

“To Be” (Idle) or “Not to Be” (Idle)

Connecting Japanese and Renaissance Notions of Idleness

This lesson takes root in the evidence of idleness across different time periods, cultures, and artistic mediums. In today’s high-paced world, students rarely experience the notion of idleness or passivity; yet, the idea of idleness is prevalent in many cultures and time periods, including the Japanese culture and Renaissance time period. Students will have the opportunity to analyze idleness through a variety of mediums, including Japanese art and literature and Renaissance literature. At the end of the lesson, students will be able to identify the role and presence of idleness across the annals of time and cultures.

Grade Level

This lesson is intended for an 8th-grade Language Arts class. The level of class and state standards can be adjusted to meet the needs and abilities of grades 8-12.

Objectives

- To define and analyze the role of idleness in 14th-century Japan and Renaissance England and to examine the distinct relationship between idleness and gender in both cultures.
- To study the use of idleness as an artistic and literary theme.
- To introduce students to the folded screen technique as an important aspect of Japanese art.
- To compare the role of literature and art as reflections of a society’s history, lifestyle, and culture.

Concepts

- Cultural similarities and differences between 16th-century England and 14th-century Japan
- Idleness – remaining in a passive state due to lethargy, personal choice, or the necessity of maintaining the status quo
- Gender and its bearing on idleness; its literary and social relevance
- Transience of time: the shortness of life and the passing (quickly) out of existence
- Visual and written analysis
- Connecting artistic mediums: visual-written and written-visual
- Japanese folding screen technique
- Purpose of art and literature; audience—for who or whom an artwork or literary piece is created

Key Ideas

- The concept of idleness plays a significant role in both Japanese and English culture.
- Japanese art and calligraphy in the form of the *byōbu*, the painted folding screen, serves as a concrete pictorial representation of Japanese history, culture, and lifestyle.

- The plays of William Shakespeare are vivid portrayals of Renaissance England, including its lifestyles, culture, social interactions, and history.
- The role of idleness is distinctly affected by other factors and ideals in society, including gender, nature, and the transience of time.
- Japanese folded screens and Renaissance literature are mirrors to society, thus serving as ‘teaching tools’ for the viewer and reader, respectively.

Materials

Scenes from ‘Essays in Idleness’, late 1700s-early 1800s, CMA 1971.43.1-.2

The Four Accomplishments, late 1500s, CMA 1979.46.1-.2

Summer Night, 1784, CMA 1973.156.1

Winter Day, 1784, CMA 1973.156.2

Ivy Lane, 1700s, CMA 1954.127

Kenko, Yoshida. *Essays in Idleness (The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko)*. Translated by Donald Keene. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.

Shakespeare, William. *The Taming of the Shrew*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992.

Display boards (3 panels), poster boards, paint, crayons, markers, glue, scissors, paper

Procedures – 4-Day Lesson

Day 1 – *Essays in Idleness* – Study in Japanese Literature and the Issue of Idleness

1. This lesson will be used after the students read *The Taming of the Shrew*. Therefore, at this point, the students will have been introduced to the concept of idleness in Renaissance terms.
2. Students will receive copies of Yoshida Kenko’s *Essays in Idleness*. Based on teacher selection, certain excerpts (at the discretion of teacher) will be read and discussed for content, effectiveness, and purpose.
3. Excerpts must reveal the Japanese notion of idleness, including definition of the term, advice given by Kenko, and other examples that clearly reveal how the Japanese culture views idleness.
4. Discuss the theme of idleness in this story – define the term, giving specific examples, and explore its role in society and relationship to gender. Students will take notes during this activity for use on Day 2 and beyond.

Homework – Connecting Kenko and Shakespeare – Issue of Idleness

- Students will create T-charts in pairs connecting the view of idleness in Kenko’s *Essays in Idleness* and Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew*. Students will use notes from yesterday’s class and from the earlier unit on Shakespeare to compare/contrast the views of idleness found in each literary work. Students will work on supporting their viewpoints by citing specific textual examples to highlight their discussion of idleness in both works – discussion should center on definitions/views of idleness, gender issues, and purpose of each text.

Day 2 – Japanese Folding Screens

1. Students must bring their T-Charts and notes from Days 1 and 2 to the Cleveland Museum of Art where they will learn about the Japanese folding screen

techniques. Students will learn the importance and function of folding screens in capturing stories, themes, and messages relevant to the Japanese culture, society and history.

