

Shudō tsuya monogatari (1713) & Male-Male Love in the Edo period

Lesson Plan: *Shudō tsuya monogatari* (1713) and Male-Male Love in Early Modern Japan

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This module contains:

1. Discussion questions for assigned readings
2. A group activity and writing exercise, "Genta's love letters"
3. An appendix with sample student letters

Target Audience:

Undergraduate Students

Duration:

90 mins (20-30 mins discussion + at least 60 mins group activity)

Learning Objectives:

- To understand attitudes toward same-sex love in early modern Japan, identify some of its key characteristics, and explore its social context

Potential Courses to Include this Lesson in:

- Gender History courses
- History of Sexuality courses
- Japanese Popular Culture courses
- courses on samurai
- Early Modern Japan courses

Assigned Materials:

- "Excerpts from Folios 3r to 7v, Folios 12r to 15r, and Folios 16v to 20v." Translation of *Shudō tsuya monogatari. Blood, Tears, and Samurai Love on Japan Past & Present*. 2024.
- Koch, Angelika. "Brave & Beautiful Boys: Samurai and Early Modern Same-Sex Culture." *Blood, Tears, and Samurai Love: A Tragic Tale in an Eighteenth-Century Manuscript on Japan Past & Present*. 2024.
- Koch, Angelika. "How to Win His Heart: Male-Male Love & Courtship Etiquette." *Blood, Tears and Samurai Love: A Tragic Tale in an Eighteenth-Century Manuscript on Japan Past & Present*. 2025.

Optional (But Recommended) Materials:

- Pflugfelder, Gregory. "Authorizing Pleasure: Male-Male Sexuality in Edo-Period Popular Discourse." In *Cartographies of Desire: Male-Male Sexuality in Japanese Discourse, 1600-1950*, 23–63. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Discussion Questions

On *Shudō tsuya monogatari*:

- Who tells the story in the text? What might be the advantage of choosing such a narrator for the tale?
- How is the protagonist Genta described in the story? How is he portrayed in the illustrations? Can you see any visual differences to the other characters? What characteristics and qualities does he possess? What can you say about his age and social background?
- Who are the men Genta associates with in the story? What can you tell about their age and social background? How would you describe their relationships with him? Are they romantic, physical, platonic, etc...? Who initiates them?
- How would you describe attitudes toward same-sex love in this story? How does the narrator appear to feel about male-male love? What is the attitude of the other characters?
- How reliable is the narrator (and the narrative)? Why do you think he is reliable/not reliable?
- Genta's tale is set in a Buddhist context in eighteenth-century Japan. Using the internet, what can you find out about religious and social attitudes towards same-sex love and its legal status in other cultural contexts at that time?

On "Brave and Beautiful Boys"

- What is a *wakashū*? What are the main characteristics of a *wakashū* vis-à-vis an older man? How does this apply to the *Shudō tsuya monogatari* manuscript?
- Which social groups were particularly associated with same-sex love in early modern Japan and why? Which of these groups do you encounter in *Shudō tsuya monogatari*?
- Why did same-sex love relationships in early modern Japan sometimes come in conflict with the law? Why does this happen in the *Shudō tsuya monogatari*?

Group Activity & Writing Exercise: Genta's Love Letters

SETUP

Group size:

Small groups of 4-6 people.

(NB: Alternatively, this can be done as an individual written assignment at home.)

Assignment:

Write two short love letters based on the characters in *Shudō tsuya monogatari* (approx. 200-300 words in total). The letters should represent an exchange between Genta and one of his partners.

Instructions:

STEP 1 Research and Planning (30 mins):

Before writing, research the following questions in your groups: How did men and boys express their love in letters and otherwise? What common strategies and expressions can you find in the love letters of the Edo period? Are there any differences depending on whether they were written by a boy or an older man? What information was usually included in love letters? See below for useful materials.

Divide the different tasks between group members and then discuss your findings together. Plan which features you need to include in your own letters.

STEP 2: Write (20 mins):

Write your short letters, paying attention to choosing appropriate language, style, images, and content based on your research.

