



## Poetry Talk

**By:** Kathy Keidel, Michael Carlson, Leah Ebel, Brenda Gates, Stacey Mandel, and Christine Cervera

**Featured Children's Literature:** *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars*, adapted by Jean Merrill

### **Objectives:**

1. Students will experience poetry as a form of communication.
2. Students will learn about an ancient poetic tradition of Japan.
3. Students will write *tanka* poetry in the correct form.

### **National Content Standards:**

#### ***Reading and Writing***

*Reading Standard 1:* Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.

*Reading Standard 2:* Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.

*Reading Standard 3:* Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.

*Writing Standard 3.* Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

#### ***History***

*5-12 History Standards in Historical Thinking, Standard 1: Chronological Thinking (F: Students should be able to reconstruct patterns of historical succession and duration in which historical developments have unfolded, and apply them to explain historical continuity and change)*

5-12 World History Standards, Era 4: Expanding Zones of Exchange and Encounter, 300-1000 CE (Standard 3B: The student understands developments in Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia in an era of Chinese ascendancy)

**Plan for Assessment:**

1. Students will write three *tanka* poems and self-assess each one using a rubric. For the first *tanka* poem, students will transform prose into *tanka*. For the second *tanka*, students will write to exchange a message. For the third poem, students will make a prediction.
2. Students will present aloud the third *tanka* during a class competition.

**Notes:**

The suggested grade level for this lesson is 4-6 and suggested time frame is three to five class periods/days.

The book that is the focus of this lesson, *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars*, is based on *Tsutsumi Chūnagon Monogatari*, a story from the late Heian period (late twelfth century). While the text is an authentic adaptation, teachers should be cautious of relying on the illustrations, which incorporate Chinese-style buildings and Edo-period (1603-1868 C.E.) clothing and hairstyles.

This lesson focuses on the traditional Japanese form of poetry called *tanka* (the modern term used for *waka*). *Tanka* or *waka* predates the better-known haiku form by hundreds of years. The *waka* or *tanka* is a five-line, 31-syllable unrhymed poem. The syllables are arranged by line in a pattern of 5-7-5-7-7.

Japan's first known literary anthology, the *Man'yōshū*, was published in the middle of the eighth century. This collection of 4,496 poems contained 4,173 in *waka* form. During the Heian period (794-1185 C.E.), *waka* became the poetry of Japan's imperial court. Two important anthologies of the period—the *Kokinshū* and the *Shinkokinshū*—were composed almost entirely of *waka*. *Waka* poets of that era wrote about the Emperor, nature and the seasons, love, sadness, travel, and other subjects.

*Waka* waned in popularity but experienced a revival in the late nineteenth century, as Japanese poets experimented with traditional Japanese forms as well as Western forms. The new poems in this traditional form became known as *tanka*.

**Materials:**

1. *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars*, adapted by Jean Merrill (multiple copies would be useful)
2. The following five poems, available on the Internet (you may download copies to read aloud or make arrangements to project the poems to the class from these sites):
  - "April Rain Song," by Langston Hughes, <http://www.poemhunter.com/best-poems/langston-hughes/april-rain-song/>

- “The Old Pond,” by Matsuo Bashō (translated by Harry Behn), <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-old-pond/>
  - “KKS:114, OHI: 9 (Spring),” by Ono no Komachi’s (translated by Donald Keene), <http://www.gotterdammerung.org/japan/literature/ono-no-komachi/>
  - “a sudden loud noise,” by Ruby Spriggs, <http://www.tankaonline.com/Notes%20on%20Form%20--%20Michael.htm>
  - “Just out of earshot,” by Gerald St. Maur <http://www.tankaonline.com/Notes%20on%20Form%20--%20Michael.htm>
3. **Tanka Examples** visual aid (provided)
  4. Enough copies of the **Cards for Tanka Exchange** (provided), copied and cut apart, for each pair of students to have a card
  5. Three copies of the **Tanka Rubric** worksheet (provided) per student (Optional: Make a copy of the rubric to project for the entire class)
  6. Equipment for projecting visual aid
  7. Computer, LCD projector, and screen (Optional: For projecting sample poems from websites listed above)
  8. Optional: White rice, green tea, and Japanese pickled vegetables (*tsukemono*) for end-of-lesson poetry competition celebration

### Implementation:

#### **Introduction/Connections: Sketch and Stretch**

1. Tell students that they are going to be learning how to write *tanka*, a form of poetry that has been widely written and read in Japan for more than 1300 years, at least 900 years longer than haiku.
2. Introduce the lesson through a Sketch and Stretch activity. Read aloud to the students the five example poems listed in the **Materials** section. Have students listen to the poems one at a time without any comments. Read the poems a second time while having the students sketch their impressions, feelings, ideas, and images that come to mind. Read the poems for a third time, one at a time. After each poem, have students discuss their sketches and feelings about the poem. Use the following questions to help guide the students:
  - What are the poems about?
  - What images come to mind?
  - How do the lengths and form of the poems differ?
  - What are some similarities in the themes? Differences?
  - What ideas do the poems express/communicate to the reader?

