*from* The Pillow Book

Sei Shōonagon

**(c. tenth century a.d. )**

Sei Shōonagon is responsible for providing us with a detailed portrait of upper-class life in Japan during the Heian Age, which lasted from 794 to 1185 a.d. Her *The Pillow Book,* a collection of personal notes written during her ten years of court service, is filled with character sketches, descriptions, anecdotes, lists, and witty insights. A precursor of the Japanese literary form *zuihitsu,* or “occasional writings,” *The Pillow Book* is widely recognized as one of the finest works of Japanese prose.

**A Complex Figure**

Sei Shōonagon was the daughter of a provincial official who was also a noted scholar and poet. She was a lady-in-waiting for the Empress Sadako during the last decade of the tenth century, and she may have been married briefly to a government official. Aside from what *The Pillow Book* reveals about her years of court service, however, little is known about Sei Shōonagon. In fact, her life following her court service remains a mystery.

Although few details are known about Sei Shōonagon’s life, *The Pillow Book*offers a wealth of insights into her personality. The 185 sections of the book reveal her to be an intelligent, observant, and quick-witted woman. While she had a tremendous amount of admiration for the imperial family, she seems to have had little respect for the lower social orders. Sei Shōonagon’s scorn for the less fortunate, her judgmental nature, her competitive attitude toward men, and her lack of restraint have angered some scholars and critics—even some of her contemporaries. The great Japanese novelist Murasaki Shikibu wrote, “Sei Shōonagon has the most extraordinary air of self-satisfaction. . . . Someone who makes such an effort to be different from others is bound to fall in people’s esteem, and I can only think that her future will be a hard one. She is a gifted woman, to be sure. Yet, if one gives free rein to one’s emotions even under the most inappropriate circumstances, if one has to sample each interesting thing that comes along, people are bound to regard one as frivolous. And how can things turn out well for such a woman?” However, it should be remembered that these two women were not only contemporaries—they were rivals, as well.

**An Uncontested Classic**

Despite the criticism Sei Shōonagon has received, it is impossible to deny the literary and historical value of her book. Filled with vivid and evocative language, *The Pillow Book* is clearly the work of an extremely gifted writer. When evaluating Japanese works of prose, many critics rank *The Pillow Book*above Murasaki Shikibu’s *The Tale of Genji,* which is widely regarded as the greatest Japanese novel. Among these critics is Arthur Waley, who wrote, “As a writer [Sei Shōonagon] is incomparably the best poet of her time, a fact which is apparent only in her prose. . . . Passages such as that about the stormy lake or the few lines about crossing a moonlit river show a beauty of phrasing that Murasaki, a much more deliberate writer, certainly never surpassed.”

**The Language of Literature**

One might wonder how it is possible that two of the most important writers of the Heian court were women. During this time, boys at court were trained to write in Chinese, much as monks in medieval Europe were trained to write in Latin. Girls, on the other hand, were taught to write in low Japanese because Chinese was considered to be beyond their ability. This discrimination backfired, however, because more people were able to read low Japanese than Chinese. As a result, works written by women were widely read, and their place in Japanese literary history was assured.

**Preview**

**Connecting to the Literature**

If you have ever kept a diary, you probably know that it is easier to write openly and honestly when your only audience is yourself. This kind of free expression can be found in *The Pillow Book,* which Sei Shōonagon says she wrote “entirely for my own amusement.”

**Literary Analysis**

**Journal**

A **journal** is a day-by-day account of the writer’s thoughts and experiences. By reading a journal from the past, one can gain a unique perspective on the culture and the historical period in which the journal was written. A journal can also reveal a great deal about its author’s personality, as this example from *The Pillow Book* shows:

“ . . . it strikes me as a strange and moving scene; when people talk to me about it, I start crying myself.”

As you read Sei Shōonagon’s observations and reflections, look for details that reveal information about the author’s personality and her life in the Heian court.

**Connecting Literary Elements**

In *The Pillow Book,* many of the author’s observations take the form of **anecdotes,** short accounts of amusing or interesting events. Anecdotes can be told purely for entertainment, but they are often used to illustrate a point or to share insight that the author gained from an experience. Use a chart like the one shown to note the insights Sei Shōonagon offers in her anecdotes.

**Reading Strategy**

**Relating to Your Own Experiences**

Sei Shōonagon lived and wrote centuries ago, yet you may find that you share some of the feelings she expresses. For example, just as finding an old letter arouses a fond memory of the past for the author, finding an old photograph may arouse fond memories for you. **Relating to your own experiences** will increase your understanding and enjoyment of Sei Shōonagon’s observations. As you read, note similarities between your own feelings and experiences and those that the author describes.

