Setsuwa Tales: Creating Kamishibai

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Sophomore English-World Literature
Time Requirement: Five class periods of one hour

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1. ***Context***: Sophomore English-World Literature
(Used with Honors, Advanced Honors and Standard Levels)
28 students per class divided into 7 groups of 4
Time Needed: 5 class periods of one hour each

2. ***Summary***: Setsuwa tales come from medieval Japan, China and India. Supernatural monsters such as oni (demons) and religious (Buddhist) motifs appear in these stories. Animals such as foxes, badgers, dragons, turtles and snakes are often characters in these stories. In the setsuwa tale, "Urashima Taro", (oo-rah-she-mah tah-roh) a fisherman, saves the life of a baby tortoise. The grateful mother tortoise rewards Taro with a visit to the Dragon King's palace at the bottom of the sea. There he is welcomed and lavishly entertained by the Dragon King's daughter who wants Taro to stay with her forever. However, Taro grows homesick for his mother and decides he must leave. The princess gives him a beautiful box to take with him, but warns Taro not to open it if he ever wants to see her again. Arriving at his home village, he finds everything changed and is unable to recognize anyone. An old villager tells him that 300 years ago, a man named Urashima Taro went fishing and never returned. Taro is bewildered and in his despair, opens the box. Smoke, representing the supernatural lapse of time wafts out and Taro instantly ages 300 years.

3. ***The Big Picture***: Setsuwa Tales (tale literature) refers to about 45 collections put together between 822 AD and 1350. Monks wrote many of these tales. The tales consist of topics such as Buddhist themes, the Japanese court and its world, legends and popular tales. "Urashima Taro" was rewritten as a children's story when compulsory education for children was introduced during the Meiji period (1868-1912). It was then included in textbooks and became part of the national, standardized curriculum.

4. ***Discussion Questions and Answers***:

A. Why did Taro decide he must leave the Princess? He grew homesick for his mother and decided he must leave.
B. How do you think the Princess felt about Taro's decision? She was very sad because she wanted him to stay with her forever, but understood his feelings of homesickness. She gave him a beautiful box as a memento.
C. What did Taro discover when he returned to his village? He discovered many years had passed and he knew no one in the village and recognized nothing.
D. Do you think Urashima Taro would have made the same decision to leave the Dragon's Palace if he knew what he would discover in his village? No, I do not think Urashima Taro would have decided to leave the Dragon's Palace if he knew what he would discover in his village as his family and friends were now deceased and he returned to his village to see them.
E. What do you think the world will look like 100 years from now? (Answers will vary here-some students may cite technological advancements, wars, etc.)
F. The story ends with Urashima Taro as an old man. If there were another chapter to this story, what would you write happening? I would mention Urashima's

regrets over his decision of leaving the Dragon Palace or possibly his attempt to return to the Dragon's Palace.

Themes and Symbols in "Urashima Taro"

Tortoise or Kame (kah-meh): this animal has traditionally been regarded as a symbol of longevity and accordingly, a bearer of good fortune. There is a Japanese expression, "A crane lives a thousand years and a tortoise ten thousand years." The two animals are often used as decorative themes on presents given at important events, like the birth of a baby or a wedding.

Seasons: Japanese people are very sensitive to and appreciative of the change of seasons. There are four in Japan, although some people consider rainy June a fifth season. The flowers and scenery Taro sees along with the list below are things the Japanese associate with the four seasons. Even today, a Japanese writer can invoke images of a certain time of the year simply by referring to a seasonal symbol.

Spring: Bamboo shoots, fern fiddleheads, clams, plum and cherry blossoms, wisteria and iris
Summer: Peaches, watermelon, morning glory, cicada, fireflies and beetles.
Fall: Persimmon, grapes, chestnut, mushroom maple leaves, crickets, dragonflies and harvested rice
Winter: Mandarin oranges (mikan), cod, blowfish, camellia, and crane.

Japanese folktales often begin with the phrase, Mukashi, mukashi (moo-kah-she) freely translated as "once upon a time, long, long ago…" They often end with the word, Oshimai (oh-she-my), freely translated as: "The End."

