

Encounter with a Skull (*Tae dokuro*, 1890)

by KODA Rohan

OBJECTIVE: The student will read the story twice, once without contextual information, and again with contextual information. This provides not only the opportunity to practice critical reading skills and note-taking, but also allows the student to re-read a text with a “renewed” sensibility, armed with additional information regarding the author and the culture from which he originated. The student, in the process, will learn the importance of expanding one’s perspective when reading literature from unfamiliar cultures. Naturally, those students familiar with the Japanese culture will experience the reading differently, and can act as “experts” on the Japanese perspective.

- The students will read and analyze the short story as a text in the style of modern horror/gothic tale.
- The class will “research” selected terms and concepts. They will be provided with a short biography of the author.
- The student will re-read the story within the context of Rohan’s life, use of Japanese and Buddhist symbolism, and historical reverence for other classic East Asian texts.
- The student will revise a tale of his/her own choice, and adapt it to a different cultural context using metaphor, cultural context and symbolism.

Summary of “An Encounter with a Skull”: Rohan, a self-assured young man becomes lost in the mountains, and after a frustrating journey, comes upon an isolated hut in which a beautiful young woman, Tae, lives. Taking pity upon Rohan, she invites him in, offering a hot bath, clean

clothes and dinner. Eventually, she encourages him to stay the night, and after agreeing to her request, Rohan proceeds to fall asleep. After several hours, he realizes that she has given him the only bedding she has, and so the two argue as to who shall sacrifice comfort in order to sleep. Eventually, she surprises Rohan when she invites him to share her bed. Rohan deliberates her offer, but refuses it because he fears that he will not be able to contain his physical attraction to her. He then convinces her to tell her story. Tae was from wealthy family whose mother condemned her to loveless (and celibate) life. A young nobleman dies of a broken heart when she rejects his love. Tae falls into a madness, and follows the young man's spirit into the mountains where she meets a wise man who teaches her to live life with understanding and grace. As she finishes her story, the sun begins to rise, the house and the young woman vanishes, leaving only a bleached skull at Rohan's feet. Upon reaching the neighboring village, Rohan learns of a hideous leperous woman who has recently disappeared into the mountains, never to be seen again.

Literary Terms: Review the following terms with students.

allegory

allusion

archetype

symbol

Pre-Reading: The students will write a short story or teleplay with the title "An Encounter with a Skull." They should include at least two characters, and the use of a symbol. The story should

be 2-3 pages, typed and double-spaced. You must also use 10 of the 20 vocabulary words on the attached worksheet.

Vocabulary: Worksheet attached

First Reading The first reading is to practice close reading. If possible, students could have their own photocopy to mark up. The first part includes several study questions, many of which ask for phrase or passage citation. In addition to being good practice for locating specific text as evidence, it is also a good opportunity to work on quotation citation. This is a short story written in 1890 by Koda Rohan about a young man who meets a mysterious woman in a mountain hut. Be aware that the author's name (Rohan) is also used for the narrator, and means, among other things, "a companion of dew." Do not worry about some of the Japanese words that are not familiar. Just read for initial understanding. We will worry about those unknown words later!

Directions for first reading of the story:

Part I:

- Read Part I (stop at Part II)
- Summarize what you think has happened so far.
- Predict what you think will happen next.
- Answer study questions for Part I (worksheet #2 attachment)

Parts II and III: (Worksheet attached)

- Read Parts II and III (the rest of the story)

- Have students follow directions on study sheet to continue close reading. (Worksheet attached.)
- Give quiz on story, preferable open note so that the students use their close reading notes.

Second Reading (Optional)

- **Look over the biographical information on Koda Rohan in the lesson plan packet for some contextual data on his background, era and writing style. There is a short fact sheet attached.**
- **Buddhist and Japanese Symbols:** You may fill in the information, or have the students investigate the words themselves. One suggestion is to assign each student one or two words, have them look them up, preferably on the internet, and report them to class. The class should take notes on the sheet of the findings. Web sites to consider could include:
 - <http://www.askjeeves.com>
 - <http://jin.jcic.or.jp/access/index.html> (general info on Japanese Literature)
 - <http://buddhism.kalachakranet.org> (Buddhism)
 - <http://rosella.apana.org.au/~mlb/cranes/lore.htm> (Thousand Cranes Network)
- Using the provided notes on the author, and Japanese and Buddhist symbolism, have students go back through the text and analyze the story one more time. Have them write a page (or perhaps a full-length essay) on whether or not the additional context changed their view of the story. Ask them for specific citation of lines and passages.

Encounter with a Skull

Koda Rohan: 1867-1947

(According to *20th Century Literary Criticism*, Vol.22, Gale Group, Detroit, 1987.)

