

Texting the Shining Prince

Connecting Social Media Savvy Teens to a Thousand-Year-Old Poetic Form

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At night, when nobody else was awake, the two teenagers would send secret messages to each other: short bursts of text that they would wrap like little gifts in layer after layer of meaning. Gossip, intrigue, flirtation, the blossoming of young love...if their parents found out what was really going on—if *anyone* found out—the teens would be in trouble, to say the least.

So they had to hide their true feelings in rich metaphors, each young lover in turn teasing out what the other had said, altering it to convey a new meaning, and then sending it back. In secret, they would unwrap each other's notes delicately, deliciously, savoring each word like a buttery caramel—so much needed to be said in a format that was, by its nature, limited in length to a set number of characters. Through these messages, initial flirtations would turn to relationships, relationships would sustain themselves, would grow—and would, too, eventually wither and die as the youngsters moved on to other phases of their lives.

And while it may be true that each generation of teenagers invents the entire world from scratch (just ask them!), we're not talking here about text messages and Twitter, despite the similarities. No; a thousand years ago teenagers in the Japanese Court were doing the same thing as their modern counterparts—sending

secret messages back and forth—limited then by formal poetic structure instead of digital character count. These messages, though, were being sent under markedly different conditions than those faced by modern-day texting teens: traditional court etiquette made it difficult for a teenage boy to even properly *see* a girl who wasn't in his family, forget about holding a conversation. And if the wrong boy was caught talking to the wrong girl, they weren't simply sent to their rooms, didn't just get their phones taken away for a month—they were exiled far away, sent to live a life of poverty, cold, and isolation.

So, instead, Japanese teenagers—and, in fact, most members of the Heian Japanese court—sent each other poems. A glimpse of just the outline of a member of the opposite sex behind a carriage window screen was all it took to begin a steady stream of poems back and forth. Often snuck out in the sleeves of staff members, the poems followed the strict structure of early 11th-century Japanese *Waka*, a form that dictated a set number of characters/syllables, and whose subject matter often revolved around nature. The quality of the metaphors—and the penmanship—were used to judge the potential suitability of a sweetheart: the equivalent of today's Jordans or Uggs. Puns and double-meanings abounded—if the poems were intercepted, one could at least then argue his or her innocence.

The form was famously immortalized in Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*, a classic text considered by some to be the first-ever novel. The book follows the life and loves

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of the title character from his boyhood to his death (and beyond, actually—the English translation is 1000-plus pages long and goes deep into the romantic history of his sons, too), and is loaded with *Waka* that are both opulent and emotional. It also makes a perfect lesson for middle and high school students today, connecting them to the history of poetry via a structure and a type of secrecy that are immediately familiar to them from the late-night texting barrages that swell their parents' cellphone bills each month.

To get started, students split into pairs, not knowing exactly why or what they will be writing, only that they will be working together. By choosing their own partners students are, in essence, also choosing their own danger level: best friends may choose to work together...or students may venture out to work with someone new. It is only then that we begin to talk about *Genji* and about the etiquette of the Heian court, the strict rules governing the interactions between men and women and girls and boys, and about the role poetry played in relationships. Students are often shocked by the notion that men and women couldn't freely interact, and the idea that they instead used poetry as a kind of "status update" in the different phases of their relationships usually thrills students' nascent ideas of romance.

We look then at three different "sets" of linked couplets from *Genji*, each showing a different point in the development of one of Genji's many amours. (There are many, many sets in the book, and their range of topics—from racy to dead-serious—allows for quite a bit of customization of this exercise.) Here is the first back-and-forth between Genji—a.k.a. the "Shining Prince"—and a young woman who has spotted him at night. Her couplet begins the exchange:

I think I need not ask whose
face it is,
So bright, this evening face,
in the shining dew.

And Genji's reply:

Come a bit nearer, please. Then might you know
Whose was the evening face so dim in the twilight.¹

These couplets show just the gentle start of a relationship, and it gives the class the opportunity to talk about shyness, false modesty (Genji, the extremely handsome scion of the royal family, knows his face is anything but "dim"), and about how people meet, how they first talk, express interest, etc. Young teenagers, in particular, love talking about relationships, but these first two couplets also lead them to consider various aspects of poetry: from the structure and history of couplets, to the way the two young poets start to pick up and work with a common theme.

A second set of later couplets, flowing back and forth, shows a relationship at a far different point. In this case Genji begins:

Carnations at the wintry hedge remind me
Of an autumn which we leave too far behind.

