

“Autumn in the Palace of the Han” by Ma chih-yuan

Summary: Written in the late 1200s under the Yuan dynasty of the Mongols, the story is set during the early 1200s when the Han rulers face the more powerful Khan and his forces. Manipulated by an evil and ambitious courtier Mao Yen-Shou, the Han Emperor, after losing his heart to the beautiful Wang Chao-chun, is forced to yield her to the Khan as the price for peace. After a sad farewell, the lady drowns herself in the Amur River rather than joining the Khan in the north; a solitary wild goose representing her soul melodically haunts her empty chambers. The Khan, now aware of the evil Mao Yen-Shou’s plotting, in a peace offering sends the Emperor the news of Chao-chun’s death, along with Mao Yen-shou in chains for execution.

Activities for Students:

Pre-reading

Students may discuss these questions in pairs, taking notes to share with the class, or write about them individually.

What forms of traditional drama are you familiar with? e.g. Greek drama, Chinese Opera, Japanese Noh, Bunraku, or Kabuki? What do you see as the main differences between these traditional forms and modern dramatic forms?

Consider the importance of poetry in any Shakespearean plays that you have studied. Which characters use poetic language and on what sorts of occasions? Would you agree that poetry can be central to the effect of a play?

Can you think of any heroines from Greek or Shakespearean drama who act bravely? Do any of them commit suicide? For what reasons? Do we accept any of these as noble suicides or are they mistaken and pathetic?

Do you think it is possible to feel sympathy for an emperor, a person shrouded in luxury from youth? (If you have seen the film “The Last Emperor,” you might think about your reaction.)

Background:

A major pattern in Chinese history has been continuing conflict between the agricultural south or Han China and the nomadic herding culture of the north. The Great Wall was an attempt to draw a line between these two regions, protecting southern China from the depredations of more mobile nomad warriors originating in Mongolia. Against this background, the play shows us human greed, deception, weakness, love, and courage.

The author appears to have been a minor official who retired from his official career and became a poet, praising the rustic reclusive life. Because the new Mongol leaders distrusted the former dynasty’s Confucian officials, they abolished the literary examination system in the 1240s (restoring it in 1314). This meant that

scholars who had previously considered drama unworthy of their efforts began to write plays to earn a living or make a name. Combining their knowledge and skill in poetry with the oral storytelling tradition, Yuan playwrights developed a form that proved popular among both the ruling Mongol class and the conquered Chinese masses. Although playwright Ma chih-yuan may have been using the play to comment on his own times, advocating stronger Han resistance against the Mongols, he is careful to present both the Han emperor and the Khan as sympathetic figures. Evil is found in the greed and cowardice of Han courtiers.

Structure and Conventions of Yuan plays

Type Characters- Most characters are types drawn from storytelling tradition - crafty scholars, merchants, courageous courtesans, wise judges, kind hearted bandits, etc. Make-up reveals personality; black and white lines on the face indicate a villain, for example. Gestures are stylized; e.g. movements of a sleeve carry symbolic meaning.

Self Identification and Explanatory Monologue- Again based on storytelling tradition, when a character enters, he generally announces his identity and tells his background. Somewhat as in Shakespearean soliloquy, the actor speaks directly to the audience, explaining his actions and motives. These *objective monologues* are, however, more factual and less introspective than Western soliloquies.

Recapitulation -Characters often review and summarize the previous action when they re-appear on stage. Also drawn from the storytelling tradition, this device of redundancy no doubt helped an audience who may have been eating and drinking rather than paying silent, reverent attention to the action.

Alternating Prose and Verse- Again in a pattern that may seem redundant to modern audiences, a common device is presentation of some informative lines in prose, followed by a song (poem) that may repeat what has just been spoken.

Limitation to One Singing Role - Although there are many songs in a Yuan play, only one character normally has the singing role throughout the play. In “Autumn in the Palace of the Han,” the Emperor does all the singing.

Four-Act Division and the “Wedge”- The plays generally include four acts and one shorter unit or “wedge,” which may function as prologue as in “Autumn in the Palace of the Han” or be inserted elsewhere between acts. Development of the conflict throughout the four acts fits familiar Western patterns of *exposition, development, climax, denouement*.

Varied Audience- Like Elizabethan audiences, the Yuan theater audience included poor laborers, illiterates, aristocrats, and scholars. It was educationally, socially, racially, and economically mixed. Unlike other more purely aristocratic literature, Yuan theater was embraced even by 20th century Communists as representative of peoples’ art.