- Koda Rohan is the pseudonym of Koda Shigeyuki.
- He was the fourth son of a prominent family in Tokyo of the samurai (warrior nobility) class. In his early teens, Koda's family lost prestige and the wealth. Perhaps this is why he chose as his pen name *rohan*, also known as *ronin*, a samurai who has become a wanderer because of the death of his lord or due to dismissal from his duties.
- He was a student of Buddhism and Confucianism, and was a scholar of classical Chinese poetry, and frequently used Buddhist symbolism in his writing.
- He wanted to write works that were spiritually enlightening.

Themes:

- Masculine hero—courage, sincerity, wisdom, creativity.
- Mystic visions & the supernatural (often as warnings to stay on the path to enlightenment.
- The Great Man—not easily fulfilled and constantly looks for a greater, more meaningful goal.
- Women—the ideal Rohan women have male attributes because greatness is the same for all humans.
- Suffering is an unavoidable part of life.
- Compassion is a key characteristic of enlightened. (One of the pledges of the samurai is compassion.)

“Encounter with a Skull”: Vocabulary

Define all of the following words. Then, write a short story or teleplay with the title “An Encounter with a Skull.” Include at least two characters, and the use of a symbol. The story should be 2-3 pages, typed and double-spaced, using at least 10 of these 20 vocabulary words.

1. dandy
2. avocation
3. courtesan
4. begrudge
5. audacious
6. vacuous
7. euphoric
8. sham
9. whimsical
10. defile
11. arabesque
12. chagrin
13. assiduous
14. vexation
15. facetious
16. prodigious

17. lewd

18. cajole

19. evanescent

20. inexorable

“Encounter with a Skull” Part I: Study Questions

Writing in complete sentences, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What do we learn about the narrator in the first paragraph? What is the point of view of the story, i.e., is the story in first or third person. How would you describe the narrator?
2. The narrator says that he has “made [himself] a companion of the dew” (90). What do you suppose he means by this? What kind of person would describe himself in this manner? If you were to give yourself an epithet like this, what would it be?
3. How does the narrator describe the manner in which he spent the “past thirty-some years” (90)?
4. As an experienced reader, how do you interpret the idea of a path or road? How does this connect to the narrator’s situation after he recuperates from an illness (90-1)? Cite a line or passage that uses the metaphor of pathways.
5. How does the narrator show he is full of pride? Cite a phrase or passage to show this. How does he also suggest that his pride can be a weakness? Cite a phrase or passage to show this. Have you ever experienced a time when your pride interfered with your better judgment?

6. As an experienced reader, how do you interpret the narrator losing his way?
7. Rohan comes upon a small hut in the middle of nowhere. When considering folktales of the American and European tradition (i.e. Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood), what do you think of isolated huts in the middle of nowhere? What usually happens in settings like this? What do you predict will happen to Rohan at this hut?
8. Rohan describes the inhabitant of the hut as a “heavenly maiden adorned with a halo”(94). What does this description suggest about this woman?
9. On page 94, what hints and foreshadowing suggests that this is not a normal situation in which Rohan finds himself? What words and phrases in particular suggest mystery and/or trouble?
10. The young woman offers Rohan a bath. What do you think of that? In your opinion, could bathing be symbolic of anything?
11. On page 97, both characters describe themselves as carefree. Cite a passage in which the characters claim this. Do you believe that both of them are free of concerns and/or troubles at the moment? Why do you feel this way?

12. On pages 98-100, both characters show their pride and sense of etiquette. How does each character show this? Cite a phrase or passage for both Tae and Rohan to show this. How does this mutual concern create comedy?

13. Tae, the young woman, surprises Rohan with an offer. What is the offer? What are Rohan's personal concerns in regards to the offer? Cite a phrase or passage to show this. What does this internal conflict say about Rohan?

14. What is a moral dilemma? How does Rohan wrestle with his moral dilemma? Cite a phrase or passage that illustrates this inner struggle. Have you ever had a moral dilemma? How have *you* dealt with it?

15. Consider the language of the last paragraph of part I (101). How are some of the descriptions paradoxical? What words or phrases perhaps suggest trouble for Rohan?

“Encounter with a Skull” Part I: Close Reading Guide

Teacher’s Edition

Writing in complete sentences, answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. What do we learn about the narrator in the first paragraph? What is the point of view of the story, i.e., is the story in first or third person. How would you describe the narrator?

- the narrator sees himself as straightforward without much interest in “dandyism and elegant avocations.” He is five feet tall, a traveler and wanderer: “a five foot snail...driven by the desire to see as much of the world as could be perceived...”
- the point-of-view is first person.
- he travels without much concern for planning, suggesting an adventurous sort.

2. The narrator says that he has “made [himself] a companion of the dew” (90). What do you suppose he means by this? What kind of person would describe himself in this manner? If you were to give yourself an epithet like this, what would it be?