STEP 3: Presentation (2 mins per group):

Share your letters with the class on a PPT slide and briefly explain your reasons for your choice of language/style/content.

RESEARCH MATERIALS AND INSTRUCTIONS

Some useful questions and samples to consider when researching your letters:

- Can you find an example of a letter in the *Shudō tsuya monogatari* manuscript? How does the older man in this case express his admiration and feelings for Genta? How does Genta respond to his advances?
- Look at the following three examples of fictional love letters/confessions between men:

Sample No. 1: Love Letter

Ihara Saikaku. "Love Letter Sent in a Sea Bass." In *The Great Mirror of Male Love*, translated, with an Introduction, by Paul Gordon Schalow. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990.

Reprinted online at *Gay History & Literature: Essays By Rictor Norton*. [My Dear Boy: Gay Love Letters through the Centuries rictornorton.co.uk](http://rictornorton.co.uk)

Sample No. 2: Love Letter

Ihara Saikaku. *The Life of an Amorous Man*, translated by Kengi Hamada, 149. Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Co, 1964.

(A priest confesses his love to a young Noh actor and the actor's response)

"It is you I have watched every day at the Noh play. How many times, indeed, have I followed you secretly to the gate as you left the theater!"

Really, I felt like dying when I heard you speak. Today I heard the sandal bearer Kongo and the others whispering that you were coming out to Higashiyama again, and I wanted desperately to see you. So I came here and climbed this tree with the intention of forsaking this world by hanging myself. Now that I have had the good fortune of speaking to you, I have nothing to regret. If you have pity for me, please burn incense for me after I am gone."

...

"I, too, have felt right along an emotion for you. Now that you have confessed to me, I am very glad. The feeling, I assure you is mutual. How can I deny you your wishes? Wait for the dawn, and your wishes shall be fulfilled. Come to my house in the morning."

Sample No. 3: Love Confession

Hiraga Gennai. "Rootless Weeds." In *Early Modern Japanese Literature: An Anthology, 1600-1900*, edited by Haruo Shirane, 215. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

(After composing two haiku a *kappa*, disguised as a young samurai, confesses his love for the kabuki actor Segawa Kikunojō)

"To escape the heat I like to go out pooling alone. The view from here is really quite nice. But today I caught sight of you. The sky suddenly clouded over with my desire, and my fishing boat rocked back and forth. My heart is a deep ocean with wild shores. If we could only spend a night of love together on the waves and share our deepest secrets... it would be the greatest wish of my whole life."

The man took Kikunojō's hand and moved closer to him. He was

sophisticated, but his feelings for Kikunojō were obviously quite real. Kikunojō was also attracted to him and felt quite awkward.

- How does the older partner in Sample 1 express his feelings for a younger boy? What strategies has he used throughout his courtship, particularly in letters?
- Is the response of the younger partner (in this case an actor) in Sample 2 different from that of an older man? Can you spot any differences in tone, language, etc.?
- How do the priest in Sample 2 and the *kappa* in Sample 3 express and confess their love? What is the tone of their confessions? Are they straightforward and to the point? What kind of references and images are used?

Skim these two homepages for relevant information on approaches to love letters in the Edo period:

- Koch, Angelika. "How to Win His Heart: Male-Male Love & Courtship Etiquette." *Blood, Tears and Samurai Love: A Tragic Tale in an Eighteenth-Century Manuscript on Japan Past & Present*. 2025.
- "Chapter 1: Love Letters in the Edo Period." In *Expressing Romance in Worlds on National Diet Library Kaleidoscope of Books*. <https://www.ndl.go.jp/kaleido/e/entry/26/1.html>.

Sample Student Letters:

(Letters created by Flame Rikkers, Anneke van Dillewijn, and Caecilia Roding)

NB: The following are actual samples from a student group assignment from a second-year BA Japanese Studies course at Leiden University and are reproduced with permission of the students. These letters may be used as an

example for the writing assignment.