5. ***Activities***: The major activity I use with Setsuwa Tales will be Creating Kamishibai. This activity will encompass 5 class days of one-hour sessions. Making individual or group Kamishibai stories is a natural response to hearing and reading setsuwa tales. Children can write the setsuwa into dialogue and using that as a script, one child can be a narrator, others can take roles in the reading and another can hold the cards. Kamishibai (paper drama) is a traditional form of Japanese storytelling that uses large color pictures to accompany a dramatic narration. Each kamishibai story is based on setsuwa tales that consists of twelve to sixteen beautifully colored cardboard illustrations. Students who love Japanese animation (anime) love this project. The boards are made of cut poster board measuring 10 ½" x 15", allowing even a large group of children to easily see the pictures. Illustrations can look like anime, watercolors, woodblock prints or brush and ink paintings.

Kamishibai in its current form became popular during the 1920s, reaching its peak in the 1950s with more than 3,000 storytellers in Tokyo alone. Each day the kamishibai man would make the rounds of neighborhoods on a bicycle with about three different stories. He would stop at a corner and announce story time by beating on a drum and sounding wooden clappers. After selling candy to the children, he would present his story. The storyboards were enclosed in a framed wooden box that opened on one side to

resemble a large stage mounted on the back of his bicycle. As the story progressed, he would pull the story boards out to reveal the next scene. He would stop at an exciting part of the story and announce that the story would be continued the next day. Kamishibai introduces students to types of Japanese characters from the Setsuwa Tales such as river spirits (kappa), wily foxes and gentle Buddhist deities (Jizo). Kamishibai is part of a long tradition of oral folk literature in Asia. In Japan, as early as the twelfth century, the recitation of stories with accompanying pictures was used in temples to explain Buddhist deities and relate the histories of the temples.

Materials Required-

A. Poster board divided into 10 1/2x 15" (12 to 16 pieces)
B. Magic Markers
C. Copies of Setsuwa Tales

Sequence of Activity's Events-

A. Divide class into groups of 4
B. Pass out copies of different Setsuwa tales to each group
C. Groups read stories
D. Groups translate stories into narration with dialogue into 12 to 16 plot segments
E. Groups design and create illustrations showing plot segments
F. Groups practice voices for characterization and presenting the Kamishibai story
G. Groups present Kamishibai story to class.

I like to have the students choose the best kamishibai stories to present to the local elementary school's first graders at the unit's end.

6. ***Connections to Other Literary Works***: The Setsuwa Tale "Urashima Taro" is reminiscent of the Western tale of Sleeping Beauty or Rip Van Winkle. Thematic elements of the tale include unexpected consequences of one's actions, adventure and kindness to animals. Comparisons can also be drawn to Aesop's Fables and the Greek Mythological story of Pandora's Box.

7. ***Resources:***

Kamishibai for Kids
Cathedral Station
PO Box 629
NY, NY 10025
This is a wonderful source for already created kamishibai. ($40.00 per story)

Education About Asia
Volume 2, Number 1, Spring 1997
Association for Asian Studies
1021 East Huron Street
Ann Arbor, MI 49104 (This has a wonderful article about history of kamishibai.)

Japanese Tales by Royall Tyler from Pantheon Books, NY, 1987. ($19.00)
ISBN 0-375-71451-0
This is a great source for Setsuwa Tales. (*Urashima Taro* comes from this source.)

Dover Children's Thrift Classics. The Boy Who Drew Cats and other Japanese Fairy Tales by Lafcadio Hearn. This is a great source for stories and inexpensive. ($1.00)

8. ***Appendix:***
Appendix A- "Urashima Taro"-Setsuwa Tale from Royall Tyler's Japanese Tales

URASHIMA THE FISHERMAN

Young Urashima lived in Tango province, in the village of Tsutsugawa. One day in the fall of 477 (it was Emperor Yūryaku's reign), he rowed out alone on the sea to fish. After catching nothing for three days and nights, he was surprised to find that he had taken a five-colored turtle. He got the turtle into the boat and lay down to sleep.

When the turtle changed into a dazzlingly lovely girl, the mystified Urashima asked her who she was.

"I saw you here, alone at sea," she answered with a smile, "and I wanted so much to talk to you! I came on the clouds and the wind."