- He enjoys nature and its simplicity and beauty.
- He is perhaps a bit of a loner (communing with nature rather than people).
- Answers will vary for personal epithets

3. How does the narrator describe the manner and mood in which he spent the “past thirty-some years” (90)?

- He has been “roving” with “no tranquility”

- He thinks a great deal, often in reference to poetry
- While often of “sober state of mind”, he also enjoys “idle relaxation”

4. As an experienced reader, how do you interpret the idea of a path or road? How does this connect to the narrator’s situation after he recuperates from an illness (90-1)? Cite a line or passage that uses the metaphor of pathways.

- Paths and roads are often suggestive of a search for self, or spirituality; of an unknown future; of the need to continue, however reluctantly, with one’s life
- Perhaps he must find a new direction for himself. Perhaps his illness is a metaphor for misdirection or unhappiness.
- He is “at the end of the mountain road” and the nearby mountains limit his options. According to the innkeeper, he “can hardly find a trail [on the mountains] because the Pass is totally covered with snow” (91).

5. How does the narrator show he is full of pride? Cite a phrase or passage to show this. How does he also suggest that his pride can be a weakness? Cite a phrase or passage to show this. Have you ever experienced a time when your pride interfered with your better judgment?

- After the innkeeper suggests that Rohan not push himself on the mountain path after recovering from his illness, Rohan thinks to himself, “ ‘ Does he take me for a city weakling...I’ll show him the cantankerous temper and the stubborn pride of a contrary man’ ” ; also “ ‘The Pass doesn’t scare me...Slight hardship would be a small price to pay for the excitement of exploring a new trail’ ” (91).

- He suggests his pride undermines his good judgment: “ ‘In a sham display over such a trivial matter, I stood firm on my thin cold legs’ ”. Later he says, “after trudging several hundred yards, I was forced to concede that the innkeeper had been right...” (91-2)
- Naturally, answers will differ

6. As an experienced reader, how do you interpret the narrator losing his way?

- Losing his way could mean that he is unsure of his future, purpose, personal success, spiritual faith.

7. Rohan comes upon a small hut in the middle of nowhere. When considering folktales of the American and European tradition (i.e. Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood), what do you think of isolated huts in the middle of nowhere? What usually happens in settings like this? What do you predict will happen to Rohan at this hut?

- Isolated huts (or locations) in the western tradition is also seen in the guise of outside of city walls, in the forest (beyond civilization and order). This suggests, besides the threat of a non-civilized world, danger/knowledge (*Hansel & Gretel*, *Little Red Riding Hood*), chaos (*Frankenstein*, *King Lear*), horror (*Dracula*, horror movies), the wild and pagan (*Midsummer Night's Dream*, the other worldly/supernatural (i.e. witches in fairy tales, *Macbeth*, *The Hobbit*).
- Usually the protagonists' lives are endangered.
- Answers will vary

8. Rohan describes the inhabitant of the hut as a “heavenly maiden adorned with a halo” (94). What does this description suggest about this woman?

- She is so beauty that she is not of this world; the woman could be supernatural, perhaps an angel or spirit (and therefore dead), and therefore a possible danger.

9. On page 94, what hints and foreshadowing suggests that this is not a normal situation in which Rohan finds himself? What words and phrases in particular suggest mystery and/or trouble?

- “How strange! A woman in a mountain hut?”; and: “Startled by her ethereal beauty, I moved a few steps back and stared hard to she if she was not a specter...”; also: [s]he somehow gave me an eerie feeling...”

10. The young woman offers Rohan a bath. What do you think of that? In your opinion, could bathing be symbolic of anything?

- Before the bath, Tae (the woman) washes Rohan’s feet; in western culture this has some connections to Christianity, (John the Baptist and the act of baptism, Mary Magdalene washing Christ’s feet) suggesting both spirituality, purification and submissiveness. Additionally, a bath, especially one in an isolated hut, seems quite intimate and sexual, especially considering that Tae offers to scrub Rohan’s back.

11. On page 97, both characters describe themselves as carefree. Cite a passage in which the characters claim this. Do you believe that both of them are free of concerns and/or troubles at the moment? Why do you feel this way?

- Tae: “ ‘What momentous circumstances could possibly affect the life of such a humble person as myself? I am just a carefree woman called Tae...’ ” and “ ‘...[I am] carefree merely from renouncing the world...’ ”
- Rohan: “ ‘[I am] a carefree man who calls himself Rohan’ ” and “ ‘It is simply that I feel merry over mountains and rivers without knowing why...’ ”
- Answers will vary. However, the two characters seem to this reader to “protest too much”; they also tend to taunt the other with word games. Finally, we know that Rohan has some concerns about the mysterious woman.

