***What is a Waka?***

The form of Japanese poetry most familiar to Americans is the haiku, the 17-syllable poem that reached the height of its development in the seventeenth century. But the haiku was derived from an older, but still popular poetic form, the *waka*, which had been used for a thousand years before the haiku. The word *waka* means "Japanese poem," and it is a form so basic to Japanese literature that the Japanese still study and write it today. It is also known by the name tanka, which means "short poem."

Let’s look at an example that is attributed to Empress Jito:

*“The spring has passed (5)*

*And the summer come again (7)*

*For the silk-white robes (5)*

*So they say, are spread to dry (7)*

*On the Mount of Heaven's perfume (8)”*

*Waka* poems capture natures beauty and express feelings. In the poem above we get a sense of the joys of summer with its warm weather and pleasant smells.

These poems have been used to celebrate special occasions since ancient times, and indeed, still are. The Imperial family still runs an annual poetry-writing contest open to all, and many Japanese are amateur poets. In the Heian period especially, *waka* was a most important form of communication between lovers, and a person's skill in poetry was a major standard in determining his or her societal status, even influencing political positions. Throughout its history, the *waka* has had an importance in Japanese society unparalleled in the West.

Let’s look at two more examples of *waka* from the Heian period. The first is written by Ono no Komachi:

*“A life in vain. (4)*

*My looks, talents faded (6)*

*like these cherry blossoms (6)*

*paling in the endless rains (7)*

*that I gaze out upon, alone.(8)”*

Ono no Komachi is regarded as one of the six best *waka* poets of the Heian period and is counted amongst the thirty-six poetry immortals.

The next poem is by Ariwara no Narihira, who is also regarded as one of the six best *waka* poets and is also counted amongst the thirty-six poetry immortals.

*“Is that not the moon? (5)*

*And is the spring not the spring (7)*

*Of a year ago? (5)*

*This body of mine alone (7)*

*Remains as it was before. (7)”*

Both Komachi and Narihira were Japanese nobles during the Heian period. Narihira was also a politician and military leader. It is also believed that he may have inspired the character Genji from Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tales of Genji*.

But what is a *waka*? It is a short poem, with specific structural requirements involving thirty-one syllables dispersed over five lines, written to express feelings. For centuries, *wakas* were written more to capture emotions than to explain or define them. Ono no Komachi, in the poem above, did not mention why her looks and talents faded; Ariwara no Harihira did not tell us how his body has remained unchanged. In contrast, much of Western poetry has been concerned with the reasons for a particular feeling, as well as the emotion itself; it has told stories, created allegories, and even discussed theology. But the "Japanese poem" has traditionally treated the "what" rather than the "why" of experience, and opens a wealth of subtle emotions to us. It is an especially rich source for increasing our understanding of the Japanese experience, in reading poetry and, as in the exercises that follow, trying to write some ourselves.

**Discussion questions**

Answer the following questions before you close read.

1. Who wrote the poems?
2. When were they written?
3. What was happening in Japan at the time?

Answer the following question after you close read.

1. Read each poem and write down your initial thoughts. What did it make you think of? How did it make you feel?
2. What do these poems have in common? What are their differences?
3. What can these poems tell us about Japanese society during the Heian period?
4. What biases may these poems have?

Complete the following activity.

1. Japanese poetry is often written in groups — for instance, people will gather together and write poems on a chosen topic, or they will write poems to commemorate a special occasion. The topic might be something like rain on a spring evening, or the waning autumn moon. The occasion might be New Year's, or an excursion to view the cherry blossoms. Form a group of four and decide on a topic — anything, not just nature images, will do. Each student in the group should try to write one *waka* poem, trying to be as close to thirty-one syllables as you can. But keep in mind that the *waka* is a short form, so each word is especially important. Then discuss the poems you have written in terms of form and content — the difficulty of writing within a particular structure, and on a set topic.