Japanese Ghost Stories

Lafcadio Hearn

About the author
Hearn was born in 1850 on the Greek island of Lefkas, son of an Anglo-Irish surgeon in the British army and a Greek mother. From the age of six, he lived in Ireland and he lost the sight in his left eye in an accident when he was sixteen. At nineteen, he moved to the United States, and five years later, became a newspaper reporter. While in the United States, he married a black woman, an act that was illegal at the time and lost him his job. In 1889, he went to Japan and began teaching English in Matsue. He married Setsu Koisumi, the daughter of a local samurai family. In 1896, he began teaching English literature at Tokyo University. He died of heart failure in 1904 at the age of 54. Hearn’s most famous work is a collection of lectures entitled Japan: An attempt at Interpretation (1904). His other books include Exotic and Retrospectives (1898), In Ghostly Japan (1899), Shadowings (1900), A Japanese Miscellany (1901) and Kwaidan (1904). At the time Hearn was writing, Japan was still largely unknown to the West, despite an ever increasing interest in the country’s culture. It was through Hearn’s sincere, poetic and charming writings that the West got their first glimpses of pre-industrial Japan and the very essence of all things Japanese.

Summary
This is a collection of mystical stories taken from the books Kwaidan and In Ghostly Japan. These tales borrow heavily from Japanese history, culture and legend.

Story 1: This is about a blind man called Hōichi, who is famous for playing the biwa and performing poems, particularly about the history of a tragic fight between two peoples – the Heiké and the Genji. Hōichi lives at a temple that was built to please the Heiké spirits. One night, Hōichi is waiting in the garden of the temple for the priest to return when a samurai appears and takes him to perform in the house of his lord. All the people there listen to him and cry out in pain when they hear about the tragic fight. The same thing occurs the next night and the priest begins to worry about Hōichi and he tells his assistants to follow him. The assistants find Hōichi performing alone in the garden of the dead. The priest explains to Hōichi that he has imagined the house of the lord and those listening to his music and that he is in great danger from evil spirits. To protect him, they paint prayers all over his body, but they forget to paint his ears. The next night, Hōichi waits in the garden and when the samurai arrives he sees only Hōichi’s ears and he pulls them off Hōichi’s head.

Stories 2–4: Story 2 is about a fortune-teller who throws a cup at an animal and breaks it. Along the line of the break, there are seventeen Chinese characters predicting when the cup will be broken. He looks for the person who wrote this and finds that he has just died, leaving behind a very special book, which brings good fortune. Story 3 tells of a girl who sees a samurai in a crowd and falls in love with him. As he is wearing a purple robe, she orders one too and hangs it in her room. However, she never sees him again, falls ill and dies. The robe is taken to the temple. The priest sells the robe and each time a girl buys it, she dies too. Eventually, the priest realises there are bad spirits in it and burns it. Characters from the first girl’s prayers jump from it and the whole city burns down. Story 4 is about Musō, a Buddhist priest. He meets an old priest, who sends him to a village where a man has just died. The man’s family leave Musō alone with the body at night and he sees a shape enter the house and eat the body. The shape turns out to be the old priest, who had been selfish in life and had been born again as a jikininki, a living thing that must eat the dead.

Stories 5–7: Story 5 is about Miyata Akinosuké, a rich man who falls asleep under a tree in his garden. He dreams he is taken to the palace of the King of the Spirits, who wants him to marry his daughter. Miyata marries her and the king sends them to rule on an island. For many years, he is a good lord, but then his wife dies and he places a stone in the shape of Buddha over her body. When he wakes, he realises that he has been living in a world of ants. Story 6 is about a girl called O-Sono who marries a man called Nagaraya. After four years of marriage and one
Japanese Ghost Stories

child, however, she dies. O-Sono’s ghost begins returning at night and standing by a box where she used to keep her personal things. A priest comes and discovers a secret love letter hidden there. He burns the letter and the ghost never returns again. Story 7 is about a man who is going to be executed for a crime. Before he dies, he threatens the samurai who is about to execute him by saying that he will haunt him. The clever samurai says he will believe him if he bites a stone as he dies. This saves the samurai as he knows that only the last thought of a man, in this case biting the stone, is dangerous.

Stories 8–9: In Story 8, priests ask local women for the metal from their mirrors to make a bell. One woman regrets donating her mirror, but cannot get it back. When the mirrors are heated, this woman’s mirror stays cold. The woman kills herself, but says first that if anyone can break the bell, her ghost will return with a gift of money. Many people try unsuccessfully to break the bell and the priests eventually push it in the river. So people try nazoraeru, which is doing one thing but imagining another. A farmer breaks an imitation bell, sees a ghost and receives a gift. In Story 9, two woodcutters, Mosaku and Minokichi are forced to stay the night in a boatman’s hut due to bad weather. During the night, a woman in white enters the hut, kills Mosaku and makes Minokichi promise not to tell the story. The following winter, Minokichi meets a young girl and they marry. After many years, he tells her the story of the woman in white. His wife screams it was O-Tei, and as he has broken his promise, she disappears in a cloud of smoke.

Stories 10–11: Kwairyô, a Buddhist priest, is invited to stay in a woodcutter’s house. During the night he sees five headless people sleeping. Outside the five heads were bouncing and planning to kill the priest. The priest fights the heads and kills the woodcutter’s head, but its teeth are biting his robe and the head gets stuck there. The next day, he enters a town and they think he is a murderer. Fortunately, an old man recognises the red characters on the neck of the head and realises it is a bad spirit and that Kwairyô is innocent. Story 11 is about a fruit tree which flowers in winter. This is because an old man had died where a tree that he loved very much grew and his ghost had gone into the tree.