12. On pages 98-100, both characters show their pride and sense of etiquette. How does each character show this? Cite a phrase or passage for both Tae and Rohan to show this. How does this mutual concern create comedy?

- When Rohan discovers that Tae has not gone to bed after him, he says “ ‘...I’m afraid I robbed you of your own bed...it’s nothing for me to spend the night just leaning against an upright beam. But it pains me to see you sitting like this.’ ” Tae responds that she “ ‘agreed to put you up...[p]lease don’t worry about me...’ ” The conversation continues in with bickering back and forth. Rohan says “ ‘[he is] the man and, therefore, will therefore take [his] leave...it would be an eternal disgrace...to sleep while leaving a woman to suffer privation. [He] would be ashamed to face [his] mother and friends.’ ” Tae also insists that she provide Rohan

with the bed because “ ‘there I such a thing as female pride. [She] must have [Rohan] sleep comfortably or [she] would be ashamed before the Buddhas in [her] eternal disgrace. The conversation continues in the same manner through the middle of page 100.

- Tae and Rohan try and outdo each other in proving their ethics and morals to the point of the absurd. Tae laughs at their conversation at the bottom of page 99, and again at the top of 100. Rohan seems less amused.

13. Tae, the young woman, surprises Rohan with an offer. What is the offer? What are Rohan’s personal concerns in regards to the offer? Cite a phrase or passage to show this. What does this internal conflict say about Rohan?

- Tae asks Rohan to join her in bed. Rohan feels that Tae is “almost menacing” and is “clinged to the marrow with terror” (100). He fears his “carnal desire” and recites the poem “Elimination of Desires” in hopes the poem will give him the will to rebuff Tae. Rohan shows himself as human, tempted, disciplined and religious.

14. What is a moral dilemma? How does Rohan wrestle with his moral dilemma? Cite a phrase or passage that illustrates this inner struggle. Have you ever had a moral dilemma? How have *you* dealt with it?

- Rohan must decide whether to reject her pleas (and sexuality) or whether to give into his desires and “[commit] deplorable misdeeds in pursuit of success” and “Where [men] should praise and respect women already chaste and virtuous, they seduce

them into transgressions...[t]hey bring shame upon their own relatives and disgrace upon their own descendents.”

15. Consider the language of the last paragraph of part I (101). How is the description of beauty paradoxical? What words or phrases perhaps suggest trouble for Rohan?

- Rohan describes Tae (indirectly as he refers to female beauty) as “the fair face of a flowery beauty is nothing but a flesh-covered skull” (101). It is a paradox to align flowery beauty with a skull, yet the sentence is true—any face is merely a flesh-covered skull.
- References to the skull suggests death or danger; also: Rohan urges good young men and eminent persons to “break the spell of the demon...” and to “guard against taking wrong steps, and those who have already fallen onto the deadly course should lose no time in reversing their direction...” He also refers to evil and the freeing of the spirit, and therefore, referring to death and afterlife.

Close Reading Notes on “Encounter with a Skull”, Parts II and III

Directions: Follow themes and figurative language (symbols, allusions, metaphors, imagery) as you find them in these last two parts of “Encounter with a Skull”. Consider what you learned in the readings of the first part, and refer back to that worksheet if that is helpful. You will use these notes in your final test or essay.

- Find any phrases and passages that you think are important in plot and/or character development, writing style and figurative language, theme and/or motif.
- Record the phrases and/or passages, using the MLA procedure for quotations. Make sure you include page number.
- In complete sentences, explain why you chose the particular phrase or passage and its significance to the story.

Themes:

| | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Temptation/sexuality | Isolation/loneliness | Grace |
| Family/filial piety | Propriety | Discipline and self-denial |
| Nature as pure | Feminine v. masculine | Happiness |
| Youth and beauty | Enlightenment/finding one’s way | Love |
| Life, death and the afterlife | Mystery/supernatural | Religion |

Extended metaphors and symbols:

- Clothing Jewels Water
- The Wilderness Birds/Cranes Music
- Trees Mountains Pathways

Encounter Teacher Notes: Parts 2-3

(101): PART II:

- **Theme: temptation, gender-**“I was nervous enough merely being under the same roof with a woman ...” Rohan as nervous—this will continue, and indeed worsen throughout this section. Rohan struggles with his libido, as well as with the boldness of Tae. This timorousness leads to a crisis of masculinity.
- **Question:** Why does he not leave? Perhaps because he is of a society that dreads any hint of impolite behavior. Of course, he is also attracted to her, and is like the proverbial moth to a flame.

(101-2)

- **Theme: youth and beauty; nature:** “as beautiful as spring blossoms in profusion” (**simile**). Rohan referencing to a beauty that is youthful and natural. Tae is of nature; also, spring reference for renewal, rebirth. Could this indicate death (Tae’s) as a rebirth? Or could it indicate the rebirth of the “lost” Rohan through this meeting with an enlightened soul (which, of course is not yet evident...)