(Sources: *History of Chinese Drama*, William Dolby, London: Elek Books, 1976, *The Golden Age of Chinese Drama: Yuan*, Chung-wen Shih, Princeton:Princeton Univ. Press, 1976)

Post-Reading

1. **Acting.** Divide students into five groups. Assign each group one of the sections (prologue or one of the four acts) to perform for the class. Provide them class time to rehearse in corners of the room, empty corridors, or wherever space is available. Long speeches can be divided so each student has a speaking role. Students should consider how to provide background music such as the lute and simple props such as the painting of Chao-chun, her mirror, and a fur or heavy jacket to symbolize the Mongol clothing that will replace her Chinese robes. One or two students should be appointed as directors to ensure that actors deliver lines in a lively fashion and to decide on movement. (Since the play itself contains much recapitulation, this exercise will serve as plot review.)
2. **Applying literary theory.** Have students consider and discuss the play from several theoretical standpoints. This could be done in groups or by the class as a whole. In either case, conclusions should be shared with the class as a whole.

Feminist:

1. Which characteristics and actions of the main characters seem most determined by the gender expectations of their societies? What are the obvious gender expectations in this society?
2. How aware are the characters of the gender expectations that shape their lives? Find any lines where characters mention appropriate gender behavior.
3. Does the playwright seem to share societal expectations or is he critical of them? What evidence can you give?
4. Do you think your own gender makes a difference in reading this work? Are you more sympathetic toward or more critical of characters who share your gender?

Marxist:

1. How important is money and social class in this work? Is social mobility possible?
2. Are there any “power struggles” that could be considered class conflicts?
3. Find lines where any of the characters comment on the importance of money or power.
4. In what ways does the work seem to support the prevailing social system or present a criticism of that system?

Structures- Dramatic Devices - Foils, Masks, Subtexts, Symbols and Imagery

1. Are any of the characters foils for the others? What do we learn about the protagonist because of this contrast with a similar character?
2. Who wears a metaphoric mask? Are any of the characters deliberately deceiving others? Do they ever lose the masks?

3. Can you find passages where there seems to be a subtext? The speaker is saying one thing, but behind his or her words is another meaning or a set of complex meanings?
4. Can you find recurring patterns of imagery or important symbols in the play?

Historical/Cultural

1. Did the writer experience the historical era in which the work is set or is he working from research?
2. What dramatic social or political movements were occurring at the time the work is set?
3. Are any of the important conflicts between characters caused by developments in the economic, social, political, or intellectual climate of the time?
4. Find lines in which characters comment on events and customs of the “real” world, outside of the play.

Writing Prompts and Related Activities - Essays should be 2-3 pages in length. If you use outside sources, include Works Cited or a bibliography.

Comparison/Contrast topics useful if classes are studying this play in connection with either Shakespearean or Greek drama.

1. Compare and contrast the villain Mao Yen-Shou with one of Shakespeare’s villains such as Iago, Richard III, or Claudius. Quote from soliloquies by each.
2. Compare and contrast Chao-chun with one of Shakespeare’s tragic women such as Ophelia, Desdemona, or Juliet. Or compare and contrast her with Antigone, Ismene or Jocasta from Sophocles’s tragedies. Consider circumstances, actions, and words.
3. It has been suggested that the great Western tragedies are largely dramas of personality in which the hero, torn by inner struggle, must make a decision that will determine his future. Yuan plays, on the other hand, are dramas of events and their meanings. For a single human being to pit himself against nature or fate would, in the Chinese view, seem a presumptuous and unnatural act. Based on your reading of “Autumn in the Palace of the Han,” agree or disagree with this view. Do any characters suffer inward struggle or pit themselves against nature or fate?

Research Topics

4. Research the roles of courtesans and eunuchs in Chinese court tradition. How are these reflected in “Autumn in the Palace of the Han”?
5. Research the Yuan Dynasty, Mongol rule, and the role of the Khan. What changes did the Mongol rulers bring to China? How were they changed themselves? What reflection of this do we see in “Autumn in the Palace of the Han”?

6. The plot and tone of “Autumn in the Palace in the Palace of the Han” seem to have been inspired by a narrative poem entitled “A Song of Unending Sorrow,” by Po Chu-yi (772-846). Read this poem (p.266-269 in Cyril Birch *Anthology of Chinese Literature*) and compare and contrast it to the play.

7. Chao-chun is representative of many traditional Chinese heroines who kill themselves out of loyalty to husbands or lovers. Jonathan Spence in Chapter Five of *The Death of Woman Wang* (New York: Viking Press, 1978) discusses this idealized behavior. See if you can find other sources idealizing female suicide in Chinese tradition and relate them to the play.

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