

ACTIVITY SHEET

ORDINARY WOMEN: MURASAKI SHIKIBU

SUMMARY

"In 10th century Japan, literary prodigy Murasaki Shikibu wrote the first modern novel at a time when women's names were rarely even written down."

"The *Tale of Genji* is often considered the first modern novel because Murasaki offered readers not just a chronicle of events, but deep psychological insight into the characters and their inner lives. Her story made history because it was more than just a story: It was a complex literary portrait of what it means to be human."

STOPPING POINTS/VIDEO BREAKDOWN

0:25 Introduction to Murasaki

0:45 A cloistered world

1:00 Literate background

1:30 *Tale of Genji*

1:55 Multifaceted female characters

2:30 Issues of fame

2:50 History of women writing

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS & THEMES

1. Murasaki Shikibu was born to an aristocratic Japanese family around 970, when aristocratic women were kept hidden from society and "shielded from public view". Although this practice is not commonplace today, how might we compare contemporary times and phenomena to that of Shikibu's experience in an "intensely cloistered world"? For example, comparing the still-present and highly problematic societal expectation that women stay at home and give up careers in order to raise a family.
2. Consider her father's response to Shikibu's literary talents: "Just my luck. What a pity she was not born a man." Why would he have reacted this way? How else can we identify a favouring of sons in contemporary cultures throughout the world?
3. Although about a male character, Shikibu's novel offers valuable insight into what it was like to be a woman in her time through the presence of "multifaceted female characters." How do novels and other works of art help us begin to understand the experiences of others?
4. Many around Shikibu called her "pretentious, arrogant and unfriendly" as a result of her literary success. How is this kind of language present in how many successful women are referred to in contemporary contexts?

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ACADEMIC ACTIVITIES (SCHOOL-BASED OR EXTRA-CURRICULAR)

1. Murasaki Shikibu wrote the first 'modern' novel. This video begins by describing what characterizes the gripping experience of falling in love with a novel. Consider a novel or something you have read where you have had this experience, and reflect on what made this novel so moving for you. Compare these reflections with how Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* is described. If you have not had this experience, consider what kinds of things you would need to see in a novel or form of storytelling to assist in developing this kind of connection.
2. Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* is not merely a chronicling of events, but is also considered the first novel because it also offers "deep psychological insight into the characters and their inner lives." For this activity, pick a significant event in history. Find a nonfiction book on the event that outlines what occurred, and find a novel on the same historical moment. Compare how both treat the same event, and what is gained from each approach to history (one fact-based, the other character or thematically driven).
3. "Throughout history, great novels have traditionally been considered the domain of male writers." Consider this observation, and conduct research on a female writer from any part of history. During this research, pay particular attention to the challenges they may have encountered in establishing a career as a female writer in a historically male-dominated field.

COMMUNITY-ORIENTED ACTIVITIES (COMMUNITY GROUPS, YOUTH CAMPS, WRITING GROUPS, MUSEUMS)

1. **CURATORIAL EXERCISE:** Pick a historical event and consider how a gallery or exhibition would typically be constructed. Learning from Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* and what information it offers regarding life in 970's Japan, reimagine a gallery or exhibition told through the lens of historical fiction. How might an image of an event be constructed based on the psychological experiences of those deemed peripheral to the event itself? How can fiction help us understand historical moments and see them in different ways?
2. **WRITING GROUP ACTIVITY:** Shikibu constructed the character Prince Genji largely through the psychological experiences of female characters surrounding the prince. Consider how this approach might be used as a tool for character development in your own writing, allowing for increased complexity in characterization.
3. Writing group activity: Male heroes are a common subject throughout literary history. This activity requires you to rewrite an epic story or poem about a male hero from the perspective of the women around him, thereby decentering the male hero. An alternative might be telling the same story exclusively from a female character's perspective. For example, how might the Middle English poem "Sir Orfeo" be retold from the perspective of his wife? This allows for a repurposing of historically male-centered narratives, and can be done with both older works and contemporary pieces.

DRAMA/IMPROV GROUP EXTENSION: Take a fairytale with a male hero. Explore the male hero from the perspective of the female characters surrounding him. Alternatively, consider how the story might be told with the hero's female counterpart as the main character instead.

