Shelby Lydon

JAPN 309

Takahashi

11/15/2012

Japanese literature Q&A

1) How do the two pieces of literature, The Pillow Book and Essay in Idleness, compare given that they are written from different points of view, being male and female? What are the similarities and differences? How might their views be biased?

The differences in the two pieces not only lies in the content of the two “journals” but also in the way that they are written. First, ‘The Pillow Book’ talks very much about Sei Shonagon’s own personal feelings and her life in the court, and it is written very much like a diary, which it is. Sei Shonagon writes the story of her life in this book, and she seems to use very intimate and emotional means to express her feelings, for example, when she creates an abundance of lists ranging from “unsuitable things” to “things that should be short” and such and such. In ‘The Pillow Book’ Sei Shonagon often includes the topic of men in her writings, but more often than not they seem to be negative.

On the other hand, Essays in Idleness, having been written from the point of view of a man, writes a great deal about the duties of a man, or what a man should do, could do, or how he should act. A great deal of passages from this piece of literature begin with the phrase, “The man who...” or, “The Intelligent man...” which means that yes, Kenko’s writing are biased because he writes only about the state of a man, or his relationship to a woman, but not of hers to him. One difference between these pieces of literature is that Kenko rarely makes lists such as Sei Shonagon, and instead he writes a great many reflections, very philosophical reflections about daily life and occurrences. Another difference between the two pieces is that Kenko very often asks questions about society, about relationships, about things that are common in Japan and why in ‘Essays in Idleness’ whereas ‘The Pillow Book’ rarely includes such questions.

The main differences between the two pieces is that Sei Shonagon’s ‘The Pillow Book’ is written in a way that projects her own life, how she feels about things, and her personal opinions of some particular topics (cats, unsightly things, etc) whereas ‘Essays in Idleness’ talks more about what is going on outside of Kenko’s own life, and it includes questions.

2) How do male and female figures differ in the different pieces of literature? Is one more often used than the other? How are they used and what do they portray?

In the pieces of literature that we’ve studied thus far, it is easy to see that men are most commonly used as the main characters, the saviors, the selfless monk, the controlling father, or the perverted man whereas women, when they are used in stories, often portray innocence, or mischievous, and are often written in the context of being troublesome, a burden, or an object that is owned and controlled by men. Women are often used as some kind of prize at the end of a story, and are rarely included in a story without a strong, male character aside her like a father, brother, lover, or potential lover. Men are very commonly used to represent strength and honor, whereas many women are the thing that tests the men’s honor, which might be true even today, but this reflects upon how women were thought about during the time that these were written and how they were so rarely included in their own stories.

3) What common themes can be identified from the Tales of Japanese short stories (Foxes, Healing, Demons, etc) and are those themes still identifiable in literature today?

One theme that is used very regularly throughout these individual stories was that you should respect the animals in nature, and should you not, some kind of retribution is going to be dealt your way. For instance, in Fox Arson, when the man shoots the fox and the fox promptly lights his house on fire. Another theme that was used quite often involved music, whether it be the instrument from ‘Genjo’ and how it was very sacred and almost worshipped, and another from ‘To Sooth the Savage Breast’ where playing music actually saved a man from robbery, which I have a hard time believing would actually happen in real-life, and finally in ‘Snakes’ when in one of the stories a man plays a song on a flute and a snake decides to listen to the music instead of biting (and killing) him and the man is spared. In more than one circumstance, it seems that music is a savior of people, and is very very important in the lives of nobility in Japan.

4) Haiku were used in many of the stories we read as a form of communication. In which stories did it appear and how were they used? Who normally wrote them, and who were they often addressed to?

Haiku were used in a number of different stories, for instance, ‘The Bamboo Cutter’, ‘The Girl who Loved Insects’, ‘The Narrow Road of Oku’, ‘The Pillow Book’ and many more. The Haikus from these stories ranged in use from communication, similar to letter-writing, and documentation or journal entries, but in every Haiku was some relation to the spiritual or intimate feelings of the person who was writing it, which is an essential part of forming a Haiku. It seems that in the majority of the stories, Haiku were written mostly by women through love-letters or diary entries, but they were also written by men in some of the stories, for instance, the monk Basho in ‘The Narrow Road of Oku’. It seemed that Haiku were used very similarly to the use of a letter, in which you would address a person, often a lover, or perhaps someone trying to become involved in anothers’ life. What is also interesting about the use of Haiku is that they really are very structured piece of poetry, which we can see in the story ‘Conversations with Kyorai’ and how seriously the matter of writing a Haiku was; the attention to detail and expression in a Haiku is very important, as is evident in each of these stories. In none of the pieces of literature we read was a Haiku used to jot down very basic, meaningless feelings.

5) Many stories were similar to each other as far as writing stye. Find one story that stood out and explain why it did. How was it different? What contrast did it show of the culture from what you’ve already learned/ read?

