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Curriculum Project

Study and Discussion Questions for Each Story

Read “The Longtang,” an excerpt from Wang Anyi’s 1995 novel, *Song of Everlasting Sorrow*, noting how she uses descriptive details to convey both the appearance and the atmosphere of a place, in this case, the neighborhoods in old Shanghai.

1. Highlight phrases or passages that you feel are particularly effective in establishing a visual image in your mind or in evoking a particular mood. In the margins, star all examples of similes, metaphors, contrasts, or sensory details, and be ready to discuss the effect of each. (I will call on you to share the passages you feel are effective and to explain the tools the writer uses in these passages.)
2. Examine the overall organization of the excerpt and be ready to explain this organization in class.
3. Make a list of words that are unfamiliar to you. Look up the definitions from three of these words in a GOOD dictionary, preferably the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and be ready to share these definitions with the class.

Read Lu Xun’s story, “Hometown,” using the following study questions to prepare for class discussion. (I advise jotting down your responses and annotating the text itself.)

1. What is the narrator’s attitude toward his family and his hometown?
2. Who is Runtu and what was the relationship between Runtu and the narrator when they were young? In the flash of memory that Lu Xun describes the narrator having at the mention of Runtu, what details seem important? What is the significance of this memory?
3. Who is Second Sister Yang? How does the interaction between her and the narrator help to reveal the character and situation of each individual?
4. When Runtu and the narrator meet as adults, how do they interact? How does Lu Xun establish a contrast between these characters?
5. What function does Hong’er have in the story?
6. What is the narrator’s mood at the end of the story? What comparison does he make between the beliefs he and Runtu have?
7. What is the significance of the image evoked in the last paragraph? What does the narrator mean by “Hope...is like a path across the land—it’s not there to begin with, but when lots of people go the same way, it comes into being” (16)?
8. What does this story reveal about Chinese culture in the first part of the twentieth century? What does it reveal about Lu Xun’s view of China in 1921, especially in terms of class differences?

Read Zhang Ailing’s story, “Sealed Off,” and use the following questions to prepare for class discussion:

1. The story takes place on a tram car during an air raid in Shanghai. What details does Zhang Ailing use to establish the setting?

2. What elements does Zhang Ailing use to unify this story? For example, what concerns do the various occupants of the tram seem to have in common? Can you find any repetition in the story that could be significant?
3. Why does Lu Zongshen start a conversation with Wu Cuiyuan? Explain each character's changing reactions toward one another during the story.
4. What does this story reveal about life in Shanghai in 1943, especially in terms of class and gender differences?
5. Choose one line of the story that you feel is effective and be able to explain what makes it effective and how it functions in the story as a whole.

Study Questions for Mo Yan's "Old Gun"

1. After reading the story, go back and examine it again, noting the descriptive details of the setting. How do these details foreshadow later events?
2. What is Dasuo's motivation for coming to the sorghum fields at sunset?
3. The editor's note describes this story as expressing "a desire for a lost world, a world that possessed a vitality and machismo lacking in the present." (Look up "machismo" if you aren't familiar with that term.) How do the flashbacks to the stories of Dasuo's grandmother and of his father support such a claim? Are both preceding generations the same in terms of possessing "vitality and machismo"? How do the three generations (Dasuo's, his father's, and his grandmother's) compare with one another? What do we learn about the way of life in each generation?

Study questions for Shen Congwen's "Meijin, Baozi, and the White Kid"

1. What changes in culture does the narrator lament during the course of the tale?
2. What is the origin of this version of the story the narrator tells? How does it differ from other versions?
3. Describe Precious Stone Cave.
4. How does the chieftain function in the story?