#### **Instruction: Learning the Tanka Poetic Form**

1. Write the poem by Bashō listed in the **Materials** section on the board. Reread the poem. Then have students count the syllables in each line. (5-7-5) Ask the class if anyone can identify this form of poetry. (*Haiku*) Write the *tanka* by Ono No Komachi on the board and reread it. Have students count the syllables in each line of this poem. (5-7-5-7-7) Ask the class how the syllable-counts of the two poems differ. (*The second poem has two additional lines of 7 syllables each.*) Explain that this poem is a *tanka*. *Tanka* is older than haiku, which was developed by dropping the last two lines of the *tanka* form. Many *tanka* were about beauty, sadness, and the

passage of time and were used to communicate messages of love, new or lost. Tell students that this lesson will focus on *tanka*.

2. Practice reading in the *tanka* form by giving the class *tanka* on familiar themes to read first. Show the first two *tanka* on the **Tanka Examples** visual aid. Have students count out the syllables aloud.
3. Introduce the students to the book, *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars*. Share that the story is an adapted version of a story in the *Tsutsumi Chūnagon Monogatari* written by an anonymous Japanese author in the 1100s. The story is set in the late Heian period in Kyoto, Japan. Many of the characters are court nobles.
4. Read aloud *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars*.
5. After reading the story, ask students: What forms of communication were used in the story? (*Spoken communication was used with those one knew well. Written messages, in the form of poetry, were used with people with whom there was a more distant relationship.*) Review the points in the book where the ladies-in-waiting, the nobleman, the Captain, and Izumi communicated through written messages. Emphasize that the notes were written in a poetic form, with hidden meanings and metaphors. Share with the students that it was common in the Heian Period (794-1185) for people, especially of different genders, to communicate by exchanging *tanka* poetry. (Note that the poems in this adapted version, which is based on three translations of the original tale, do not maintain the 31-syllable form of *tanka*; instead, they are presented as short free verses.) Heian poetry communicated life experiences, relationships, travel, nature, ideas, and people's situations. The poems were short and metaphors were used. With students, define *metaphor* as a figure of speech in which similarities between two things are suggested: Her rosy cheeks were apples.

### **Guided Practice: Writing Tanka**

1. Tell students they are going to write a note to exchange with the person next to them. The note should express a positive feeling about the person. Show the following examples from the **Tanka Examples** visual aid:
  - *I like the color of your eyes. They are very blue.*
  - *I think you are a great soccer player. You are very fast.*Have students write their notes. Have students read notes aloud. (Expect giggles.)
2. Pass out copies of the **Tanka Rubric**. Instruct students to copy the note they wrote to the neighbor as "the message you want to communicate" on the first line of the **Tanka Rubric** worksheet. To experience communication through poetry as the court nobles of the Heian period in Japan did, students should turn their note into a *tanka*. Use the **Tanka Examples** visual aid to demonstrate how the example notes above are expanded to the *tanka* below.

*Your eyes are so blue.  
They are like the deep, deep sea.  
They shine like the sun.  
Your eyes are smiling eyes, too.  
I smile back at you, my friend.  
Kathy Keidel*

*You, soccer player  
Running so fast, like the wind  
You slide, tackle, push  
You see the goal up ahead  
Now you score, unstoppable!*  
Kathy Keidel

Give students time to transform their prose into *tanka* and self-assess their poems.

### **Guided Practice: Paired Writing of Tanka**

1. Reread *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars*. This time, if possible, have copies of the story available to students so they can follow along and volunteer to read aloud.
2. After reading the story, pair students and have each pair draw one of the **Cards for Tanka Exchange** from a hat/basket. Each card describes a scene from the story in which *tanka* might be exchanged. (Give students who need extra support one of the last two cards, as these depict scenes in which poetry is modeled in the story.) Together, have the pairs decide which character each student will take on and plan the messages that the characters will communicate to each other. Have each student write his/her character's message in the first section of a **Tanka Rubric** worksheet. Using the **Tanka Rubric** worksheet, have students individually write *tanka* poems that communicate the messages of their characters and self-assess their poems.
3. Review the story by having the student-pairs read aloud their *tanka* exchanges. Ask the class to describe their favorite scene and tell why it is their favorite.
4. Refer to the book's "Afterword" and the questions it poses in regards to Izumi's future. Have the students individually develop a prediction about something that might happen to Izumi in the future. Based on his/her prediction, each student should think of a future message Izumi might want to send to her parents, the Captain, ladies-in-waiting, Worm Boy, Mantis Man, Centipede, or other character. Give each student a **Tanka Rubric** worksheet to use in developing the future message based on their prediction, writing a *tanka*, and self-assessing the poem. Remind students that *tanka* of the time often discussed beauty, melancholy, and the passage of time and communicated messages of love, new or lost. Optional: Model this process for the students.

