



Mini-Lesson: Who was Matsuo Bashō?

OVERVIEW

Students will continue developing their contextual understanding of *Letter from Sado* by reading a biographical article about author Matsuo Bashō, discussing questions related to the reading, and encountering the Japanese poem read in the Japanese language.

LEARNING GOAL

Students will deepen their understanding of *Letter from Sado* by learning about the author of the poem that inspired composer Jodie Blackshaw.

MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Student copies of [Who was Matsuo Bashō](#)
- [Recording of haiku read in Japanese](#)

PROCESS

1. Have students read the short biographical article about Matsuo Bashō. Provide copies or post the article on your class web page and assign the reading as homework before a class discussion.

Follow the reading with a class discussion about Matsuo Bashō. Use these questions or frame others you would like them to consider:

- What did you find most interesting about the poet, Bashō?
 - What does his name mean in English?
 - Have you ever encountered the word *samurai* before? Where? What was the context?
 - How did his students in Edo (Tokyo) honor him?
 - Speculate about why Jodie Blackshaw focused on Bashō and his poem when she was commissioned to write a new work for Middle School Band. Why these words from this author?
2. Display the Japanese translation of this well-known Bashō poem. Listen to a recording spoken in Japanese and follow the Japanese text. If you have a Japanese speaker in your school community, invite them to class to read the poem out loud and provide their own thoughts and knowledge about haiku. Consider asking one

or more students to learn the Japanese version and have them present the poetry just before performances of the piece.

stormy sea—	<i>araumi ya</i>
stretching out over Sado,	<i>sado ni yokotau</i>
Heaven's River	<i>amanogawa</i>

3. Return to this biographical information about Matsuo Bashō when learning the piece to help students continue developing their understanding of the music.

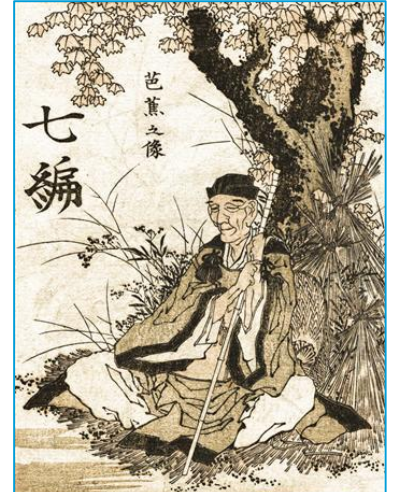
EXTENSION

For teachers and students who want to know more about this great poet and this particular poem, there is an excellent chapter from David Landis Barnhill's book, *Matsuo Basho 1644-1694*, State University of New York Press, 2004. In the chapter, Barnhill provides multiple translations of the poem, and additional biographical information about the poet and the development of haiku. The chapter can be accessed online at <http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/60977.pdf>.

WHO WAS MATSUO BASHŌ?

Matsuo Bashō was born Matsuo Kinsaku in 1644, in Ueno, near the city of Kyoto, Japan. In Japan, one's family name is first and birth name is second. Matsuo is the poet's family name, and Kinsaku was his original given name. We know him as Matsuo Bashō because he took several pen names. One was Bashō, which means banana tree.

Born into a lower level **samurai** family, his father died when Bashō, was a child. (A samurai was a soldier who served the nobility.) The Matsuo family was not prosperous, so Bashō went to work as a servant for the son of a local lord. This was a great move for him because his young master also loved poetry. Together they explored and created poetry. The young noble died in 1666 when Bashō was 22 years old. By then, he had published his first poem (1662) and his first collection (1664). From this point on, he devoted himself to a literary life as a poet and writer.



Matsuo Bashō by printmaker
Katsushika Hokusai



The small cottage thought to be
Bashō's birthplace

He went to Kyoto, then on to the new city of Edo (the old name for Tokyo). He started a school of poetry in Edo, and adopted the pen name, Tosei. There his students built a small home for their beloved teacher and planted a banana tree outside the front door. Matsuo was very touched and decided to adopt a new pen name, Bashō, to honor those students. The word means banana tree.

Matsuo's poems followed the poetry forms popular 350 years ago in Japan, **haikai no regna** or "linked verse." Poets and students gathered and collaborated on inventing poems that followed a set of specific guidelines. Poetry was very popular in that time, and many people paid instructors like Bashō to teach them. Many students became his followers because they wanted to learn from a very skilled poet. The poetry created by Bashō and his students was eventually collected and published as *The Best Poems of Tosei's Twenty Disciples*.

As his fame grew, Bashō wanted more privacy. In 1684 he fled the city and began traveling alone, off the beaten paths, across Japan. He thought perhaps he might die in the wilderness or be assaulted by bandits. But as he traveled on, his mood lightened and he came to enjoy being on the road, he made many friends, and he began marvel at the changing scenery and seasons. In the summer of 1694 he set out again to visit Kyoto and Ueno, the town of his birth. During this trip that he fell ill in the town of Osaka. There he died, surrounded by friends.

