

# The description of japanese poet matsuo basho's travel diaries

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Nature has been a muse for plenty artists throughout history, but I believe that our world is most ornately illustrated when it is done through simple works. Japanese poet Matsuo Basho exemplifies beautiful simplicity accented with genuine feeling while recording his travels throughout 17th century Edo period Japan. In this collection of Basho's work, we receive a conglomeration of his travel diaries interwoven with beautiful haikus that articulate Basho's epic journeys. Drawing inspiration from the older poet Saigyō Hōshi, Zen Buddhism, and ancient Chinese poetry, Basho creates a poetic recording of our natural world that is filled with awe, counterbalanced with a feeling of delicacy.

The Narrow Road to the Deep North and Other Travel Sketches brings the reader through Basho's travel diaries as he treks throughout Japan along with his traveling companion Kawai Sora. Basho was driven to travel through a thirst to grow in his writing and his desire to experience the places older poets once wrote about. Through this traveling, Basho hoped to expand the scope in which he saw life and consequently discover innovative new ways to write poetry.

This version of Basho's work was translated by Noubuyuki Yuasa. Yuasa accomplished a translation that not only translated meaning, but also translated Basho's signature lyrical quality of combining prose and haiku in modern language that allows any reader to understand. In this version, Yuasa also shares with us an introduction that provides insight to the mechanics of the haibun style of poetry and analyzes the evolution of Basho's own unique writing style. This introduction goes above and beyond

in accomplishing its purpose of providing background for Basho's work and developing a preparatory understanding of Basho's writing style for the reader.

The introduction is followed by Basho's writings of his first pilgrimage into nature's realm: *The Records of a Weather Exposed Skeleton*. This first story of Basho's travels shows him journeying westward and encountering a myriad of different experiences. In most of these experiences, Basho artistically comments on them and conveys his thoughts through the works of his haikus. Basho also has many interesting philosophical comments spread throughout this odyssey of his. For example, Basho encounters a very young child on the banks of River Fuji that had been abandoned by its parents. The parents deemed the child unable of "riding the stormy waters of life" and thought it would have a short life because of this (52). Basho gives what little remains of food he has with him to the child, but he ends up leaving the child alone there despite any pity he has for it. Basho tells us that the child's suffering is far beyond his control and that if the child would be saved it would have to be through its own pleas to heaven. Basho doesn't want to interfere with something "far greater and far more massive than himself" (52).

Basho's second journey led him westward once again and it resulted in the travel diaries of *The Records of a Travel Worn Satchel* and *A Visit to Sarashina Village*. These diaries were fairly similar to his first one except there were many more cases of continuous prose and continuous haiku. In these cases of unbroken thought, the prose felt more descriptive and

informative as well as the poems feeling more reflective as it built on itself. You can see an example of this at the end of Sarashina village as Basho is describing his farewell to the village. Basho plays with constant elements like the moon and the season throughout this poem in new ways that weren't seen in his first travel diary (94).

The final travel diary in this collection is Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. This time, Basho heads northward into some of the most isolated parts of Japan. His diary opens this time with a prologue talking about his own thirst for travel and reminds the reader that life itself is intended to be a journey. After leaving the reader with a haiku that expresses his feelings about departing once again, Basho leaves, headed north to the many destinations awaiting him. Basho records his thoughts through the commentary of his prose at every noteworthy place he visits. Basho visits and writes about many historical sites widely known in Japanese culture. He alludes to places, sites, and people from many ancient classical writings that the Japanese people recognize.

These references to previous works create a sense of importance in his writings and evoked nostalgia for the Japanese who were reminiscent of their history. Basho advances from one village to the next, examining all of the culture and natural beauty the world has to offer along the way. In fact, Basho is often overcome with a sense of awe during his travels and writes impromptu haikus to capture the beauty of the moment. Basho often writes haikus when he needs to reflect on his experiences and does so quite often. For an example, Basho writes about a willow tree, Shinbou's famous

stone, and the Tsubo stone, all while in Ashino. This travel diary of Basho's is one of his best known—and for good reason. It is indeed the longest of his travel diaries and includes some of his most beautiful writings.

Basho's travel diaries are an excellent read for those looking for a story of adventure and discovery, and for those who also have an appreciation for Japanese poetry. Basho lets us walk along with him in these writings, seeing through his artistic point of view the whole way. We are able to see deeper into Basho's philosophy of the world and are even able to see some of his growth as he encounters a plethora of new experiences and sensations provided by his previously undiscovered world. His unique combination of writing styles provides the reader with articulate description and also time to reflect on his observations. Basho's writing gracefully includes illustrative depictions of his environment, excellent examinations of Japanese culture, and an appreciation for history and past poets.