And the emotional reply:

I see them, and my sleeves are drenched afresh,
The wild carnations at the wasted hedge.

Genji, too, is deeply affected:

Many a desolate autumn have I known,
But never have my tears flowed as tonight.

But his old lover won't let him off that easy:

¹ Shikibu, Murasaki. *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Edward G. Seidensticker. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1994.

I knew that the autumn mists
had faded away,
And looked for you in the stormy
autumn skies.

What happened? The relationship looked to be so promising, but here we've changed from a bright face in the evening to carnations at a wasted, wintry hedge? The couplets are particularly ripe in possibilities for intense dialogue, but also, again, in poetic themes: metaphor, hyperbole, and personification. More, they show students how to extend metaphors throughout the length of a poem, as each poet above picks up the metaphor introduced by the other and brings it forward in a new way.

Finally, we move on to a third set of couplets, in which Genji begins by nearly hinting he'd like his old lover back:

The old one's gaze rests long on the seedling pine,
Waiting to hear the song of the first warbler.

But, though the sweetness of the memory might be shared, his lover makes it clear she hasn't been waiting around for Genji.

The warbler left its nest long years ago,
But cannot forget the roots of the waiting pine.

Students love the implications in these sets: the meeting, the breakup, the drama, and, ultimately, the re-buffing of the prodigal lover. The discussion is always incredibly animated, with boys and girls fully engaged and relating their own young experiences and those of their friends to Genji and his lost love.

The students' enthusiasm at this point makes it a perfect time to segue into the writing of their own couplets. So I introduce the scenario for them: they have spied each other across the market, just an intriguing glimpse. Will they become friends, or not? I remind the students that the first poet should intro-

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duce a metaphor to describe how he or she is feeling, and that that metaphor should be hit back and forth like a ball in a tennis match. For the first attempt, I don't give them the strict bounds of syllable count, but I do suggest they look to nature for their metaphor topics, often giving them an idea or two to help get them started if they are having trouble. Students aren't allowed to talk to one another, only to pass a piece of paper back and forth, speaking through the couplets they write each other. And, to make it more fun, each poet has a set time limit—sixty seconds, say, before passing the paper back to his or her partner.

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Spring rains fall and touch the soft petals
of the cherry blossoms that woke with sweetness

For the first time the blossoms stretch
and smile to the rain that disturbed her calmness

The world seems so far away
only raindrops can give me happiness

Rain only touches those leaves
that are most beautiful

—Christina and BJ, 8th grade

And throughout, what appears again and again is a youthful sense of vigor. The couplets, the elements of the natural world, seem to tap into the middle- or high-schoolers' new sense of themselves as growing, maturing individuals, to their ideas of the vast possibilities suddenly becoming open to them:

We emerge from winter
frozen but optimistic

The spring flowers
blossom,
the world is fresh with
dew
Like new buds,
we open toward the light

—Robinson and Lily, 8th
grade

But perhaps the most thrilling part for a poetry teacher is that the students learn to take one metaphor and to extend and expand on it, instead of simply flitting from one to another:

Her path, unsure as it may be,
is fearless, strong, and unquestioning

Strong like the branch of the cherry-blossom tree
holding tightly to her beloved

Like the trunk of the strong, unwavering cherry tree,
a life has many knots and bulges, all part of its path

Together shall we make the trunk of the cherry tree,
bonded forever, for love, for life.

—Amanda and Jocelyn, 8th grade

I'm not sure what exactly it is in this form that elicits such an expansive engagement by students, but in my experience it never fails to do so. Perhaps it's

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the fact that, in order to even enter into the assignment, we first have to discuss something that they aren't generally asked to talk about with authority figures at school, a subject in which they themselves are the authorities: the emotional ups-and-downs of being a teenager, with all of the crushes and heartbreak, the new friendships and new love, associated with it.

Or perhaps it is the act of imagining themselves living in ancient Japan that frees them to express what might otherwise be embarrassing. It's a comforting knowledge: hey, you're not the only one reaching out to someone late at night, via text. The history itself brings a sense of safety, an anchor that—as young people coming alive to grown-up ideas and emotions—they rarely get. There is freedom that comes from knowing you're one in a long line of young people who have experienced these same ideas and emotions, and have responded by doing the exact same thing you're doing today—sneaking short messages that seem to you to carry the weight of the world. 📱