British Literature curriculum, students would have learned about the Restoration period and would therefore have some background knowledge of the conventions of courtly life in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Europe. Brief discussion of *The Rape of the Lock* and showing a clip of the film *Dangerous Liaisons* would therefore be helpful as a way into *The Pillow Book*.

Citations

Alvis, Andra. Lecture notes: “The Conventions of Courtly Love.” *Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School*. Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. July 16, 2008.

O’Bryan, Scott. Lecture notes: “Japanese History.” *Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School*. Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. July 16, 2008.

“The Pillow Book of Sei Shōnagon.” The Japanese Literature Homepage. 23 July 2008.
<http://www.jlit.net/authors_works/premodern/makura_no_soshi.html>

Schirokauer, Conrad. A Brief History of Japanese Civilization. Harcourt, Inc. NY, 1993.

Appendix A: Definition of Literary terms

Satire

A literary form employing wit to expose human foolishness, usually with the intent to inspire social reform.

Parody

A form of satire that imitates the style of a particular writer or form in order to ridicule it.

Mock Epic

A form of parody that uses the style of a classical epic poem to describe a trivial subject.

Appendix B: Instructor notes for lecture

The Heian Period (784-1185)

- Follows the **Nara** Period (710-784) when Man'yōshū and Kokinshū poetry was composed (Tenka)
- **Golden Age**: Period dominated by the court aristocracy (not the emperor), the flowering of Japanese culture, and the establishment of a new capital (Kyoto)
- **Fujiwara**: house that rose to power through intermarriage with the imperial family
- **Shoen**: private landholdings outside government control - exempt from taxation, redistribution and inspection (led to a decrease in government revenue and power)
- **Art diaries**: popular form of writing providing an insight into the daily life of upper class women in Heian Japan
- **The Tale of Genji** – Japan's greatest prose work and the world's first novel (twice as long as *War and Peace!*), written by Murasaki Shikibu
- Followed by the **Kamakura (Medieval)** period (1185-1333), the beginning of military rule (**Shogun** and **Samurai**)

The Conventions of Courtly Love

- Marriages arranged – exchange of property/status
- One or more secondary wives
- Love affairs – men and women (no double standards)
- High literacy amongst aristocracy (men and women)
- Jealousy – lovers housed within palace - long waits between visits, gossip and reputation, life of leisure
- Farical element – mistaken identities in the dark
- Themes of lost youth, impermanence of life and beauty
- Rituals – calligraphy, music, robes (up to 12 layers displayed on sleeves), courtly dances, screens
- Extreme emotion – lots of open and group weeping, self-pity common
- Perfect gentleman/"shining prince" (Genji is paragon)
- Visual beauty important – both sexes wear make-up: white face paint with rosy tint, long glossy hair, eyebrows plucked, blackened teeth – sign of married women (and courtesans), perfume
- Rare things/embarrassing things/annoying things/hateful things – parody
- *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book* both have a feminine focus and were written by women (ladies in waiting)

Motifs

View through a fence
 Seeing one's lover in a dream
 Poetic exchanges (letters)
 The rebuff
 Clandestine visits
 One lover loses interest (male) or disappears (female)
 The other lover is left desolate

Themes

passing of time
 mourning of wasted youth/beauty