# Imagery in Japanese Death Poems and English Poems of War

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There are so many differences between Japanese death poems and English poems of war that any study of these two classes of poems may strike the reader as a case of "comparing apples and oranges." Indeed, Japanese death poems are almost never concerned with war, and though the poet's suicide or anticipated death in battle are sometimes the motivation for the poem, even these facts of violence are seldom apparent in the poems themselves. Mainly this absence is due to the spare form of the tanka or haiku, in which the poet has room for but one or two images and a single mood or feeling of serenity—or if, as occasionally, there is excitement, it is without fear or anger, feelings prominent in the English war poetry of modern times. An English war poem may be short; memorable is W. H. Auden's "Epitaph for the Unknown Soldier":[1]

To save your world, you asked this man to die:
Would this man, could he see you now, ask why?

English, too, is Kipling's trenchant breath, but as brief as a haiku poet's: "If any question why we died, / Tell them, because our fathers lied."[2] Such short war poems are very rare.

Another important difference is that while the memorable death poems in Japan were written by often elderly zen monks and haiku poets, English war poetry of repute often came from younger writers of varied social levels and cultures. There were notable exceptions on both sides, of course. Okano Kin'emon Kanehide, one of the famed forty-seven samurai who committed suicide in 1703, was twenty-four when he wrote,[3]

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| Over the fields of | Sono nioi |
| last night's snow— | yuki no ashita no |
| plum fragrance. | noume kana |

And Sakyoku (1790, 21) even younger:

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|---|---|
| How sad.... | Ara kanashi |
| amidst the flowers of the spring equinox | hana no higan o |
| a journey deathward. | shide no tabi (p. 276) |

On the other hand, Thomas Hardy was seventy-five when he reflected on World War I:

Yonder a maid and her wight
Come whispering by:
War's annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die. (p. 161)

Moreover, these few verses, together with the two epitaphs previously quoted, may serve to illustrate the point of this essay. Japanese death poems, no less than poems of beauty and joy and love in life, give the flower as poignant image of even the last loss or transition, whereas in modern English war poems imagery is either replaced by ironic or acrimonious utterance or given as some aspect of darkness. Granted the significant differences between dying quietly of old age and dying younger and suddenly in warfare, yet it is hard to imagine Japanese soldiers or civilians making a verse of complaint against elders or emperor, however bitter their war and questionable its cause. There is simply no sanction for it in the many poems, reaching over centuries, in which death is seen not as an enemy, nor the result of betrayal, but as something which has always happened to flowers. Thus Kiko (1823, 52):

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|---|---|
| That which blossoms | Sakeba chiru |
| falls, the way of all flesh | mi no yukusue ya |
| in this world of flowers. | hana sekai (p. 224) |

Yoel Hoffmann translates (see Note 3) some three hundred twenty haiku death poems, eighty-two of which have the flower as image. No other image occurs nearly so often. It is used not only as the generic term but also very often particularly. The cherry blossom, plum, chrysanthemum and lotus appear most often, but there are also the poppy, hibiscus, hydrangea, iris, morning glory and others.

It is not very remarkable that so many flower images appear in the death

poems, for the flower is common in all kinds of Japanese poems from earliest times. Indeed, in world poetry it is a classical symbol of the beauty and brevity of life. Moreover, since in Japan certain of the flowers had widely-known seasonal reference (cherry, spring; poppy, summer; chrysanthemum and hibiscus, autumn), and since such a reference is part of the haiku convention, a dying haiku poet would be especially likely to call to mind an appropriate flower.