One piece of literature that very greatly stood out from the rest was the story ‘Busu’ which described two men that worked for a noble man, and rather than acting very strict and proper like the men of majority of stories we had already read, they were actually very childish and silly in the absence of their master. Not only that, but rather than relishing the honor of their names and obeying the commands of their master, they not only disobeyed him by looking at the “magic object” but they also lied to him about it and then struck him, which was very unusual for a Japanese character/ characters. This story, rather than being serious in tone, or even strange, was more humorous and play-like.

**Japanese essences:**   
  
List five interesting cultural elements/essences from all covered texts with your personal

interpretations.

--- focus on different literatures in different time periods

--- explain reasons for your choices

1) The first cultural essence that has remained in my head since the beginning of this class is the physical appearance of **women** from that time, which was to have blackened teeth, long black hair (unless they were a nun) and either very thin or no eyebrows. What’s more is that many women, mostly educated, upper-class women, were rarely allowed to be seen by men, if ever and were constantly guarded. While I understand the reasoning behind this caution and security, it is still incredibly hard to imagine when compared to the freedom of the royals of our time. Not only was a woman’s physical appearance very unusual, but the way in which they were directed to act was very strict and formal, with very little speaking freedom in the presence of men. Women were regarded as a form of entertainment with their music, their stories, their voice, and often their bodies, and it was very unusual (and yet refreshing) to read about a woman from a story who actually spoke her mind and did what she wanted, for instance, like the story “The girl who loved insects”.

2) The second cultural aspect that really left an impact was the use of **animals** in Japanese literature, specifically foxes, badgers, and birds of some kind. I know that the use of animals in literature is not resigned only to the Japanese literature, but the way in which they were used in these stories seemed vastly different than their counterparts. For example, when reading the short stories about foxes, it was very obvious to see that, generally, foxes were seen as a type of mischievous creature that caused trouble, and if you should come across a fox, you should be weary of it immediately, for instance in ‘Fox Arson’, or ‘The Fox’s Ball’ where the foxes caused trouble and were very devious and cunning. Another aspect that seemed unique was that the animals from these stories could often talk, or were given very human-like attributes, for instance, in Snakes, when the snake doesn’t eat the man because he so enjoys the music he plays. I found these very interesting because they explained a part of nature that is often forgotten, which is the animals that inhabit it, and how our decisions (or the decisions of the characters) affect these animals, and are often justly reprimanded for interfering in their lives. The idea of a person being punished by an animals seemed very interesting to me.

3) Another cultural essence of Japan that I identified in these stories was the very great importance that was placed on the learning of **musical instruments** and **proper speech** and **writing abilities** that was taught to people of the upper class. In Essays in Idleness, Yoshido Kenko explains that the learning of a musical instrument, writing style, or proper speech is something that is incredibly important to the people of Japan and especially to the nobles because it further identified you as a person with proper education. This characteristic, that musical ability, is so critical to proper education really stood out as unique and culturally interesting. What is even more essential to the fact is that women were not the only one that were taught in this way, but men as well, and if you could not speak, read, write, or play an instrument with the utmost diligence, then you were considered undereducated.

4) While **religion** is something that has been practiced in many countries and civilizations for many centuries, I felt that in these Japanese writings the use of religion as a form of redemption was used more often, rather than for the sake of simply doing good. In many of the literature pieces we read, religion was involved in some way, for example, The Pillow Book explains how Sei Shonagon becomes a nun to escape the life she had with her husband, who constantly sought the company of other women, or how in the story of Atsumori, the samurai became a monk after killing the young man known as Atsumori, simply because he killed him. Even more, in the tale of the Three Priests, the priests talk about how they entered priesthood, and how they became priests after experiencing some kind of loss, or for killing someone, and this is something that many stories include. I found it very interesting that religion, along with spirituality, was very heavily involved in the different pieces of literature; but not just that it was involved, that it came to be in such an abrupt way. Many of the characters from the stories chose to turn to religion as a priest or nun very abruptly because of something they had done or committed, and gave little thought to the decision. This I found to be a very unique cultural essence of Japanese literature.

5) The final cultural essence that I identified from these pieces of literature was the use of **Haiku** as a form of communication, most commonly between a man and a woman. In The Girl who Loved Insects, the man who sees the girl uses a Haiku poem to write to her, in which she responds with her own Haiku (also an example of the level of literacy of the upper class) and also in the Bamboo Cutter involving Kaguyahime in which she writers Haiku as well. On the other hand, Haiku were also often used as a type of diary or journal, for instance in The Narrow Road of Oku where the traveler Bashou uses Haiku as a form of documentation to identify and remember all that he has seen, or thought throughout his journey on the Oku road. Also, Haiku are very serious pieces of poetry that, not unlike other forms of poetry, can be assessed and analyzed down to the very specifics, which I thought was interesting.