JAPANESE LITERATURE

The Conventions of Courtly Love

The excerpts in this first section all center on the tradition of courtly love as it developed in literature of the Nara (710–784) and Heian (794–1185) periods. Early poetry collections such as the Man’yōshū and Kokinshū witnessed the appearance of conventional narrative/motifs for portraying a (typically doomed) love affair at the imperial court. These conventions were refined during the Heian period, most notably with Murasaki Shikibu’s endlessly inventive recasting of the tradition throughout her fifty-two-chapter The Tale of Genji. Finally, Sei Shōnagon’s Pillow Book satirizes the tradition of courtly love in passages that have not lost their freshness—or bite—in the thousand years since she recorded them. (Don’t miss the inept lover who stumbles about muttering the Heian equivalent of “Where are my socks?”)


Buddhist Themes in Medieval and Edo Literature

Our second lecture focuses on Buddhist themes as they appear in the medieval era (1185–1600) and the Edo period (1600–1868). We will look at 4 themes: 1) reincarnation; 2) karmic retribution; 3) the impermanence of all things; and 4) salvation through devotion to the Buddha/Buddhist doctrine. Be also on the lookout for a subtheme of #3 (the uncertainty of the world) that led to the inclusion of startlingly secular passages in some of our texts!
The first modern lecture deals with three stages of psychological “realism,” one of the prominent trends in literature from the Meiji period (1868–1912) to the present. In the texts of Meiji writer Natsume Sōseki, psychological “realism” appears as literary revision of the “idealized” mental struggles portrayed in traditional literature. Authors such as Shiga Naoya later reinvented psychological “realism” as a literary style, with their creation of the stream-of-consciousness “I-novel.” Finally, literature after World War II initiated a new phase of psychological “realism” as social critique. Contemporary female authors, such as Takahashi Takako and Makino Eri, are notable for taking advantage of this latest incarnation of psychological “realism” to critically assess the institution of motherhood.


Modern Japanese Fantasy

Our final section on Japan ends with a discussion of Japanese fantasy literature. We begin with texts that adapt familiar conventions from Western science fiction, such as Rampo’s “Hell of Mirrors” and Tsutsui’s “Standing Woman.” We then continue with stories that derive their fantastic elements from early Japanese prototypes. For example, Akutagawa’s “The Spider’s Thread” references supernatural folklore, while Enchi’s “A Bond for Two Lifetimes—Gleanings” delivers an unexpectedly feminist message through its rewriting of a Buddhist miracle tale.