We should be impressed then not by the mere reference to a flower but by what the poet makes of it. Kin'u (1817, 62) wrote:

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| How leisurely the cherry | Yururi saku |
| blossoms bloom this year, | kotoshi no hana no |
| unhurried by their doom. | kakugo kana (p. 226) |

Hoffmann comments that "kakugo" means "courageous resignation to fate." Kin'u takes a new look at the most common of all images of transient life and sees, not the soon-to-be end of the blossoms' loveliness, but simply their being as they are, without care of ending. The blossoms care not what they might mean to others, and neither feel that they are living a short time nor fear their going. "Courageous resignation," then, is what Kin'u imagines now in this time of his own dying, though he assigns the feeling to the blossoms ("hana no kakugo"). We fall into no "pathetic fallacy" of brave blossoms, and are no more fooled than was the dying poet. There is really only the leisurely blossoming. We may be tempted to apply Shakespeare's "Ripeness is all" to the poem's effect, but we should see that there is no thought in the blossoms of enduring their going hence, as in Shakespeare's context about mankind. In the haiku it is the leisurely blossoming, never quite ripe, that is all. It's just the here and now.

Kusamaru (1836, 52) wrote what seems prosaic at first:

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| My morning porridge, | Asagayu no |
| and then I'll go to see | za kara me ni iku |
| the willow blossom. | yanagi kana (p. 235) |

The blossoming willow tree, found along river and lake shores, sometimes dipping branches into the water, is another common image of spring. To see this tree, rooted in damp soil, leaves opening to the sun and thin branches

stirred by the lightest breeze, is what Kusamaru is going to do before he is going to die. Or maybe the two goings are one and the same. In any case, breakfast first! Everything in its time and place. Just before he dies, Kusamaru will do what he can. Morning meal, then go, then....what? The willow in blossom may be every bit as radiant this day, of all days, as was A. E. Housman's cherry tree "hung with snow" when that poet went out to look.

The last poem written by the renowned Basho (1694, 51) is also probably the best-known of all the death poems:

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|---|---|
| On a journey, ill: | Tabi ni yande |
| my dream goes wandering | yume wa kareno o |
| over withered fields. | kagemeguru (p. 143) |

Basho died in early winter. Though it may appear the feeling is sad and the scene desolate, it need not be so. The poet died of illness on a trip, and it is highly satisfying to take the poem symbolically: stopped from traveling by illness, yet depressed or weakened abilities cannot stay his restless creative imagination. Of course, such an appreciation may not satisfy many other readers, especially since "dream" may have many meanings, and "wandering" does not necessarily imply a search or desire. Still, lasting is the impression that, where all else may be dead or dying, *some* dream lives and goes. It is interesting that the Japanese allows us to read, instead of "my dream goes," "a dream goes" or even "dreams go." When we take such an alternate translation, and further consider that "journey" is a universal metaphor for any person's passage through life, one often fraught with illness through sin or desires, then surely the poem may become even more validly poignant and personal to us than if we take it as about Basho and his dream only.

Harold G. Henderson's tribute may be the best of all comments on Basho's poem: "Surely as lovely a farewell as any poet ever gave to the world."[4] And a farewell still heard and pondered.

Senchojo died in the early summer of 1802, age unknown:

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| I cup my ears | Unohana ni |
| among the deutzia lest I fail | kikisokonawaji |
| to hear the cuckoo. | hototogisu (p. 282) |

The deutzia, "Japanese sunflower," has white or pink blossoms. This poet

takes her leave in early summer, going closer to the growing color and melody.

Such are some of the voices, serene and compelling, of Japanese poets facing death, following an old convention yet sometimes striking a timeless note. In the almost two centuries following Senchojo's death, it is a very different voice that is raised by poets in English against a very different kind of death. Their tones are harsh and bitter, their colors and images unpleasant, their meanings painfully clear. For their subject is death in war. Long before the mass slaughters of the twentieth century, in Byron's *Don Juan,* God's "Let there be light!" is mocked: " 'Let there be blood!' says man, and there's a sea! / The fiat of this spoiled child of the Night...." (p. 97) And no loveliness grows, the poet concludes, "For war cuts up not only branch, but root."

Yet the tone need not always be strident and condemning. If war is monstrous, it is also stupid, and this is the calm point made by Hardy behind the words of his common soldier who finds it "curious" that "You shoot a fellow down / You'd treat if met where any bar is, / Or help to half-a-crown." (p. 151) So much nonsense, this killing your "foe."

