

# JAPANESE LITERATURE

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## Overview

The literature of Japan spans nearly fifteen centuries and represents a fusion of influences— key borrowings from China, especially Buddhism and Confucianism; the native Shinto faith; the aristocratic culture of the imperial court; and an increasingly-dominant warrior class. Poetry and lyrical expression emerged early on as the literary centerpiece, and an array of prose genres assumed prominence around a thousand years ago among the Kyoto-based courtiers during the Heian period. Following a millennium of development, Japan's modern literature, with its origins in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, reflects the enduring marks of the nation's classical and pre-modern literature together with the gradual adaptation and absorption of Western literary and cultural influences.

## Genres

Japanese literature runs the gamut of genres, forms, and styles. The standard poetic form is the *waka*, with thirty-one syllables in a strict 5-7-5-7-7 format. Poetry in Chinese (*kanshi*) was widely practiced, and this reflects the privileged status of China's literary legacy. The well-known *haiku* form— with its seventeen syllables in a 5-7-5 format— became the standard poetic genre in recent times and has achieved global prominence as a Japanese cultural export. Japanese poetry has typically been gathered together in collections and anthologies, and its production, up to the modern period, was subject to formal judgment and rules that governed diction and technique.

The major prose genres include the following: *monogatari*, a broad category encompassing fictional, factual, and autobiographical narratives; *zuihitsu*, the Japanese essay form; *nikki*, diary literature; and *setsuwa*, which includes folk and legendary accounts. In the modern period, a Western-inspired genre of fiction— *shōsetsu*— came to displace poetry as the standard literary genre.

## Periods

Early and Classical (Heian) Literature (600-1200) Having absorbed the literary culture of China, courtiers in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century produced the *Kojiki*— Japan's first literary work— which recounts the nation's mythic origins among the *kami* divinities, and their generation of an imperial lineage. The first great anthology of Japanese poetry, the *Man'yōshū*, comprising over four thousand verses, appeared in the mid-8<sup>th</sup> century. Its extraordinary virtuosity has made it a fixture of the Japanese literary canon. With the establishment of the imperial court in Kyoto during the 'classical' Heian period (800-1200), poetry— *waka*, in particular— became the chief preoccupation of the aristocratic class. The first of many imperially-commissioned anthologies of *waka*— the *Kokinshū*— appeared in 905 and established orthodox rules of poetic composition that have survived to the present day. The masterpiece of Japanese classical literature is Lady Murasaki's *Tale of Genji* (ca 1008), a court romance centering on the figure of Prince Genji, the very embodiment of courtly sensibility and refinement. This monumental tale has been endlessly retold and recast in different genres over the centuries. Among its few literary rivals is *The Pillow Book*, a collection of courtly essays by Murasaki's contemporary, Sei Shōnagon. This work, written with great style and flair, helped establish a code of courtly aesthetics and decorum that virtually defines Japan's aristocratic culture.

Medieval Literature (1200-1600) The medieval period marks the nation's transition to warrior (*bushi*) rule and a literature that reflects the values and tastes of the samurai elite. Buddhist ideals and aesthetics— especially those of the meditative Zen sect— were crucial. Poetry and lyrical expression remained prominent, but the Heian courtly elegance gave way to an austere and introspective mode of expression. Japan's great warrior epic, the *Tale of the Heike* (early 13<sup>th</sup> century), would rival the *Tale of Genji* as a national classic. Its memorable accounts of clan

rivalries and bloody battles, based in the history of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century, are told as a moving lament for the transience of all things. This key medieval theme of ephemerality— *mujô*— underscores Kamo no Chômei's 'Account of My Hut,' a personal essay whose minimalist credo and Buddhist lyricism have made it an enduring classic. And the brilliant 15<sup>th</sup>-century compositions of Zeami, the great playwright of Japan's austere and ethereal Noh theater, were highlights of medieval culture and continue to be regarded as literary masterpieces.

Early Modern (Tokugawa) Literature (1600-1868) The literature of the Tokugawa era reflects the society and culture of the nation's third and final shogunal epoch, which was marked by Japan's relative isolation from the world and the growth of a distinctive urban-based culture centering on money and pleasure. Three writers of the so-called Genroku period (ca 1680-1720) represent the range of Tokugawa literary arts. Ihara Saikaku was a renowned writer of fiction largely set in the pleasure quarters, which recounted the lives and loves of *geisha* and the men who vied for their attention. His *Five Women Who Loved Love* has been a perennial favorite. Chikamatsu Monzaemon wrote plays for the popular *bunraku* puppet theater, many of which featured the tragic suicide (*shinju*) of ill-fated geisha and their hapless lovers. *Love Suicides at Amijima* is perhaps the best-known of these plays. Matsuo Bashô, a certified Japanese cultural icon, was a great haiku poet who imbued the spare seventeen-syllable verse form with artistic depth and spiritual significance.