"But where did you come from, then, on the clouds and wind?"

"I'm an Immortal and I live in the sky. Don't doubt me! Oh, be kind and speak to me tenderly!"

Urashima understood she was divine, and all his fear of her melted away.

"I'll love you as long as the sky and earth last," she promised him, "as long as there's a sun and a moon! But tell me, will you have me?"

"Your wish is mine," he answered. "How could I not love you?"

"Then lean on your oars, my darling, and take us to my Eternal Mountain!"

She told him to close his eyes. In no time they reached a large island with earth like jade. Watchtowers on it shone darkly, and palaces gleamed like gems. It was a wonder no eye had seen and no ear had ever heard tell of before.

They landed and strolled on hand in hand to a splendid mansion, where she asked him to wait; then she opened the gate and went in. Seven young girls soon came out of the gate, telling each other as they passed him that he was Turtle's husband; and eight girls who came after them told each other the same. That was how he learned her name.

He mentioned the girls when she came back out. She said the seven were the seven stars of the Pleiades, and the eight the cluster of Aldebaran. Then she led him inside.

Her father and mother greeted him warmly and invited him to sit down. They explained the difference between the human and the divine worlds, and they let him know how glad this rare meeting between the gods and a man had made them. He tasted a hundred fragrant delicacies and exchanged cups of wine with the girl's brothers and sisters. Young girls with glowing faces flocked to the happy gathering, while the gods sang their songs sweetly and clearly and danced with fluid grace. The feast was a thousand times more beautiful than any ever enjoyed by mortals in their far-off land.

Urashima never noticed the sun going down, but as twilight came on the Immortals all slipped away. He and the maiden, now alone, lay down in each other's arms and made love. They were man and wife at last.

For three years he forgot his old life and lived in paradise with the Immortals. Then one day he felt a pang of longing for the village where he had been born and the parents he had left behind. After that, he missed them more each day.

"Darling," said his wife, "you haven't looked yourself lately. Won't you tell me what's wrong?"

"They say the dying fox turns toward his lair and the lesser man longs to go home. I'd never believed it, but now I know it's true."

"Do you want to go back?"

"Here I am in the land of the gods, far from all my family and friends. I shouldn't feel this way, I know, but I can't help being homesick for them. I want so much to go back and see my mother and father!"

His wife brushed away her tears. "We gave ourselves to each other forever!" she lamented. "We promised we'd be as true as gold or the rocks of the mountains! How could a little homesickness make you want to leave me?"

They went for a walk hand in hand, sadly talking it all over. Finally they embraced, and when they separated their parting was sealed.

Urashima's parents-in-law were sad to see him go. His wife gave him a jeweled box. "Dearest," she said, "if you don't forget me and find you want to come back, then grip this box hard. But you mustn't open it, ever."

He got into his boat and they told him to close his eyes. In no time he was at Tsutsugawa, his home. The place looked entirely different. He recognized nothing there at all.

"Where's Urashima's family — Urashima the fisherman?" he asked a villager.

"Who are you?" the villager answered. "Where are you from? Why are you looking for a man who lived long ago? Yes, I've heard old people mention someone named Urashima. He went out alone on the sea and never came back. That was three hundred years ago. What do you want with him now?"

Bewildered, Urashima roamed the village for ten days without finding any sign of family or old friends. At last he stroked the box his divine

lady had given him and thought of her; then, forgetting his recent promise, he opened it. Before his eyes her fragrant form, borne by the clouds and the wind, floated up and vanished into the blue sky. He understood he had disobeyed her and would never see her again. All he could do was gaze after her, then pace weeping along the shore.

When he dried his tears, he sang about her far, cloud-girdled realm. The clouds, he sang, would bring her the message of his love. Her sweet voice answered him, across the vastness of the sky, entreating him never to forget her. Then a last song burst from him as he struggled with his loss: "My love, when after a night of longing, day dawns and I stand at my open door, I hear far-off waves breaking on the shores of your paradise!"

If only he hadn't opened that jeweled box, people have said since, he could have been with her again. But the clouds hid her paradise from him and left him nothing but his grief.