Hardy's "The Man He Killed" was written in 1902, but any hope that it might herald a dawning consciousness and conscience in soldiers after the Boer War was soon dashed in World War I when thousands of young men marched and fell between the trenches of Europe. Ezra Pound's comment is scathing: "There died a myriad, / And of the best, among them, / For an old bitch gone in the teeth, / For a botched civilization...." (p. 211) And also poignant: "Quick eyes gone under earth's lid."

Rupert Brooke, who died in the war, wrote patriotic lines learned by the next generation of school children, even on into the next great war: "If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is for ever England." (p. 163) And Julian Grenfell, another casualty in 1915, wrote of the soldier, "Day shall clasp him with strong hands, / And Night shall fold him in soft wings." (p. 165)

But such noble and sentimental attitudes were rare. Charles Sorley (1895–1915) was more typical in his realism and honesty. If you the living, he says, should see the "millions of mouthless dead," do not tell them that you'll remember.

Give them not praise. For, deaf, how should they know
It is not curses heaped on each gashed head?
Nor tears. Their blind eyes see not your tears flow.
Nor honour. It is easy to be dead.
Say only this, "They are dead." Then add thereto,
"Yet many a better one has died before." (p. 167)

And do not imagine, Sorley goes on, that you see a face you used to love: "None wears the face you knew. / Great death has made all his for evermore."

Edward Thomas (1878–1917) at Easter in 1915 sees "flowers left thick at nightfall in the wood," but they only "call into mind the men, / Now far from home, who, with their sweethearts, should / Have gathered them and will do never again." (p. 179) Nature is no solace in wartime when the young men are gone or dead.

Yet this is not quite true. Nature may solace, if in an unusual way, even a way more felt than understood, as in Wallace Stevens's "The Death of a Soldier":

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
The clouds go, nevertheless,
In their direction. (p. 169)

Autumn is a season of contracting, of falling, of stopping. Yet it is a transitional season, and that which contracts will expand; the stopping is a pause, not an end; and what falls, like leaves, participates in time in new life and growth. There is no memorial for absolute death because such would be

superfluous or gratuitous, as for the wind stopping, but at the *same time* and for the same reason there is no memorial for the clouds going on unaffected. We know or feel so little the part of death, its falling and stopping, and don't know what that part is in what comes next or in what is going on in the greater and somehow purposeful changes elsewhere (with "direction"). Hence, our ignorance about death is lessened, our presumption corrected, our grief or anxiety calmed. This last effect is contributed to by the poem's slow movement and subdued sounds, and by what may be called the haiku-like simplicity and spareness of many of the lines.

One likes to think Stevens's lines make a soldier's non-memorial such as Sorley might have approved, had he lived. Much more common, though, are the starkly figurative and searing lines, like those of Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918): "Iron are our lives / Molten right through our youth. / A burnt space through ripe fields...." (p. 184)

Some poets, like Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), satirized smug officialdom (the Bishop's "The ways of God are strange!"; the General: "the soldiers he smiled at are most of 'em dead, / And we're cursing his staff for incompetent swine." pp. 176-7). Other poets, like Wilfred Owen (1893-1918), described death in battle (as by poison gas: "the white eyes writhing in his face" p. 189). G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) in his "Elegy" mourned not only for England's soldiers, who "have their graves afar," but also for England, whose rulers "Alas, alas....have no graves as yet." (p. 213)

Vernon Scannell, curiously, remembers not the war he fought in but the one called Great, which ended four years before he was born in 1922: "And now, / Whenever the November sky / Quivers with a bugle's hoarse, sweet cry, / The reason darkens; in its evening gleam / Crosses and flares, tormented wire, grey earth / Splattered with crimson flowers." (p. 224) Indeed reason is appalled where the flowers are bloodied young bodies.

One can have too much of this. We might expect that poems about the later wars would give us many of the effects and themes we have already found in verses about World War I. And it is interesting that while the Great War merits some sixty-nine poems in *The Oxford Book of War Poetry,* subsequent wars together have only some eighty-nine poems. It may be that later poets

realized how much had been done by their predecessors and decided that it was enough. Or perhaps World War II shocked everyone, poets included, into insensibility.