Stories 12–15: In Story 12, an old man meets a woman and a man. It turns out they are mujinas, dog-like animals that can change their shape. Story 13 is about a hunter who shoots the male of a couple of river birds. That night, he dreams of a woman who says he has killed her too. The following day, he goes back to the river and sees the female bird kill herself. In Story 14, Nagao is promised in marriage to a young girl, O-Tei, but she dies. Before dying, she says they will meet again after fifteen years. Nagao marries another woman but never forgets O-Tei. His wife and child die and he goes travelling. He meets O-Tei again and marries her. She remembers for a second who she is, but never remembers after that. In Story 15, a Bodhisattva, a Buddha on earth, takes his young friend up a mountain of skulls. The boy is afraid, but the Bodhisattva explains that there is no reason to be as all the skulls belong to him from his millions of past lives.

Background and themes

Spirituality: Many of these stories emphasise the importance of spirituality and the unity that exists between humans and their surroundings. All things are considered to be important, be it a tree or an ant, in the overall scheme of things. Japan’s first religion, Shinto has many deities known as kami. Everyone’s ancestors become a form of kami upon death. These minor deities inhabit the countryside and are a source of a rich mythological and folk tradition of ghosts and spirits.

Reincarnation: Many of the characters in the stories experience reincarnation of some kind. This reflects religious beliefs that many Japanese held at the time. There are also suggestions in some of the stories that the way a person has previously led their life will have an effect on the way in which they are reincarnated. In Story 4, the old priest was reincarnated as a jikininki because he was not good in his previous life. O-Tei, an innocent girl in Story 14, is reunited with her first love in another life.

Honour and morality: Honour is probably best symbolised through the samurai, who are brave and principled young men. Generosity, humility and kindness are clearly seen to be superior to vanity and greed.

Discussion activities

Before reading

1 Discuss: Put students in small groups and ask them to discuss what they know about Japan. Where is it? Is it big or small? What language do they speak? What kind of food do they eat? What do you think the Japanese people are like? Do you know what religions they believe in? Do you know anything about their history?
Japanese Ghost Stories

Story 1
While reading (p. 3, after ‘Hōichi only had to perform on two or three evenings each week.’)

2 Role play: Put students in pairs, and ask them to role play the conversation between Hōichi and the priest. Allow them to write the dialogue first if necessary.
  
Student A: You are the priest: Ask Hōichi about his life, music and poems. Tell him you love music and invite him to live at the temple.

Student B: You are Hōichi: Tell the priest about your life.

3 Research: Ask students to do some research about the samurai using the Internet. Give them the following questions to guide them. What type of people were they? What did they do? What did they use to fight? What did they sometimes do if they lost a fight? What did they believe in? Do they exist today? Are there any famous films about samurai warriors? Get feedback from the students in class.

Stories 2–4
Before reading Story 2

4 Discuss: Ask students to talk about the following questions in small groups.

What different things do people use to tell somebody’s fortune? Do you believe in these things? Has anybody ever told you your fortune? What do you think will happen in your future?

After reading Story 3

5 Pair work: Ask students to think of a famous love story that has an unhappy ending. Tell them to write a summary of the story without mentioning the names of the people involved. Each pair then reads out their summary and the rest of the class has to guess the name of the book or film.

After reading Story 4

6 Discuss: Students talk about the following questions in small groups.

In this story, what do the dead man’s family have to do after he has died? Why? What do the people in your country do when somebody dies? Is it the same in other countries? What happened to the old priest after he died? Why? Do you believe in these things?

Stories 5–7
After reading Story 5

7 Discuss: Ask students to talk about the following questions in small groups.

Do you remember your dreams? Have you ever had a bad dream? What do you think dreams mean? Can they tell us about real life?

After reading Story 6

8 Discuss and write: Ask students to talk about the kinds of things that people write in love letters. Get feedback from the class. Now students individually write a letter to O-Sono from a character they have to invent.

After reading Story 7

9 Pair work: Write the following words on the board: tied, rice, haunt, stone, bounce, dangerous. In pairs, ask students to talk and write sentences about Story 6 using these words.

Stories 8–9
After reading Story 8

10 Write and discuss: Remind the students that the mirror was very special to the young woman in the story. Tell them to write a list of five things that are special to them and the reasons why. Discuss as a class.

After reading Story 9

11 Write, ask and answer: Write Why did Minokichi and Mosaku have to stay in the hut? on the board and elicit the answer (Because of a snowstorm). Now tell students to write similar questions about Story 9. Students then mingle with each other, asking and answering each other’s questions.

Stories 10–11
After reading Story 10

12 Role play: Put the students in groups of four. One person is Kwairyō, two are judges and one is the old man who discovers the truth. Ask them to act out the courtroom scene.

After reading Story 11

13 Discuss: Ask students to discuss in small groups what they would be like to be in another life and why. It can be an animal, a place, a person or thing. Get feedback from the class.

Stories 12–15
After reading

14 Write and guess: Write The soba-man’s face became as smooth as a ball. on the board. Elicit which word is wrong from the students (as smooth as an egg). Now students choose a sentence from Stories 12–15 and rewrite it changing one word. Students mingle, reading out their sentences and the other students have to identify and correct the mistake.

Vocabulary activities
For the Word list and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.