### **Conclusion: Utaawase Competition**

1. Hold an *utaawase* competition (poetry slam). Introduce the origins of *utaawase*, explaining that *utaawase* is a game using *tanka*, which Heian court nobles first played in the late 800s for amusement. Organize students into two teams. Tell teams to decide in what order they will present their *tanka*.
2. Select a high court noble, the Emperor, or the Empress to judge (another teacher, other staff, or parent could serve this function). Have representatives of each team present their *tanka* sequentially to the judge. The judge can award points to each team for the quality of each poem (for example, one point could be awarded for proper syllable counts, one point for conveying a clear message, and one point for using a metaphor or other expressive language). The team with the most points wins.

3. Optional: Commend all students and celebrate with a snack of green tea, rice, and Japanese pickled vegetables.

### **Extensions and Cross-Curricular Ideas:**

1. *Visual Arts:* Show students the second-to-last illustration of *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars* and point out the hand scroll and brush. Share with students that Japanese of the Heian period wrote stories with a brush on scrolls. Explain to students that they will create a hand scroll with a copy of their third *tanka* and an appropriate word, written in Japanese *hiragana* characters. *Hiragana* characters are a simpler way of writing than the *kanji* borrowed from Chinese and were popular with Heian court ladies. Have the students choose a word from the **Japanese Words for Use on Scrolls** handout (provided) that reflects their future-prediction *tanka*. With paper and paint, have students practice painting the *hiragana* word.

Next, have students reflect on the materials characters in the story used to write messages. Point out Izumi's choice of paper and handwriting to respond to Snake Man (page 20) and the Captain's choice of paper and ink to write to Izumi (page 23). Explain that the Heian period was a time in which beauty was appreciated, including the beauty of the materials used for writing, as well as the author's handwriting. When potential couples exchanged letters, the recipient scrutinized the handwriting, the paper on which a poem was written, the scent of the paper, and perhaps the inclusion of a flower with the note, to assess the author's taste and background.

On a long, horizontal piece of paper (from a roll), have students write a final version of their third *tanka* in their best handwriting and paint with black paint a final version of the accompanying *hiragana* word. Attach a small dowel rod, or long straw, at each end of the paper by wrapping the edge of the paper around the rod or straw. The thick end of the scroll should be around the left dowel/straw because East Asian languages read right to left. Allow students to accessorize their poetry scroll with other art supplies.

2. *Character Education:* Discuss the fact that Izumi was a girl who did not conform to society. Introduce *conformity* as a new vocabulary word. Discuss how citizens conform to expectations in their society. For example, people follow the laws, written and unwritten; are polite and respectful; follow social conventions such as waiting your turn, etc. Ask: What purpose does conformity serve in our society? (*It helps maintain order and safety.*) In the Heian period, the aesthetic of the court expected women to blacken their teeth, shave their eyebrows, have pale skin (painting the face white if needed), and dress in at least five to six layers of robes of different lengths and colors, depending on the season or occasion. The Heian court was obsessed with rank and formal status, as Izumi's parents portray through their conversations. With these attributes a person was judged as having "good taste." Izumi blatantly ignored the Heian rules of taste and beauty. She refused to shave her eyebrows or blacken her teeth. She dressed in simple robes. She left her hair unruly. She talked to the boys of a lower class from the balcony. She played with insects. Ask: What benefits might nonconformity have had in this situation? (*Izumi might be happier, she would not waste time on customs that she felt did not serve an important purpose.*) Conduct a debate about Izumi's behavior: was she right to stand up for herself as an independent-minded young woman or should she have followed

3. *Science*: Coordinate this lesson with the study of the life-cycle of caterpillars and the production of silk for kimono.

**Resources and References:**

***Resources for Use in Lesson***

Merrill, Jean, adaptor. *The Girl Who Loved Caterpillars*. Floyd Cooper, illustrator. New York: Philomel Books, 1992.

***References for Teacher Background***

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Smits, Gregory. East Asian History Textbooks. University Park, PA: Penn State University. <http://www.east-asian-history.net/textbooks/>

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Waka (Poetry). Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waka\\_\(poetry\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waka_(poetry))

Waley, Arthur, trans. "The Lady Who Loved Insects." In Keene, Donald, ed., *Anthology of Japanese Literature: From the Earliest Era to the Mid-nineteenth Century*. New York: Grove Press, 1955, pp. 170-176.