Good verses were written, of course. There is "Vergissmeinnicht" (Forget Me Not) by Keith Douglas (1920–1944). In the last stanza the author reflects on the body of a German soldier, three weeks dead, near which is found the picture of his girl friend with the above inscription: "here the lover and killer are mingled / who had one body and one heart. / And death who had the soldier singled / has done the lover mortal hurt." (p. 268) The strong, terse tetrameters drive home war's eternal tragic paradox: it is not so much "soldier" or "enemy" or "killer" who is killed, but a person who gives and receives love. So, too, with many civilian victims, including women and children.

Finally, Denise Levertov's "What Were They Like?" must be quoted, at least in part:

1) Did the people of Vietnam use lanterns of stone?
2) Did they hold ceremonies to reverence the opening of buds?

.....

1) Sir, their light hearts turned to stone. It is not remembered whether in gardens stone lanterns illumined pleasant ways.
2) Perhaps they gathered once to delight in blossom, but after the children were killed there were no more buds. (p. 323)

In many of the verses of war poetry, as in these by Levertov, a sense of darkness, present or approaching, is found. Yet, even when we cannot point to such an image, a feeling of it persists. Whence this impression? In large part it derives from the poem's mood of sadness, grief, disillusion, and hopelessness, which clouds the reader's mind with gloom by weighing down his spirits.

Matthew Arnold's vision, in "Dover Beach," of his time as "a darkling plain....Where ignorant armies clash by night" seems almost attractive in our day. For we hear, in Peter Porter's "Your Attention Please," the announcement of a nuclear attack; the directions conclude: "Death is the least we have to fear....Now go quickly to your shelters." (p. 339)

To turn to brighter verses for an ending, there are these by Buson (1783, 68):

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| Of late the nights | Shiraume ni |
| are dawning | akaru yo bakari to |
| plum-blossom white. | narinikeri (p. 147) |

And these by Utsu (1863, 50):

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|---|---|
| The owner of the cherry blossoms | Ki no moto no |
| turns to compost | koyashi tomo nare |
| for the trees. | hana no nushi (p. 335) |

Who is not cheered to think that at least after death he may assist life and beauty? And there is more hope in Buson, whose plum blossom signifies late winter and early spring, death and rebirth.

We have seen that impending death, arriving in the courses of nature or by man's violence, has stirred poets East and West to write well, providing readers with moments of clearer sight and more varied feelings. Whether the occasion is that most private of experiences, one's quiet death, or the most public, death in war, Japanese death poems and English war poems alike reveal, as creative and social acts, that it is after all not death that matters but rather the voice of attention and care, even at the doorway of death or against it.

**NOTES:**

1. *W. H. Auden Collected Shorter Poems 1927–1957.* London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1966, p. 268.
2. From Rudyard Kipling, "Epitaphs of the War 1914–18," in *The Oxford Book of War Poetry.* Chosen and Edited by Jon Stallworthy. London, Oxford University Press, 1984, p. 216. Henceforth, all verses of English war poems quoted are from this anthology.
3. *Japanese Death Poems Written by Zen Monks and Haiku Poets on the Verge of Death.* Compiled with an Introduction and Commentary by Yoel Hoffmann. Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1986, p. 249. Hoffmann's Introduction contains a highly enligntening essay, "Death and Its Poetry in the Cultural History of Japan." All of the Japanese poems quoted are from this anthology. In parenthesis after the poet's name are given the year of death of the poet (in Western calculation), and, if known, the poet's age at death.

4. *An Introduction to Haiku.* An Anthology of Poems and Poets from Basho to Shiki. Harold G. Henderson. New York, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1958, p. 30. Basho's wintry image and Henderson's comment may remind readers of Shakespeare's picture of old age and lost powers, as coming one day to himself (for he wrote the lines in his relative youth): "yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang / Upon those boughs which shake against the cold, / Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang." (fron Sonnet 73)