 

**Background**

During Sei Shōnagon’s time, Japan was dominated by the powerful Fujiwara family. The leader of the family was the true ruler of Japan; the emperor was merely a figurehead. In addition, other members of the family usurped the power of officials in the various national and provincial offices. As a result, many of the people referred to by title in *The Pillow Book* had few official responsibilities.

Despite the essentially ceremonial nature of the positions, members of the Japanese aristocracy placed a great deal of importance on obtaining a government post. The offices were closely tied to social rank; holders of rank were often given land or servants and were entitled to a variety of privileges, including exemption from military service.

In spring it is the dawn that is most beautiful. As the light creeps over the hills, their outlines are dyed a faint red and wisps of purplish cloud trail over them.

In summer the nights. Not only when the moon shines, but on dark nights too, as the fireflies flit to and fro, and even when it rains, how beautiful it is!



In autumn the evenings, when the glittering sun sinks close to the edge of the hills and the crows fly back to their nests in threes and fours and twos; more charming still is a file of wild geese, like specks in the distant sky. When the sun has set, one’s heart is moved by the sound of the wind and the hum of the insects.

In winter the early mornings. It is beautiful indeed when snow has fallen during the night, but splendid too when the ground is white with frost; or even when there is no snow or frost, but it is simply very cold and the attendants hurry from room to room stirring up the fires and bringing charcoal, how well this fits the season’s mood! But as noon approaches and the cold wears off, no one bothers to keep the braziers**1**alight, and soon nothing remains but piles of white ashes.

The cat who lived in the Palace had been awarded the headdress of nobility and was called Lady Myobu. She was a very pretty cat, and His Majesty saw to it that she was treated with the greatest care.

One day she wandered on to the veranda, and Lady Uma, the nurse in charge of her, called out, “Oh, you naughty thing! Please come inside at once.” But the cat paid no attention and went on basking sleepily in the sun. Intending to give her a scare, the nurse called for the dog, Okinamaro.

“Okinamaro, where are you?” she cried. “Come here and bite Lady Myobu!” The foolish Okinamaro, believing that the nurse was in **earnest** , rushed at the cat, who, startled and terrified, ran behind the blind in the Imperial Dining Room, where the Emperor happened to be sitting. Greatly surprised, His Majesty picked up the cat and held her in his arms. He summoned his gentlemen-in-waiting. When Tadataka, the Chamberlain,**2**appeared, His Majesty ordered that Okinamaro be **chastised** and banished to Dog Island. The attendants all started to chase the dog amid great confusion. His Majesty also reproached Lady Uma. “We shall have to find a new nurse for our cat,” he told her. “I no longer feel I can count on you to look after her.” Lady Uma bowed; thereafter she no longer appeared in the Emperor’s presence.

The Imperial Guards quickly succeeded in catching Okinamaro and drove him out of the Palace grounds. Poor dog! He used to swagger about so happily. Recently, on the third day of the Third Month,**3**when the Controller First Secretary paraded him through the Palace grounds, Okinamaro was adorned with garlands of willow leaves, peach blossoms on his head, and cherry blossoms round his body. How could the dog have imagined that this would be his fate? We all felt sorry for him. “When Her Majesty was having her meals,” recalled one of the ladies-in-waiting, “Okinamaro always used to be in attendance and sit opposite us. How I miss him!”



It was about noon, a few days after Okinamaro’s banishment, that we heard a dog howling fearfully. How could any dog possibly cry so long? All the other dogs rushed out in excitement to see what was happening. Meanwhile a woman who served as a cleaner in the Palace latrines**4**ran up to us. “It’s terrible,” she said. “Two of the Chamberlains are flogging a dog. They’ll surely kill him. He’s being punished for having come back after he was banished. It’s Tadataka and Sanefusa who are beating him.” Obviously the victim was Okinamaro. I was absolutely wretched and sent a servant to ask the men to stop; but just then the howling finally ceased. “He’s dead,” one of the servants informed me. “They’ve thrown his body outside the gate.”

That evening, while we were sitting in the Palace bemoaning Okinamaro’s fate, a wretched-looking dog walked in; he was trembling all over, and his body was fearfully swollen.

“Oh dear,” said one of the ladies-in-waiting. “Can this be Okinamaro? We haven’t seen any other dog like him recently, have we?”