Student Letter 1

A letter to the go-between Shinkai Hyōkichi by the *nenja* Hiraga Kohachirō

Explanation: In this letter Hiraga Kohachirō, the *nenja*, expresses his admiration for Genta, the *wakashū*, to a mutual friend who he hopes will help him set up an appointment with Genta. Reading love confessions in literature we noticed that there were few confessions directed at the object of desire. Those were only uttered in conversations between friends. As such we chose to write a letter from the *nenja* to his friend who acted as a go-between in the story. In this letter we were at liberty to write about the aspects of the *wakashū* that the *nenja* found desirable, such as his skills in martial arts, his filial piety and his looks.

Letter

When I saw Genta for the first time on the archery course, his skills made me wonder if the famed archer Nasu no Yoichi had been reincarnated. Although his visage might more closely resemble Atsumori, whose youthful beauty drove Kumagai to take Buddhist vows to alleviate the guilt of slaying such a refined young man whose forelocks had not yet been shorn.

During our meetings, whenever I asked him about his study and complimented his skills, Genta's cheeks would turn the color of cherry blossoms. Then, in a soft and slow voice, he bashfully denied the truth of my words with language as graceful as the autumn leaves. Each time he would tell me that he owed everything to his wise teachers and that with their guidance he would walk the long path towards proper cultivation. This made me want to teach him some other skills a man will need in life.

His words showed me how passionate he is about his studies, in turn also igniting the fire that is now burning in my heart. Unlike his peers, he takes great interest in relieving the worries of his mother by properly carrying out the duties of his late father and valuing the life that his parents have given him.

Not even mentioning his great skill in calligraphy or his great manners, besides being skillful when it comes to his studies, Genta also possesses the great skill to stir up the ki within my body and make me feel more alive than ever. Starting from the warm smile and winks he flashes me when I pass by, to the way he has styled his hair beautifully showing off his forelocks by leaving a few stray locks of hair to frame his face.

His heart and head know no limits, which I was blessed to learn about after sharing my cup of sake he had so calmly poured me. He sang me many songs about all kinds of historical tales and people with a softly raised voice that reminds me of a nightingale singing in the night. But what I found most impressive was the way he recited great poetry works. I wonder if he carefully chooses which ones to use, so in the end they fit together like puzzle pieces to reveal his love. For when he recites great works of poetry the look in his eyes makes me hope that he might have some feelings for me as well.

As you are a close friend of Genta, I hope you might pass on the second letter to Genta in which I have written the confession of my love.

Student Letter 2

A letter from the *nenja* Hiraga Kohachirō to the *wakashū* Genta, in which the *nenja* confesses his feelings.

Explanation: The love letters in the literature in which one's feelings are confessed for the first time had a few similarities, such as the fact that the

letters mainly consisted of descriptions of the feelings of the confessing party regarding their crush and the fact that the language used in these confessions is dramatic; nothing matters besides the love one feels at that moment. In the following love letter we have attempted to write in a similar style.

Letter

The first time I saw you from behind, you reminded me of a young, green sapling, but when you turned your face to me I realized you were much more like a cherry blossom in its prime.

When drinking, laughing and enjoying music at your side, a nostalgic feeling flows through me like the warm summer breeze in the night air, clear water running down a stream. During such moments, the feeling of wanting to forsake my life for even one night with you resonates deep within me. Well then, with these emotions of love in my heart, what could prevent us from finalizing our brotherhood when even the Buddha approves?

Having spent every moment I could with you, these feelings only grew stronger and I can no longer live without confessing them to you. I wonder, having revealed all this, when shall I pluck and hold in my hand the young stem whose roots of the chrysanthemum? In the meantime, I ask of you, ‘Though your affections are ephemeral as the morning glory’s flower, gone before sunset, do not loosen your under-sash for anyone but me.’

Having written this letter I have no more regrets.

Student Letter 3

A letter from the *wakashū* Takenomata Genta to the *nenja* Hiraga

Kohachirō, in which Genta accepts Kohachirō's feelings and invites him to come over.

Explanation: Answers to love confessions seem to be surprisingly short. A few sentences in which the courted party replies that the feelings are accepted seem to be enough. An invitation to consummate the love at a later date can also be included.

Letter

Upon reading your confession, I felt my feelings coming to full bloom due to the sincerity of your emotions. Under the light of the next full moon I will wait for you to loosen my under-sash.