

## Cuteness in Manga

**Lesson Plan:** Cuteness in Manga

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**Keywords:** Manga, Comics, Cuteness, Kawaii, Art, Characters

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### **Target Audience:**

High School students, Undergraduate students

### **Duration:**

2 class sessions, 50-60 minutes long

### **Potential Courses to Include this Lesson In:**

- Japanese Studies courses
- East Asian Studies courses
- Popular Culture courses
- Media Studies courses

## **Background:**

The bulk of this class will be devoted to exploring a definition of illustrated cuteness in the context of Japan. It makes a case for how manga contributed to the popularity of cuteness in mainstream Japanese visual cultures. This occurred through an expansion of cuteness from "shōjo manga," or comics for girls, and comics for children, especially the relatively stable and easily replicable style of Tezuka Osamu. From the late 1970s into the 1980s, the so-called "cute movement" saw this aesthetic rise in comics for adults. At a time when more paper was used to print comics than to make toilet rolls, cute icons became standard across the visual field in Japan. Today, even the most adult works in manga display a distinctly cute look, which has influenced other related media and material forms.

## **Learning Objectives:**

1. To acquire knowledge about and develop an interest in different cultures.
2. To develop cross-cultural knowledge and skills to cooperate as a member of the international community.
3. To think comparatively and analytically about culture and the present.
4. To work in groups and conduct discussions that are critical, collaborative, and cross-cultural.

## **Core Readings:**

Shiokawa, Kanako. "Cute but Deadly: Women and Violence in Japanese Comics." In *Themes in Asian Cartooning: Cute, Cheap, Mad, and Sexy*, edited by John A. Lent, 93–125. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999.

Brophy, Philip. "Osamu Tezuka's *Gekiga*: Behind the Mask of *Manga*." In *Manga: An Anthology of Global and Cultural Perspectives*, edited by Toni Johnson-Woods, 128–136. New York: Continuum, 2010.

## **Assigned Materials:**

Tezuka Osamu. *The Mysterious Underground Men* (1948), pp. 1–35, 138–148. (See also "[The Mysterious Underground Man](#)." Tezuka Osamu Official.)

Tezuka Osamu. *Apollo's Song* (1970). (See also, "[Apollo's Song](#)." Tezuka Osamu Official.)

Takahashi Rumiko. *Urusei Yatsura* (1978–1987), [chapter 1](#)

Takeuchi Naoko. *Sailor Moon* (1991–1997), [chapter 1](#)

## **Optional Assigned Materials:**

Berndt, Jaqueline, Kazumi Nagaike, and Fusami Ogi, eds. *Shōjo Across Media: Exploring "Girl" Practices in Contemporary Japan*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019.

Friedman, Erica. *By Your Side: The First 100 Years of Yuri Anime and Manga*. Vista, CA: Journey Press, 2022.

Ikeda Riyoko. *The Rose of Versailles* (1972–1973), sample chapter from *Manga! Manga!*

Okuyama, Yoshiko. *Reframing Disability in Manga*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2020.

Welker, James., ed. *Queer Transfigurations: Boys Love Media in Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2022.

Welker, James. *Transfiguring Women in Late Twentieth-century Japan: Feminists, Lesbians, and Girls' Comic Artists and Fans*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2024.

## **Activity/Procedure & Discussion Questions:**

### **Lesson 1:**

1. Brainstorm! What is cute? Groups should write down their answers on sticky notes and place them on the classroom board in clusters of like concepts.
2. Compare Barbie and Rika-chan dolls. What, if anything, sets them apart? Compare Mickey Mouse and Hello Kitty. What, if anything, sets them apart?
3. Read an excerpt of Tezuka Osamu's *The Mysterious Underground Men* (1948). How does this compare to the comic books familiar to the reader? Read an excerpt of Takeuchi Naoko's *Sailor Moon* (1991–1997). How does this compare to the comic books familiar to the reader?

## **Lesson 2:**

1. Read an excerpt of Takahashi Rumiko's *Urusei Yatsura* (1978–1987). How does this work fit into Shiokawa's argument about the expanding realm of cuteness in Japanese comics and mass culture? (Aside: With a quick nod to the boom surrounding "Lum-chan," the discussion can easily be expanded into fan culture and the Comic Market, or "Comiket.")
2. Read an excerpt of Tezuka Osamu's *Apollo's Song* (1970). Considering Brophy's argument, how is this master artist using cuteness to convey his message? Where is the mask of manga, or cuteness, most prevalent for the reader?

## **Evaluation:**

Students can choose one of the featured artists and do further research for a final paper. Or, they could choose an example of contemporary manga and write about how it is related to past examples of cuteness in comics.

## **Instructor Reference Materials:**

Tezuka Osamu Official Website: <https://tezukaosamu.net/en/manga/>

Rumiko Takahashi Fan Website: <https://www.furinkan.com>