(102):

- **Theme: temptation, danger:** “Why should I be troubled by the harmless buzzing of mosquitoes?” (**metaphor & irony**) The mosquitoes are clearly his nagging attraction to Tae; are these mosquitoes truly harmless? Some will bite, cause quite an itch (euphemism), and perhaps transfer a disease that is harmful. Is this a reach? However, having said that, I nice bit of imagery...

- **Theme: propriety:** “Although I am by nature quite unperturbed by gossip and criticism...” Is Rohan a reliable narrator? He seems obsessed with propriety. Moreover, he shows he is pretty “thin-skinned” when Tae teases or criticizes him.
- **Theme: sexuality, temptation: References** to intimacy/sexuality: “how could I possibly fall asleep with her body so close, our mutual warmth passing through the scant folds of our clothes?”—Rohan gives many evocative images that are mainly based in fantasy. Of interest is he is faithful to his spirit, but reacts like a human, obsessed with the physical.
- **Theme: discipline and self-denial:** “I had to chant the “Elimination of Desires...” at the Tae’s “mere mention of [sleeping in the same bed].”
- **Theme: sexuality & metaphor:** Perhaps too adult, but a lovely one: “even the eminent Abbot...confessed that if an attractive woman promised her favor for the night, a withered willow in its old age would produce a new shoot.” The teacher could refer to the idea of old age, and the influence of youth. Clearly, that new shoot could be interpreted in a slightly different manner...
- **Theme: sexuality:** “Be on guard”—this (man and woman interacting) is war...
- *Arhat:* in Buddhism, the highest rank of saint.
- **Theme: faith; self-denial:** Rohan refers constantly to Buddhist figures and their sexuality: “saintly wizard of Kume...”
- **Question:** What keeps Rohan from sleeping with Tae? Is it discipline? Piousness? Fear? There seems to be great fear of the aftermath of a relationship with Tae (the “Bottomless Hell”)
- **Theme: mystery, fear:** Rohan gives image to his fear: “...she might say...she might entreat...Where would she put her exquisite arms?”

(103):

- **Theme: propriety, pride:** Rohan refers again to propriety (and ego): "...what if her well-contoured legs or shapely feet happened to touch my own hairy shins? Good Heavens! That would be a moment of life or death for me..." This also seems to be a somewhat Victorian—Japanese romanticism?
- **Symbolism:** Tae as fox or badger—Like western folklore, the fox is clever and dangerous to mankind's innocence.
- **Theme: gender (masculine v. feminine):** Gender roles and behavior become more of an issue for Rohan: "She shows no signs of embarrassment in saying things that ordinary women would be unable to mention. What else could she be but a goblin?"
- **Metaphor:** "it would be the poorest of tactic to slap the water only to get soaked, or to beat the grass only to rouse a snake." **Theme:** Hidden dangers.
- **Foreshadowing; Theme: gender:** "...[Basho] has his sleeve caught by a woman...Basho caught her sleeve from behind..." On the next page, this scene is replayed when Tae is the aggressor.
- **Allusion:** reference to Rohan's "carefree" attitude in Part I: "you [Rohan] certainly don't act like one who is used to making merry over mountains and waters." **Question:** Does she essentially inform the reader of this narrator's unreliability or is it merely that the author wants to show how little we understand ourselves?

(104)

- **Metaphor/symbol/foreshadowing:** Tae is referred to as "goblin"
- **Theme: Gender (roles are reversed):**

- Tae becomes aggressor/masculine presence. "...but still she tried to drag me...She came after me and caught my sleeve" (Remember, Rohan is wearing a woman's kimono.) In the next paragraph, takes up a hatchet and chops wood.
- Rohan becomes victim/feminine presence: "My guard weakened for a second. In spite of myself, I let out a scream, shook my hand loose, and fled."
- **Theme: gender:** Tae picks up the hatchet, a stock prop for determining danger, evil, masculinity. Isn't Rohan de-sexed? **Comedy:** Rohan worries—it is a false alarm.
- **Theme: gender** Gender roles partially re-established (in the most temporal of manners)—Rohan provides his "masculine hand" for cutting wood.
- **Imagery/symbol:** Home and safety: a roaring fire in the fireplace. Prepares us for the end of the tension, and for the story?