2. Have pairs of students view Goshun's *Scenes from Essay's in Idleness* (CMA 1971.43.1-2) and closely examine this artwork that coincides with Kenko's written work. Student pairs will take notes to determine the connection between Goshun's artwork and Kenko's written work, looking for details in the screen (images, characters, "messages") in order to create a comparative analysis between these written and visual works regarding idleness.

Day 3 – Translating Shakespeare into Japanese Folded Screens

1. Students must bring their T-Charts and notes from Days 1, 2, and 3 to class today.
2. Students will rejoin the same partner from Day 2 in order to create Japanese folding screens based on three characters from *The Taming of the Shrew* – Petruchio, Kate, and Bianca.
3. The basic assignment for the next two days is as follows: Students will take all of their information and notes from the previous three days regarding idleness in Shakespeare as well as Japanese art and literature. They will then attempt to connect all of the different facets of this lesson into a folding screen representation of idleness as embodied by Petruchio and Kate or Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Each pair will select Petruchio and one of the female characters – Kate or Bianca.
4. Each pair of students will create a six-fold screen (three panels for Petruchio, three panels for the female character). Using colors, imagery, ideas, and actions found in Shakespeare's play, students will attempt to create a Japanese six-fold screen depicting idleness in Shakespeare. Students will draw on notes from Shakespeare and analyses of both Kenko's and Goshun's works. Students will use Goshun's artistic interpretation of Kenko's written work as a model for capturing the words of Shakespeare in a folded-screen rendition.
5. Some images and ideas for students' folded screens:
 - a. creating images that accurately depict idleness as it relates to or affects the character,
 - b. colors to complement the character's mood, personality, attitudes, and actions or 'messages' that clearly relate to the character's role in Shakespeare's play.
6. Screens must be completed within one week of Day 3 for "Art Showcase."

Day 4 – Art Showcase

1. Student pairs will bring in their finished six-fold screens and share their masterpieces with the class. Pairs will discuss and share insights into color, image, action, and character choices.
2. Students must also be ready to support how their folded screens incorporate aspects of Japanese art and the issue of idleness in Renaissance times. Simply, students must be willing to discuss how their screens exemplify every aspect of this week's lessons.

Evaluation

1. During screen presentations, students will be asked a series of questions concerning their folded screens. Students will be asked to evaluate (orally) their own work for evidence of the following accuracies: portrayal of idleness in characters based on play and historical time period; use of Japanese screen technique; creativity. If needed, written evaluations will be instituted to ensure accountability for all students.
2. Students will discuss the intended audience and purpose of both Kenko's *Essays in Idleness* and Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Enrichment Activities

- A. Select one literary excerpt from *Fahrenheit 451* or *The Chocolate War* (other texts employing sensory imagery may be substituted). Create a picture using colors and imagery that captures the written sensory imagery in the selected excerpt.
- B. To understand and appreciate the use of sensory imagery, select a ukiyo-e from the classroom collection of CMA images. Write two (2) separate descriptions of the same ukiyo-e:
 - a. A description employing sensory imagery and great use of detail
 - b. A description using NO detail – very vague.
- C. Compare and contrast the two descriptions for effectiveness, appeal, and aesthetic value based on the presence or absence of detail and sensory imagery. Analyze the differences and the importance of using detail in your writing.
- D. Analyze the role of marriage in Japanese culture and Renaissance times. Issues to explore include roles in marriage, purpose of marriage (love, money, status, land, family ties), as well as such items as dowries and wedding etiquette. Students will research both cultures and compare/contrast their research. Students may wish to use the relationships and wedding scene from *The Taming of the Shrew* and find examples of Japanese marriage in literature and/or art.
- E. Students may wish to research the evolution of women's role in Japanese society, European society and/or American society.

State Standards – Language Arts (8th Grade)

1. Use precise language, actions verbs, sensory detail, colorful modifiers and style as appropriate to audience and purpose (fictional writing).
2. All writing conventions apply.
3. Prepare writing for publication (for display or sharing with others).
4. Generate writing ideas through discussions with others and from printed materials.
5. Deliver descriptive presentations that convey relevant information/descriptive details.
6. Produce informal writings for various purposes.
7. Use oral and visual techniques to gather and present information that supports a position about the topic.
8. Apply reading comprehension strategies, including comparing and contrasting.

9. Identify the author's purpose and intended audience for the text.
10. Analyze an author's argument, perspective, viewpoint, mood or tone.

This lesson plan was developed by Michael Babinec, 8th-grade teacher, Shaker Heights City Schools, Shaker Heights, Ohio