Modern (pre-war) Literature (1868-1940) The Tokugawa era ended with the establishment of a new, Western-oriented Japanese nation under the Emperor Meiji. The Meiji period (1868-1912) witnessed an extraordinary social and cultural transformation, with Tokyo as the showcase of Asia's first imperial state. Its writers were equally drawn to Japan's traditional literature— now available in modern print editions— and to new Western literary models and influences. Of the first generation of modern writers, two stand out— Mori Ôgai (1862-1922) and Natsume Sôseki (1867-1916). Ôgai's work, which reflects his samurai background and philosophical temperament, explores the roots of Japanese identity and the spirit of the modern age. Sôseki's novels explore Meiji society through accounts of troubled marriages and egocentric protagonists. His *Kokoro* (1914) is arguably Japan's finest modern novel. The next generation of writers branched out into many literary avenues— historical fiction, modern poetry, fantasy, science fiction. Some would favor a genre of autobiographical fiction— the so-called 'I-novel' (*shishôsetsu*)— that ostensibly expressed the author's authentic self. Among the greatest figures of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are Akutagawa Ryûnosuke (1892-1927) and Tanizaki Jun'ichirô (1886-1965). Akutagawa achieved mastery of the short story form, while Tanizaki favored fiction that spoke to the desires and compulsions that underlie our nature. Enormously creative and varied, albeit under the censorial review of an authoritarian government, Japan's pre-war literature was essentially suffocated on account of the restrictions imposed by the militarist regime in the 1930s.

Modern (postwar) Literature (1945- present) The Pacific War brought Japan's empire to a catastrophic end. But the American Occupation oversaw an extraordinary social, economic, and cultural regeneration. A new spirit of independence and creative expression inspired a move away from traditional styles and outmoded models. One exception is Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), whose wistful lyricism in novels such as *Snow Country* and *Sound of the Mountain* helped earn him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1968. In sharp contrast, the novels of Abe Kôbô (1924-93) and Yukio Mishima (1925-70) pointed to the profound alienation and emptiness that marked postwar urban Japan. Mishima's samurai-style ritual suicide in November 1970 underscored the nation's crisis of identity and the lingering specter of *bushido* and imperialism. Younger writers emerging in the 1960s spoke to the nation's youth and to a materialist, consumer-oriented society. Ôe Kenzaburô's *A Personal Matter* (1964), centered in the Tokyo youth subculture, is a radical departure from traditional imagery and themes. Ôe (1935- ), who is Japan's second Nobel laureate in literature (1994), is regarded as the literary conscience of the nation. In terms of popularity, though, Murakami Haruki (1949- ) is unrivalled in terms of his popularity and international reputation. Widely-admired novels such as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and *Kafka on the Shore* present a postmodern Japan entirely devoid of the conventional icons and stereotypes. Finally, the role of women writers as mainstays of modern and

contemporary Japanese literature must be acknowledged. The work of Enchi Fumiko, Kôno Taeko, Tawada Yôko, and Yoshimoto Banana— among many others— speaks to the open horizons of literary expression in Japan today.

### **Readings**

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Marcus, Marvin, *Japanese Literature: From Murasaki to Murakami* (Association For Asian Studies, 2014)

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Tyler, Royall (ed.), *Japanese No Dramas* (Penguin, 2004)

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Varley, H. Paul, *Japanese Culture*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Hawai'i, 2000)

### **Discussion Questions and Topics**

Japanese literature has been conveniently ‘packaged’ into specific periods and epochs. How should we think of these designations (classical/ medieval/ early modern/ modern)? In particular, the contrast between ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ as literary and cultural signifiers bears critical assessment. What are the markers of literary ‘traditionalism’ and ‘modernity’? What themes and ideas appear to span the historical spectrum?

If poetry and poetic sentiment can be said to tap into the essence of Japanese literature, how are we to understand and appreciate this quality— especially insofar as poetic language is easily ‘lost in translation’?

Give thought to the way that ‘selfhood’ and ‘psychological interiority’ are expressed in Japanese literary works. How does individuality confront/ contest/ reflect the group context and the authoritarian regimes that have

dominated Japan's social and cultural history? How does the stereotype of Japanese 'groupthink' and conformity play into our reading of its literature?

Compare and contrast the modern literature of Japan with respect to the two domains of the imperial (prewar) period and the postwar/ contemporary period?

What seems most 'unique' about Japan's literature? What seems most accessible and 'universal'? Which works/ genres/ writers would you be interested in pursuing?

## Poetic Examples

*Honobono to  
Akashi no ura no  
asagiri ni  
shimagakureyuku  
fune wo shi zo omou*

In the dim, dim light  
of the early morning mist  
on Akashi Bay,  
a boat disappears amid the islands,  
my heart following in its wake

Attributed to Hitomaro, ca 700

*Miwataseba  
hana mo momiji mo  
nakarikeri  
ura no tomaya no  
aki no yûgure*

Looking out upon the scene,  
there are no cherry blossoms,  
no crimson leaves.  
A thatched hut on the bay  
in the evening dusk

Fujiwara no Teika, ca 1200

*Shizukasa ya  
iwa ni shimiiru  
semi no koe*

Such utter stillness:  
The sound of cicadas  
piercing the rock

Matsuo Basho, ca 1690

*Hisakata no  
Amerikabito no  
hajimenishi  
besuboru wa  
miredo akanu kamo*

Under the heavens  
of far-off America  
it was created:  
The game of baseball,  
which I never tire of watching

Masaoka Shiki, ca 1900