(105):

- **Theme: masculinity** Tae insults the manhood of Rohan: "...A fine specimen of man you are. I didn't think that you were...[a] weak-willed man...you are indeed cowardly and unsure of yourself..." Does this show the level of Rohan's discipline since she is so manipulative by insulting his manhood (this would be a lovely comparison to Lady Macbeth...)
- **Question:** Tae insists that she thinks of Rohan in a more maternal manner. He feels she treats him as a three-year-old. Is he acting childish? Is he right to be offended?
- **Metaphor:** Tae as "jewel" and "goddess" and beyond the ability of a human artist (the other-worldly/supernatural.)
- **Metaphor:** "One would hate to place a deer in thorny bushes, and one would expect a crane to perch on a old pine tree" The same idea as a round head in a square hole; Tae as

misplaced in the isolated hut. Also, her tendency to act “manly” Is this a question of stereotyping on Rohan’s part?

➤ **Japanese Symbolism: Crane:** symbol of fidelity, prosperity and longevity, marriage (Japan); wisdom (Chinese). In art, often painted with pine tree, another symbol of long life.

- **Question:** Why drop in this reference to the janitor and his political history of Japan? While it suggests that this janitor should be in a job more “worthy” of his intellect, it seems out of place in a story that seems to avoid a sense of era. Is it perhaps because the janitor does “women’s work” (i.e. the **theme** of gender)? As Rohan says, “[he drops the book] while cleaning the floor on his knees...” Also, the **theme** of pride (especially male pride), “it brought tears to my eyes to imagine how mortifying it must be...to be wasting his lofty ambition in menial service...”

(106)

- **Simile:** “like a tree in the remote mountain valley whose blossoms are never to please human eyes.” Tae as a creature of nature.
- **Theme: enlightenment** “this woman of refined taste and dignity, [transcended] mundane emotions almost to the point of perfect enlightenment...”
- **Theme: gender** “...how inexcusable that she, as a woman, should behave like a man! A woman being unfeminine and a man being unmanly are both against nature and utterly repulsive.” Of course, this is ironic because as a ghost she is *outside* of nature.
- **Question:** What is feminine to Rohan? Answer: A traditional woman who does show the boldness of arguing with Rohan, and who does not outwardly criticize him (and his masculinity). A woman who does not make propositions.

- **Theme:***Religion/enlightenment** “...when a woman acts unfeminine and a man unmanly in an almost divine way, they both have attained the sphere of the holy.” This seems to be a particularly important point, perhaps of the whole story. Tae and Rohan connect beyond the boundaries of the natural world. To use a hackneyed phrase, they are soulmates, and this allows Tae to *appear* to Rohan.
- **Irony:** “...if she actually meant to hold me as a wet nurse would a small boy, she can’t be a masculine woman but an extraordinary, superior being...”—which of course, she is. And: “Her clear eyes betrayed that she was undisturbed by the trivial matters of the world.

(107) PART III

- **Simile:** “like a moon afloat in the dreamy spring sky over the Yangtze River after a gentle breeze has wafted the clouds away.” **Extended metaphor: nature.** Tae as a creature of nature. Also, the moon suggests the heavens, as well as romance.
- **Simile:** “Her eyes radiated happiness, like the sultry mist around Mt. Randen, softly shimmering on a jewel...” **Extended metaphor: jewel**
- **Extended metaphor: nature** Tae as of nature: “...I was treasured like a butterfly.” Also, the use of images of dewdrops (like Rohan she is a companion of the dew), pampas grass, and “cherished like a flower.”
- **Theme: death:** “After the untimely death of my father...” and, “after we sent my father off with a streak of crematory smoke...”

- **Theme: loneliness/ isolation** Her father is cremated in “a desolate field” and “three times daily his seat at the table was vacant...” Is this also alluding indirectly to Tae’s family curse of loneliness and life without love?
- **Imagery:** her mother “picking at her food as if she hardly had the strength to lift her chopsticks” and “she seemed to subsist solely on warm water...”

(108)

- **Symbolism: Music** A home without music as one without life; Tae is effectively withdrawing from the living.
- **Symbolism: Books** Tae is partially liberated by reading. More importantly, she is presented to Rohan as well read, as an equal (perhaps) intellectually.
- **Theme: gender/feminism (?)** “I also observed that, since olden times, men have always been superficial beings who love and care but for a time, their desire intense but their patience thin. They delight in meeting women but never grieve over parting, prefer those who coquettishly flatter them, glory recklessly in love conquests, and admire a woman for the beauty of her appearance just as they would a dog or cat for its fur markings...” One could claim that Tae is a feminist. Perhaps, the teacher can remind the student that this work was written in 1890 in Japan! The teacher may ask about other female characters of pre-20th century literature that have shown a similar rebellious streak (Wife of Bath of *The Canterbury Tales* comes to mind...)
- **Allusion: *Tale of the Genji*:** “I vehemently loathed amorous men like Prince Genji...”
Tae dares to dislike the canonical text of *Genji* for very modern reasons.