We called to him by name, but the dog did not respond. Some of us insisted that it was Okinamaro, others that it was not. “Please send for Lady Ukon,”**5**said the Empress, hearing our discussion. “She will certainly be able to tell.” We immediately went to Ukon’s room and told her she was wanted on an urgent matter.

“Is this Okinamaro?” the Empress asked her, pointing to the dog.

“Well,” said Ukon, “it certainly looks like him, but I cannot believe that this **loathsome** creature is really our Okinamaro. When I called Okinamaro, he always used to come to me, wagging his tail. But this dog does not react at all. No, it cannot be the same one. And besides, wasn’t Okinamaro beaten to death and his body thrown away? How could any dog be alive after being flogged by two strong men?” Hearing this, Her Majesty was very unhappy.

When it got dark, we gave the dog something to eat; but he refused it, and we finally decided that this could not be Okinamaro.

On the following morning I went to attend the Empress while her hair was being dressed and she was performing her ablutions.**6**I was holding up the mirror for her when the dog we had seen on the previous evening slunk into the room and crouched next to one of the pillars. “Poor Okinamaro!” I said. “He had such a dreadful beating yesterday. How sad to think he is dead! I wonder what body he has been born into this time. Oh, how he must have suffered!”

At that moment the dog lying by the pillar started to shake and tremble, and shed a flood of tears. It was astounding. So this really was Okinamaro! On the previous night it was to avoid betraying himself that he had refused to answer to his name. We were immensely moved and pleased. “Well, well, Okinamaro!” I said, putting down the mirror. The dog stretched himself flat on the floor and yelped loudly, so that the Empress beamed with delight. All the ladies gathered round, and Her Majesty summoned Lady Ukon. When the Empress explained what had happened, everyone talked and laughed with great excitement.

The news reached His Majesty, and he too came to the Empress’s room. “It’s amazing,” he said with a smile. “To think that even a dog has such deep feelings!” When the Emperor’s ladies-in-waiting heard the story, they too came along in a great crowd. “Okinamaro!” we called, and this time the dog rose and limped about the room with his swollen face. “He must have a meal prepared for him,” I said. “Yes,” said the Empress, laughing happily, “now that Okinamaro has finally told us who he is.”



The Chamberlain, Tadataka, was informed, and he hurried along from the Table Room. “Is it really true?” he asked. “Please let me see for myself.” I sent a maid to him with the following reply: “Alas, I am afraid that this is not the same dog after all.” “Well,” answered Tadataka, “whatever you say, I shall sooner or later have occasion to see the animal. You won’t be able to hide him from me **indefinitely** .”

Before long, Okinamaro was granted an Imperial pardon and returned to his former happy state. Yet even now, when I remember how he whimpered and trembled in response to our sympathy, it strikes me as a strange and moving scene; when people talk to me about it, I start crying myself.

 

Dried hollyhock. The objects used during the Display of Dolls. To find a piece of deep violet or grape-colored material that has been pressed between the pages of a notebook.

It is a rainy day and one is feeling bored. To pass the time, one starts looking through some old papers. And then one comes across the letters of a man one used to love.

Last year’s paper fan. A night with a clear moon.

I remember a clear morning in the Ninth Month when it had been raining all night. Despite the bright sun, dew was still dripping from the chrysanthemums in the garden. On the bamboo fences and the criss-cross hedges I saw tatters of spider webs; and where the threads were broken the raindrops hung on them like strings of white pearls. I was greatly moved and delighted.

As it became sunnier, the dew gradually vanished from the clover and the other plants where it had lain so heavily; the branches began to stir, then suddenly sprang up of their own accord. Later I described to people how beautiful it all was. What most impressed me was that they were not at all impressed.

**Critical Reading**

**1. Respond:**Do you agree with the author about springtime dawn? Why or why not?

**2. (a) Recall:**In “In Spring It Is the Dawn,” what time of day does Sei Shōnagon say she finds most beautiful during autumn?**(b) Generalize:**What does Sei Shōnagon’s description of this time of day reveal about her sense of detail?

**3. (a) Recall:**What items does Sei Shōnagon list in “Things That Arouse a Fond Memory of the Past”?**(b) Interpret:**Why do you think she avoids sharing the fond memories that these items evoke?

**4. Evaluate:**Do you think Sei Shōnagon succeeds in conveying what is amusing or interesting about what she observes? Why or why not?

**5. (a) Generalize:**Based on the events described in “The Cat Who Lived in the Palace,” how would you describe the life of the upper class in Japan during the Heian Age?**(b) Criticize:**Do you think the anecdote shows the Japanese nobility to be responsible, effective leaders? Explain.