

## Loneliness, Dreams, and the Unsaid: Su Shi and Ono no Komachi

Lara Katz

**In a Tortoiseshell:** *In this East Asian Humanities paper, Lara Katz juxtaposes two poets' unique styles of engaging with the themes of loneliness and powerlessness. Through strong **evidence choice** and masterful **close reading** skills, Lara **analyzes** the works' poetic forms (length, literary devices, voice, etc.) to demonstrate how this juxtaposition reveals more about the texts than if they were considered in isolation. The following excerpt deconstructs the poets' respective approaches to poetic focus and reader engagement through imagery.*

*Excerpt*

### III. Direct Versus Indirect: Poetic Focus and Angle

Given the reliance on the unsaid in both Su Shi's "Down and Out Drunk" and Ono no Komachi's poems 552, 553, and 938, loneliness and dreams are fitting subject matter. As discussed in the previous section, Su Shi's angle is indirect, relying upon "show don't tell." In the line, "when I woke there was no one there to tell my secret dreams," the ostensible subject is the act of waking, but the real subject is loneliness. Su Shi is in a city, but he is not surrounded by people with whom he shares a degree of confidentiality—that is, people he can "tell [his] secret dreams." Even the reader is not a confidante. Though Su Shi's loneliness persists throughout the poem, the reader is permitted only to sympathize, not empathize.

Su Shi's indirect approach to loneliness becomes more evident beside Ono no Komachi's direct, authorial openness. The door to her "secret dreams" is unbarred. Working with even fewer syllables than Su Shi, she has no room to dance around her subject matter. 552 opens with "Longing for him," enveloping the reader via a non-mutually exclusive grammatical subject; the reader or anyone else could be "Longing for him" as well. The reader is not only permitted to hear her dreams, but thrown into them, such as when Komachi asks the reader an unanswerable abstract question, "is that why he appeared?" The implication is that the reader knows as much about Komachi's reality as she does. The penultimate line offers confirmation Komachi knows she saw "him" while still asleep, but both the reader and Komachi initially assume "his" appearance to be real. Her regret at this unreality is palpably accessible to the reader: "Had I known it was a dream / I would never have awakened." In just two lines, Komachi expresses that her love is so powerful that her dreams are preferable to reality. Like Su Shi, she does not state her loneliness outright, and much is left unsaid. But Komachi's unsaid—in this case the subject of her dreams—is far more accessible to the reader, due to the directness of her angle.

## V. Reader Engagement through Imagery

By design, Komachi's poetry lacks setting, which encourages relatability, even though she describes nothing beyond her personal experience—553 is a personal, abstract reflection. The opening line, "Since seeing in my sleep," implies relative time. If the reader saw something meaningful in their sleep just last night, the event's nearness gives it impact. If the reader last saw something meaningful in their sleep three decades ago, then the whole period of time "Since" then must have been meaningfully affected, given that the reader still remembers the moment now.

This line like Komachi's work in general—though colloquial, ostensibly about its author, and unmoored from time and place—manages to find ground in the reader's reality, in contrast to Su Shi's pursuit of reality by anchoring the reader in an all-too-real setting. Arguably, Komachi mistrusts any setting in reality, given the lines, "it's these things / called dreams / I've learned to trust." Unlike Su Shi's physical environment, which emphasizes his smallness, Komachi's lack of setting emphasizes how overwhelming her internal conflict is, with the implication that there is nothing else for her—at least not worth poetic discussion—beyond it.

Su Shi also enables reader engagement and relatability via abstract imagery, despite his simultaneous construction of a physical setting. His abstract question, "Throughout this life I am swept along, when will it ever cease?", offers the reader a subtle opportunity for empathy. The reader cannot answer this question personally or for Su Shi. Su Shi puts himself in the passive voice, without grammatical agency, and the second clause's subject is a vast yet indefinite "it," once again capitalizing on the unsaid. What "it" is to the reader may be different from Su Shi, but, contextually, must be life-altering. "[T]his life" is also inspecific, allowing the possibility of another life, or another's life. Without directly acknowledging his reader or permitting an inside view, Su Shi nevertheless facilitates a loose kind of empathy. Any reader could relate to this rhetorical question and understand a modicum of Su Shi's loneliness and powerlessness, even while ignorant of the speaker's "secret dreams" and what "it" means to him.

Komachi employs mostly first-person pronouns in 553, but, due to the lack of situational specificity, all while engendering reader engagement. With the line, "the one whom I love..." she clarifies the stakes and impact without adding situational specificity. The poem's setting can become the reader's setting; "the one whom I love," the reader's love; the "dreams," the reader's dreams. "[T]he **one** whom I love" and "**it's** these things / called dreams" are the only non-first-person pronouns in the poem, but they feel intimate. If there is someone the reader loves, they will most likely be called to mind vividly. The indefinite pronoun "it's" also clearly refers to "dreams," although in an odd manner, as its reference is not clear until the following

line. Komachi engages the reader by pulling them onto the next line in pursuit of contextual comprehensibility; meanwhile, her tone implies that what are “called dreams” are not dreams at all. In this way, Komachi not only invites the reader to consider *her* relationship with reality and dreams, but also their *own*.

On their own, the poems are powerful, ringing with the unsaid and giving new weight to individual words, such as “dreams” and “lonely.” But together, they serve as mutual lenses, assisting in unraveling each others’ unsaid and granting dreams and loneliness further layers of nuance. Komachi reveals the delicate nature of Su Shi’s maintenance of privacy within this honest snapshot of his life. In turn, Su Shi’s reliance on situational details clarifies the impressiveness of Ono no Komachi’s timeless, boundless storytelling in just over half as many syllables.

