

## Post-Reading Worksheet for “The Telegram”: Answer Key

Kuroshima Denji was part of the Proletarian Writers Movement (1927-1932). The purpose of this literature was to raise social awareness of the proletariat (worker) through the promotion of social justice. Proletarian literature looked at national, colonial, class, and gender issues.

1. Describe the region in which the story is set. What role did nature play in this story? Explain and cite at least three specific examples of nature’s role in the plot.

*This story is set in a rural village. The main character is a “dirt poor farmer.” They pray at the local temple. Gensaku works the land, yet does not advance.*

2. Contrast the two views presented in the story. First list how each felt about education. Next, deduce what Kuroshima was trying to tell readers.

Wealthy Landlord View	Poor Peasant Farmer—Gensaku
What was the landlord’s view on education? <i>Looks down upon Gensaku. Once the tax collector sees that Gensaku is trying to get ahead and improve his son’s lot in life, the tax collector makes things more difficult for Gensaku. The tax collector is greedy, lacks compassion, and is powerful.</i>	What was the peasant farmer’s view on education? <i>Wants his son to have a better life so Gensaku sends son to school in order to get ahead. Gensaku is a hard worker and has been a very hard worker since a young age. Despite his hard work, he still remains poor and quite powerless to change his lot in life. Gensaku ignores the negative comments and criticism over his decision to send his son to school. Gensaku is loyal and obedient to societal rules and expectations.</i>
How did the author seem to feel about those who are solvent (soy brewer and landlord)? <i>Author seems to reject the landlord and soy brewer.</i>	How did the author seem to feel about the rural poor? <i>The author feels sorry for the poor and is trying to highlight the obstacles they encounter.</i>

3. How did Gensaku’s insistence on sending his son to school reveal his personality and/or set the tone for the rest of the story? Explain.

*Gensaku is forward thinking and wise. As a hard worker, he realizes how in this society hard work only gets you so far. Gensaku understands that to get ahead in the future, one will need an education. He is determined to provide that for his son. Gensaku is not one to take a short cut: “Our life is just about over, but his is only beginning. Rather than leave him a bit of money, it’s much better to see he gets educated” (20).*

4. How do you feel about Gensaku? Do you feel sorry for him? Are you annoyed by Gensaku? Why or why not?

*Answers will vary. Solicit personal opinions; however, be sure to require students to support those opinions with textual evidence.*

5. How did Gensaku communicate with his son throughout the story? What was the significance of using postcards and telegrams in the story? What might this method of communication suggest? How does the symbolism of the telegram relate to the major themes of the story?

*Tax collection notice arrives via mail. The father writes a telegram to communicate the bad news to his son about school being over forever. A letter is received stating his son passed the exams. A major signifier of a modern nation is one that has a rapid method of communication. During the Meiji Restoration postal service began in 1871. For such an honest and strong man, it is curious how Gensaku chooses to send his son a telegram rather than voice his decision face-to-face. Also, the telegrams and letters can represent “progress,” yet ironically they serve to put a halt to progress.*

6. Consider the interplay of three aspects of the story: the poor rural farmer, the passive mother, and the powerful landlord. How are these three aspects of the story thematically important? How do they lead us to interpret the story?

*Rural Farmer—represents those in modern Japan who are not benefiting from the rapid changes around them. They are trying to modify and adapt; however, old ideas and suppressive social norms prevent them from succeeding.*

*Passive Mother—represents the submissive and voiceless females. Women, as part of this new modernizing Japan, had little say in the changes around them. While females might have ideas and opinions, they are not welcome to voice those sentiments.*

*Powerful Landlord/Tax Collector—represents those who are benefiting in modern Japan. The rich landholders can exploit the workers of Japan and, in doing so, will maintain control. About the time this story was written, 12 industrial and financial business conglomerates (Zaibatsu) controlled 80%+ of all wealth in Japan. While the tax collector in this story is by no means a Zaibatsu, he does represent the powerful and rich.*

7. The story concludes with the arrival of a letter from the boy’s school stating, “the boy had passed the entrance examination, but the parents did not enroll him” (24). Does this final line convey hope, paradoxical hope, or futility? Explain.

*Answers will vary. Some will feel that nothing will ever change and the son will end up only slightly better off than his father. Others might feel optimistic that the son will work hard to make sure that his children have the educational opportunities he could and should have had. Be sure students support their opinions with textual evidence. For example, the optimistic view that the son will work hard to ensure his children receive an education can be supported by the fact that through hard work, as a child, he did pass the exams.*

8. Think about this story in comparison to “The Dancing Girl” and “The Broken Ring.” What are some of the similarities? What are some of the differences?

*Similarities: All three stories have characters who are struggling to find security and happiness in a quickly changing modern world; sadly, they do not prevail in their quest. Gensaku is held back by the oppressive social structures carrying over from feudal Japan. The female narrator in “The Broken Ring” represents the women of early modern Japan’s desire for independence in marriage, education, and social norms. The narrator in “The Dancing Girl” is part of the wealthy elite. He is well-educated, well-traveled, and an archetype of Meiji societal values. Although his affair with the German girl is against the social decorum of the day, he does make the proper choice in the end by returning home.*

*Differences: The three characters are from different sectors of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Japanese society: rural poor, female, and urban elite.*