(109)

- **Imagery/simile:** “I felt as if ice-cold water had just been poured over my head, and at the same time, as if my eyebrows were being seared in a fierce flame...”
- **Theme: mystery/Suspense:** “It’s too painful for me to mention what was written in the letter...” Tae refuses to divulge what is in the letter.
- **Theme: death** “...May my body dissolve soon, turning me into an ethereal spirit so I can join my mother.” Also, **irony** since she gets her wish.
- **Symbolism: Clothing** (clothing as society and femininity): “...my hair was without the fragrance of hair oil...rouge and powder were completely forgotten. I no longer took pains to pick out the right sashes, to select the tight thongs for my clogs, or to coordinate my wardrobe.”
- **Theme: gender (feminine)** “I was rid of all female concerns.” Considering the previous remarks, is this indeed liberating for Tae?

(110)

- **Metaphor: nature** “Flowers bloomed, but I was wilted. Birds sang, but I was silent. The silvery moon cast no reflection on the turbid waters of my heart.” And later: “Frost and cold weighted cold in my heart...” Tae as out of balance, not connected to nature/the natural.
- **Theme: isolation; religion/faith** “In my anguish I resented gods, Buddhas, people, and even heaven and earth.” And, “My agonizing rage against gods and Buddhas intensified to such an extent that I would have stabbed them with a needle...”
- **Theme: love** Tae finds out about the young nobleman in love with her.
- **Theme: filial piety** The young man falls in love with Tae because of her filial piety: “The young girl [Tae] who has just left is not only beautiful but also touching in her filial

piety...” Tae refuses the young man because of her mother’s letter, ironic since he fell in love because of this quality.

(111)

- **Question:** Initially, Tae dismisses the young nobleman because she believes it was “merely a fleeting male fancy and an ignoble pursuit of beauty.” As a young woman, does her judgmental attitude cause not only her own misery and loneliness, but also that and the eventual death of her suitor?

(111-112)

- **Theme: Love/Romance** The suitor suffers in the typical lovesick manner: “He is grief-stricken at the sight of flowers or the moon...[h]e eats less and less, spends the day dozing, and tosses and turns at night...he...talks to himself day and night, saying things like ‘if I were gone like a dewdrop that might as well evaporate, would she take pity on me...I wish to give up my life swiftly.’” Perhaps remind students of other lovesick characters (Hamlet, Romeo.) Of course, the young nobleman sickens eventually dies of a broken heart.

(113)

- **Theme: Love and romance** A continuation of the suitor’s suffering, including the romantic conventions of love poetry.
- **Isolation/loneliness:** Tae continues to choose solitude due to **filial piety**, and as a result becomes cold and cruel.
- **Theme: supernatural; metaphor; foreshadowing** The nobleman’s messenger refers to Tae as a demon.

(114)

- **Allusion:** *Tale of the Genji (Evening Faces)*—a reversal of the dying lover (the nobleman) as the lover (Tae and Genji) look on; both are to blame for the death of their lover (*Genji*—the jealous spirit (unrequited love) kills Genji’s lover; *Encounter*- the unrequited lover dies.)
- **Theme: death** Not only does the suitor die, but Tae figuratively dies “...I collapsed in a swoon. When I came back to life...I returned to my house feeling I could hardly linger in this world.”
- **Theme: death and the afterlife/supernatural:** “...his shadowy phantom appeared while I was chanting sutras before the family altar...” Tae is visited by the dead as she mourns for her dead parents. She then follows the phantom into the mountains.
- **Theme: enlightenment** Tae, delirious, wanders into the wilderness (as Rohan is doing); she meets an enlightened priest, and finds peace. “I am able to contemplate an infinite number of things in my quietude...I find people fascinating in their own ways...Now I am amused by my own existence...I love Buddhas, I love ordinary men, and I truly love you too. There is not a single thing in the world I hate...”
- **Theme/symbol: nature** Tae gains enlightenment in the wilderness, and then with enlightenment, see the beauty in nature, “...the rising water in the valley stream announces the coming of spring, and the falling leaves in the hills foretell the approach of winter

(115)

- **Theme: enlightenment** Or lack thereof—Rohan “[fails] to comprehend [the story’s] true meaning. Tae will try to teach him the true meaning, but only with her disappearance with the morning will he understand

(116)

- **Theme: Death; Life as mysterious and ever-changing** Upon finding the house and Tae gone with the morning, Rohan finds a skull at his feet; this experience teaches him much, and helps him on his path to enlightenment.
- **Theme: Enlightenment** Rohan discovers that "...if love and compassion are mutual, I am within him, and he is within me. With no distance between us, we perceive each other's emotions and share our boundaries. A skull in a secluded valley attracted the mind of a solitary wayfarer traveling in the present, and that traveler in the deep mountain perceived the former life of the skull. Our karmic paths happened to cross, and we chose not to forgo a momentary encounter...I then buried the skull left behind by the spirit, who had communicated by the vibration of my heartstring..." Rohan's connection to the spirit of Tae defied the physical world, and he gains (some) enlightenment through the process.
- **Theme: Death** Rohan discovers the truth of Tae's last days of life. Tae's physical self was more demonic than she is in death. She is essentially a walking corpse, in the process of rotting away, "Her entire body looked grayish-red, with an uncanny purple shine here and there...Her left foot barely retained three toes...Her browless forehead bulged prominently, full of purplish hollows oozing gray-yellow pus...her right eye was merely a crater smeared with pus..." and so on. She repeats "I abandon the world..." which she of course, does. Only with death is Tae able to re-claim her beauty (or one might ask if she is only beautiful in death...)