*Author Commentary*

Lara Katz

I wrote this essay for HUM 233 / EAS 233 / COM 233, East Asian Humanities I: The Classical Foundations, co-taught by Professor Brian Steininger and Professor Martin Kern. There were multiple prompts to choose from, so I considered which texts most excited me to write about. The answer was easy: poetry. Whenever there is some kind of independent choice permitted in a course assignment, I always look for ways to bring my personal interests into the assignment. As a reader and writer of poetry in my spare time, the following prompt was a clear choice:

Many of the texts in this module have been some type of poetry. **How does poetry function differently than other kinds of texts we have looked at this semester?** Choose two poetic texts from two different East Asian traditions (Chinese, Japanese, or Korean) and discuss the similarities and differences between their **form (length, rhyme, meter, etc.)** and **rhetoric (imagery, metaphors, etc.)**. How do the differences in form affect **how each poet approaches their subject matter?** Be sure to convey why you find this particular pair a **meaningful juxtaposition**.

After selecting my prompt, I set about building an outline that would fully adhere to the prompt. Because the essay needed to be only 1800 words, I understood that, given the extensive detail in the prompt, extraneous information would not fit in my essay. I began my outlining process with the knowledge that every sentence would need to be meaningful and somehow link back to both my thesis and the prompt. I bolded the phrases/words as in the quoted prompt above, and each of these bolded elements constituted a separate section of body paragraph(s) in my essay, delineated by Roman numerals.

As a result, my outlining process practically wrote the essay. I selected the work of two poets, one Japanese and one Chinese, Ono no Komachi and Su Shi, due to the fact that they seemed, on the surface, to write very similar poetry, yet as individuals had completely different backgrounds. Once I began considering all the elements of the prompt, the differences between the two poets' work revealed themselves. Writing this essay was a process of discovery. In order to answer the prompt's central question—why my choice of poets were a meaningful juxtaposition—I had to juxtapose them first. Through the process of juxtaposing Su Shi and Komachi, I understood the value of their juxtaposition, and unearthed layers of poetic beauty that I would never have otherwise discerned.

*Editor Commentary*

Jasmine Rivers

The relationship between **evidence** and **analysis** — although it constitutes the bulk of traditional academic writing — is not as straightforward nor easy as it may seem. Especially considering the fact that the bulk of high school-level writing pedagogy fails to adequately emphasize the importance of detailed **close reading**, many students fall into the trap of offering only a brief **analysis** of lengthy quotes. Lara’s paper, in contrast, stood out as an impressive example of masterful **close reading** that deconstructs and generously interprets poems’ short phrases and individual words.

As she explains in her commentary, Lara’s commitment to adequately answering the prompt informed the **structure** she created for her essay, with each section cumulatively adding more layers of nuance to her juxtaposed analyses of Su Shi’s and Komachi’s work. Although each section includes strong **evidence choice** and **close reading**, sections three and five stood out as particularly exemplary. In comparing the two poets, Lara first grounds the reader in their similar engagements with the themes of loneliness and dreams, before delving into their unique approaches to writing about these subjects. Section three highlights Su Shi’s “indirect approach” in contrast to Komachi’s “direct, authorial openness,” while section five analyzes their use of imagery to stimulate empathy and relatability.

There are a number of **close reading** strategies Lara employs to effectively argue her claims. First, rather than taking the poems at face value, Lara pays attention to the subtext of each line, unearthing what she calls the “real subject” as opposed to its ostensible facade. Lara also consistently hones in on how Su Shi and Komachi relate to their readers, analyzing how the poetry’s grammar, voice, and setting facilitate distinct poet-reader relationships. For example, Lara highlights the ambiguity of the subject referred to in Komachi’s short phrase: “longing for him,” as well as the reader-directed questions such as “is that why he appeared?” to prove the “palpably accessible” poet-reader relationship created through these techniques. Although Lara chooses to include Su Shi’s full line: “Throughout this life I am swept along, when will it ever cease?” she breaks it down into digestible pieces — observing the passive voice, the lack of specificity, the implications for reader engagement, etc. — to offer a commendably thorough **analysis**. This part of Lara’s excerpt is a helpful guide for how to deconstruct relatively lengthier yet well-chosen pieces of **evidence** into smaller elements to effectively **close read**.

In my opinion, a key takeaway from Lara’s paper is that even when engaging with the briefest types of literature, there is still an abundance of rich content to unpack and explore. Her

essay serves as an inspirational reminder to not gloss over the details, as **close reading** them leads us to the most nuanced and compelling **analysis**.

## **Bios**

Lara Katz, is a member of Princeton University's Class of 2024, majoring in Comparative Literature. On campus, she writes and edits for the Nassau Weekly, is President of the Curling Club, and will serve as dramaturg for Theatre Intime's upcoming production of the Laramie Project. Her writing appears in the National Poetry Quarterly, *Bookends Review*, *Alexandria Quarterly*, the Nassau Literary Review, and other publications. She wrote this as a sophomore.

Jasmine Rivers, '24, is an Anthropology major pursuing a certificate in Dance from San Francisco. In addition to her involvement with Tortoise, Jasmine serves as a Writing Fellow, a Lewis Center Student Advisor, and the President of BodyHype Dance Company. In her free time, she enjoys choreographing, cooking, reading, and doing yoga, and is constantly listening to music. She wrote this as a sophomore.