

## The Oyster Shell: Answer Key

Below is an excerpt from a longer poem, “The Oyster Shell,” written by Japanese poet Kambara Ariake in 1902. Read the excerpt and be prepared to discuss the questions.

### The Oyster Shell

An oyster in his shell  
Lives in a boundless sea,  
Alone, precarious, limited,  
How miserable his thoughts . . .

Unseeing and unhelped,

He sleeps behind a sheltering rock.

**Note to teacher:** *Donald Keene, Shincho Professor Emeritus of Japanese Literature and University Professor Emeritus at Columbia University, states in his book Dawn to the West:*

*The Oyster’s Shell is an allegory that depicts the oyster (individual) as being unhappily imprisoned in its shell (society), unable to appreciate the beauty and grandeur of the surrounding world, and powerless to achieve its ideals.*

*Written in response to Japan’s rapid modernization in the early 20th century, these lines from Meiji writer Kambara Ariake’s poem convey a deep sense of desperation and uncertainty. The Meiji government came into power in 1868. The new leadership was comprised of a young, determined group of powerful leaders (former samurai) who shared one goal: to resolutely modernize Japan. New ideas and social norms emerged. However, not all Japanese embraced or adapted well to the changes sparked by the Meiji Restoration.*

*Kambara’s poem expresses the alienation realized by some as a result of living in a new, modern Japan. His poetry constitutes a lasting image recorded for close inspection and contemplation. When students in a history or English classroom are presented with a quality piece of literature like Kambara’s, they will quickly begin to realize the author has a greater purpose than just simply telling a story or crafting a memorable metaphor; rather, students encounter and welcome an authentic voice that challenges them to consider a perspective other than their own.*

### Discussion Questions

1. What does the oyster represent? *A unique individual. The shell? Society, safety, protection, or what is needed for survival.*
2. What does the poet mean by *boundless*?  
*The poet is suggesting vast possibility potentially available for the individual.*
3. What types of words are used in line 3 of the poem?  
*All the words in line 3 are adjectives suggesting isolation, danger, or restrictions on the individual. The use of alone reflects how life is truly up to the individual; precarious speaks*

*to the inherit danger associated with life; and limited implies the individual is not able to grow or thrive because something (shell=society) is holding him back.*

4. Why use an ellipsis to close stanza 1?  
*The use of an ellipsis indicates that more will follow or a break in thoughts. So in terms of this poem, the individual is miserable and might not want to continue to explain his discontent. Or the ellipsis might be used to leave the impression of the speaker's uncertainty.*
5. Why is the oyster not visible? Explain the connotations of "Unseeing and unhelped."  
*Unseeing indicates that the individual might not be able to see or comprehend the source of his difficulty, and unhelped might reflect how truly desperate and pathetic his current situation.*
6. What is the tone in the last two lines of the excerpt?  
*The poet's attitude seems a bit sad and helpless. The speaker appears to hope for a bright future for the oyster, yet sadly realizes the conditions are not prime for the oyster's survival.*
7. What seems to be the message/theme of this poem?  
*One's surroundings and environment can have a strong influence over one's life.*

Source: Kambara Ariake. "The Oyster Shell," in *The Poetry of Living Japan*, Ed. Takamichi Ninomiya and D.J. Enright (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1957). Internet Archive. 10 Mar. 2001. [http://archive.org/stream/poetryoflivingja007840mbp/poetryoflivingja007840mbp\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/poetryoflivingja007840mbp/poetryoflivingja007840mbp_djvu.txt).