Encounter with a Skull

Buddhist and Japanese symbols and vocabulary

Bats: (90) It is seen by some as a contradictory symbol, emblematic of happiness and long life in China while possessing a meaning not far removed from that of the dragon and the hermaphrodite in Western

Three spheres: (101) There are many types of gods, and that there are gods in all three spheres. The gods of the two higher spheres are beings who, in their previous lifetime, attained a very sublime state of meditation, like the states the Buddha was taught by his teachers—before he became truly enlightened. As a karmic consequence, they spend an entire (long) life in meditation at that high level in these upper two spheres.

The gods are more powerful than us, live longer, and have much less pain and discomfort in their lives. On the other hand, they are not necessarily any more wise or enlightened; they are not necessarily any closer to nirvana.

Arhat: (102) The highest kind of saint who is exempt from further rebirth.

Contemplation of the Nine Stages of Human Corpses: (103) Navasivathika, looking at corpses, in nine different stages of decay, from one newly dead to one reduced to crumbling bones, and, in each case, applying what is seen to oneself, reflecting that one's own body must meet a similar fate;

Deer: (105) The deer is often symbolic of the Buddha's teachings because the first teaching of the Buddha was in the Deer Park at Sarnath.

Fox: (103) Like western folklore, the fox is clever and dangerous to mankind's innocence.

Crane: (105) Symbol of fidelity, prosperity and longevity, marriage (Japan); wisdom (Chinese).

In art, often painted with pine tree, another symbol of long life.

Sutra: (114) A text which claims to have been spoken by the Buddha

Bodhisattva: A person who wishes to win full enlightenment. Or to become a Buddha

Path: The straight and direct road to Nirvana.

Zen: One of the schools of Chinese and Japanese Buddhism, emphasizing abandonment as the way to enlightenment.

Tae: Another name for Benzai Tennyo, the name of a Japanese goddess of sexuality and fertility, also of music, fortune and wealth

Rohan: Meaning "companion of the dew"; another name for *ronin*, a wandering samurai because either he was dismissed or his lord had died. He has no home, or place in society.

Final Evaluation: Essay: (Handout attached)

Using the notes from the first reading, and the optional one-page essay from the second reading (reading with contextual information), have the students write on one of the following:

1. How does the author investigate the process of finding one's own self? Consider both characters' stories, and their struggle to find their way to happiness. Do they find their way to happiness? Does it matter?
2. Is this a horror story? Why or why not?
3. What do you think the ending means? What do you think the author was getting at?
4. Look at the two characters. What do you think the author is saying about gender? Do the characters fulfill their roles as man and woman in the manner you expected?
5. Write a paper on symbolism and metaphor. How does the author use these devices? How do they enrich the text? Consider the use of nature or clothing for your essay.
6. Pick one of the themes that you investigated on your close reading, and write a succinct essay on that specific theme. You may cite another work read in school as a comparison, if you would like.

Alternative assignments: Here are some ideas if the teacher prefers not to give an essay as a final evaluation.

1. Draw an accurate set design of the hut in the wilderness.
2. Using what you know about the clothes in the story, design the costumes of Rohan and Tae.
Remember that Rohan would have a few costume changes.
3. Write a screenplay and film a video of the short story. You may consider doing only one scene, but it should be one of the following: the meeting of Rohan and Tae, Tae's story, the next morning, and Rohan's discovery of the truth about Tae.
4. Draw a storyboard or comic strip of the story. For individual scenes, look at #3 option.

Encounter with a Skull

Essay Topics

Using your notes write a three to five page paper on one of the following topics. You must include at least five quotations from the text in the body of your essay, using the MLA method of citing quotations.

1. How does the author investigate the process of finding one's own self? Consider both characters' stories, and their struggle to find their way to happiness. Do they find their way to happiness? Does it matter?
2. Is this a horror story? Why or why not?
3. What do you think the ending means? What do you think the author was getting at?
4. Look at the two characters. What do you think the author is saying about gender? Do the characters fulfill their roles as man and woman in the manner you expected?
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Lesson Plan for
“Encounter with a Skull”
(*Tae dokuro*, 1890)
by
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