Discussion Questions for Yan Lianke's "Black Bristle, White Bristles"

1. What is Liu Genbao's motivation for volunteering to do the prison time for the town head, and how does his motivation compare with that of Wu Zhuzi, Lame Zhao, and Li Qing?
2. Why has Liu Genbao been unsuccessful in finding a wife? What does his earlier interaction with the twenty-year old his kinsman introduced to him indicate about his character?
3. The editor's note describes this story as a "biting analysis of the workings of political power in a rural village—a critique of a political system that pushes people to blindly serve power" (76). Where do we see this satire at work in the story?
4. Could the name of the Party Secretary, Zhao, suggest another figure in China's history?
5. What effect is achieved by Yan Lianke's framing the story with Butcher Li's slaughtering of pigs?
6. What is the tone of the end of the story? How is the mood established in this section of the narrative?

Discussion Questions for Wang Shuo's "Hot and Cold, Measure for Measure"

1. What effect is created by Wang Shuo opening with the scene in the hotel? What do we learn about Zhang Ming in the scenes before he meets Wu Di?
2. How do Wu Di and Chen Weiling differ in their reaction to Fangfang and Zhang Ming?
3. Does Zhang Ming have any redeeming characteristics? What is his philosophy of life? How does it contrast with more conventional perspectives (perhaps those held by Chen Weiling or Han Jin)? What perspective does he offer on education, politics, and work?
4. How does Zhang Ming manipulate Wu Di? Are the depictions of gender relations in this story reflective of attitudes common in our culture?
5. How do you interpret the last two paragraphs of the story that appear in italics? What does Wang Shuo mean by “Wu Di....might...just as easily have joined the Protest Movement as been seduced by Wang’s ‘hero’” (168)?
6. How does this story reflect the change from a socialist to a market economy in contemporary China? How does Wang Shuo use the setting to highlight the contrast between the past and the present?
7. What is the significance of the title of this story? Is Wang Shuo alluding to Shakespeare’s play, and if so, is this allusion ironic?

Discussion Questions for Alai’s “The Fish”

1. How sensitive to nature is the narrator? What support can you gather from the text to determine the narrator’s relationship to the natural world?
2. How religious is the narrator? Why do Tibetans have a taboo against fishing? How does this compare to the food taboos common in other cultures?
3. How does the narrator’s experience in breaking a taboo affect him? What is his motivation for fishing despite his culture’s prohibition of this act? Chart the changes he undergoes in the process of breaking this taboo.
4. What does the narrator mean by “mastering himself”? What other examples of individual or cultural taboos (taken from your own culture or any other culture) illustrate the point that taboos can interfere with or retard self-development or progress?
5. How does the marmot hunt relate to the experience the narrator is having while fishing?
6. How does the setting (the landscape, the weather, even the fish) function in the narrative? Are any of these elements symbolic?
7. What is the significance of the last sentence: “You see, before a person even takes leave of a spot where something has occurred, that event has already vanished into nothingness” (212).

Discussion Questions for Xi Xi’s “The Floating City”

1. Now that you have been given some background on the history of Hong Kong, and have seen some slides of the city, we need to list the features of Xi Xi’s floating city and then try to establish some connections between his surreal depiction and what we know of Hong Kong. What details do you recall?
 - a. History: grandparents’ grandparents witnessed violent beginning, pirates, deep sleep, legend
 - b. Takes willpower and faith to live there; living without roots; people’s efforts made city “vibrant, prosperous, and wealthy”
 - c. Buildings, highways, trains; technology; free education; art, medicine, government, recreation, science: a miracle
 - d. People dreaming of floating

- e. City as an illusion (Magritte exhibition), not a fairy tale
 - f. "Could the floating city control its own destiny?" The city's stability / threat of water and pirates
 - g. Water
 - h. "bottomless pit of material desire"
 - i. Important moment in time
 - j. Mirrors reflect only the backs of things
 - k. Emigration (wings)
 - l. Bird grass (surrounded by image of flight?)
 - m. Child prodigies; role reversal, dependence on children
 - n. Tourists looking in
2. Let's play with interpretative possibilities. What could Xi Xi be saying about Hong Kong through this bizarre description of the floating city?
 3. How does the reference to Magritte (and the whole concept that images of objects differ from the object itself) relate to the story's attempt to represent a place? How does Xi Xi employ the same concept in his narrative through the depiction of observers outside the window, the students looking at the painting, and the people in the painting? What does the last section of the story mean?