

# Two poems by archbishop jien

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Two poems by Archbishop Jien (Carter, p. 171, poem 327; p. 172, poem 330) and two by Shunzei's Daughter (Carter, p. 175, poem 341; p. 176, poem 342)

"plumb the depths of your intent without laying it [the situation] bare"

(Kamo no Chomei, p. 3, No. 6) to depict mankind's paradoxical approach to the moon: seeking reassurance and companionship in its permanence and predictability, despite it being an uncertain mystery, inaccessible directly and impossible to control nor fully understand.

The poets merely provide a stark glimpse of the situations in which the speakers find themselves, so that the reader must fill in with his or her resonance to complete the poetic experience. The speakers' attempts to escape their predicament by seeking fulfillment in the deceptive permanence of the moon are left hanging incomplete, creating in turn for the reader an atmosphere embroiled with lack of fulfillment and the mystery of the moon, which probes the reader's depths of intent to understand as best he can.

The sense of lack of fulfillment upon which the poems end creates a vacuum into which any careful reader fills to restore the equilibrium. The lingering sense of incompleteness creates an atmosphere that "hovers over the poem" (Fujiwara no Shunzei, p. 3, No. 7), "plumb[s] the depths of [their] intent", thereby extending the reader's frame of mind into a realm "distinct from its words" (Shunzei, p. 3, No. 7). All four poems possess this quality.

In Jien's poem 327 (Carter, p. 71), the moon sets before a lone traveler has had enough of the moon's company and beauty manifested in its reflection in the mountain spring water he was drinking, as his cupped hands suggest.

As honkadori from Ki no Tsurayaki's poem 171 (Carter, p. 105) on " Parting, composed upon bidding farewell to someone with whom he had talked near a spring on a mountain road", it reaffirms the instinctive human desire for any type of company, human or not-Monk Saigyō even makes a companion of solitude: " If not for solitude,/how dismal my life would be! " (Carter, p. 167, poem 318).

In this case, the floating, unanswered to last line " leaving me still wanting more" conveys the speaker's loneliness and desire for his trustworthy but only temporarily graspable (through reflection) companion the moon. The consciousness of such emotional attachments and desires indicates the timelessness of the emotions, perceptions, and aesthetic sensibilities of past poets, to which humanity has been responding even till now. Furthermore, the experience is not restricted to one specific context; Tsurayaki's speaker was not satisfied with the brief human contact, but Jien's speaker made do with the inanimate moon.

That the experience transcends not only minds but also contexts reinforces it. All this was not laid out bare. The speaker in Jien's other poem (Carter, p. 172, poem 330) calls out for someone to understand his sorrow and looks to the moon for an answer. His exposure to the indiscriminate, sharp and harsh " bright gleam" of the moon suggests through a heightened monochromatic contrast and the fact that no one responds to the speaker's resounding question spoken out loud in this darkness delineates the individual alone in the stark, empty world, on a clear, dark night.

Whether or not he answers his question remains ambiguous until one recalls that the moon shining in the darkness has long since been a symbol of Buddhist enlightenment within this transient world of suffering and sorrow. He wonders till he gazes up and his senses seem to drown in the bright gleam of the moon. The reader can imagine that he will follow the gleam of the moon-the moon which is always there, but still subject to mutability and likely to bring sorrow until one arrives at the point of detachment.

In Shunzei's Daughter's poem 341 (Carter, p. 75), a lover departs such that his bodily absence creates a vacuum for which the lady tries to compensate by opening the door to let the moonlight stream into the room. The man has his attachments elsewhere, so despite being "reluctant" to leave, there is nothing he can do, and his body allows him to be only at one place at one time. In stark contrast, right after he leaves, the moon floods the lady's room, detached, impartial and fair to all, sharing its infinite light with all beings everywhere. The moonlight automatically streams in through open doors-there is no need to wait, as a woman then had to wait for a lover who might not come.

Hence, in place of any explicit sadness the lady might harbor due to her lover's absence, the moon in the sky at the break of day (as well as the lover's absence) creates a sense of aware that anticipates the sun's drowning out of the moon with the start of another day. This quiet, stark morning atmosphere, again distinct from the words of the poem and was not laid out bare, invites introspection before the day wakes up the rest of the living beings. Lastly, Shunzei's Daughter's poem 342 (Carter, p. 176), the

speaker, with " wait! " calls for the autumn moon not to proceed into the course it follows as autumn deepens and winter approaches.

Familiarity with the moon has made the speaker comfortable with personifying the moon as if it is a friend. However, the constant upon which the speaker has always relied-the moon's nightly cruise through the sky-will now change with the seasons. The speaker is thus confronted with the difficulty of reconciling the uncertainty of the future with the comfortable familiarity of the past. This foreboding uncertainty of the future is embodied in " Now I cannot be so sure/ of seeing you travel/through the same old sky again/as I did so long ago" which is left hanging with no suggested solution.

The only constant is change, and every change results in more uncertainty. That the poem does not lay everything bare points toward the uncertainty it embodies. In all four poems, the tendency to search for a resolution in the seemingly permanent and dependable moon is a paradox the speakers in the poems face. The moon's circular shape is itself symbolic of its predictable cyclical patterns, rising and setting, waxing and waning at specific times. Appearing nightly in the sky, people know that it is always there, and is the same one seen from anywhere, anytime.

In fact, despite its predictability, it is still mutable and hence subject to unpredictable changes, for instance, in its course (poem 342). In addition, the moon cannot be grasped tangibly, only accessed indirectly through its reflection in the water (poem 327), its visible presence in the sky (poems 330, 342) and its moonlight filling in the room (poem 330, 341). As a result of all this, its fluidity of movement and appearance across time and its

inaccessibility contradicts the widespread believed-in permanency of the moon's being.

Furthermore, due to its inaccessibility, the moon was to past peoples an object of mystery they could neither control nor fully understand.

Nevertheless, many, as illustrated by the speakers in the poems, turned towards it for answers and understanding. The moon does not argue, frustrate, or make you wait. Visible from anywhere in the world, its constancy, predictability and amorality make it an easy source of solace, reminiscent of Izumi Shikibu's "What am I to do/if the man I have waited for/should come to me now--/not wanting footsteps to disturb/thesnowof my garden court" (Carter, pp. 23, poem 218). The empty hands (327), empty mind (330), empty room (341) empty future (342) in all four poems respectively, and the prominent, mystifying, quiet figure of the moon-the paradoxical emblem of mutability and permanence-prove that without "laying it bare," a lingering bareness distinct from the words "plumb[s] the depths of your intent", invoking a reaction.

An experience may be eternalized in the words of a poem, but it is what has been left unsaid that triggers the common biological response that ties all humanity. It is the collective resonance by readers across temporal, spatial and situational contexts to the experiences depicted in the poems, and to the universal, ironic attraction to the all-embracing moon that demonstrates the timeless universality of these emotions amongst humanity these past poets illuminate.