

Introduction

Glimpses in the Mirror: Women's Identity in the Modern Chinese Stories "Xiaoxiao" and "The Wounded"

Close readings of the short stories "Xiaoxiao," by Shen Congwen and "The Wounded," by Lu Xinhua reveal interesting insights into the lives of Chinese women in rural China before the Communist Revolution ("Xiaoxiao" was published in 1929) and in village life post Cultural Revolution ("the Wounded" takes place in 1978). The main characters, Xiaoxiao and Wang Xiaohua, are both young women (Xiaoxiao is truly a girl) rubbing up against but not overtly questioning the cultural and political roles assigned to them. Confucian values come into conflict with the principles of Chairman Mao; and women's roles are reinvented. In both stories we see these protagonists take brief but meaningful glimpses into mirrors in quests for self-identity.

Xiaoxiao is a decidedly country girl. At one point in the story she peers into a pond while passing by (no mirrors being available in her rural household) to consider how she might look without her long braid. The "coeds," female scholars on holiday in her village, have made a fashion of being braid less. Xiaoxiao looks to see who she might have been if circumstances were different, or who she might become.

Wang Xiaohua in "The Wounded" clandestinely examines her face in a mirror while on a train home to her estranged mother. She wants to view herself as her mother will. She is curious to see who she has become in nine years away from home.

For both characters identity is a tricky, sometimes shifting, notion. Each's angst about who she is is tied up in the binds of culture, gender, and history. As teachers in a small all-girls high school particularly welcoming to students of diverse ethnic backgrounds, we encounter many young women seeking to better know themselves as part of and apart from the ties of their

various cultures. Self-identity is a uniquely fascinating topic for growing girls. Almost all genuine inquiry at this age can be traced back to the question: Who am I? We feel the quest for identity is well served by a combined study of literature and history. We read stories of others to better know ourselves; and we study history to find our roots in place and time.

We believe a pairing of history and literature is particularly beneficial in the reading of these two stories. Knowing the historical context places the reader more firmly in the minds of these two interesting characters; and once there, our students should find themselves further along their own quests for self-knowledge. This lesson plan seeks to provide a mix of relevant historical background and techniques for close reading of the stories with accompanying activities geared to fully engage the class and satisfy all learning styles. We envision a full treatment of these stories to sustain perhaps four to five class periods.

Plot Summaries

“Xiaoxiao,” by Shen Congwen, trans. by Eugene Chen Eoyang

Raised by her uncle in rural China, Xiaoxiao is married off at age eleven to a two-year-old husband. She serves ostensibly as his babysitter, with the understanding that she will bear his children when he comes of age. An influx of “coeds” (female scholars) to the village for their summer holidays is a source of fascination and the subject of much mockery for the traditional community. The coeds defy traditional female roles and behave and look different. Xiaoxiao jokes about the coeds with the other; but inside she partly longs to live this freer life. Something about Xiaoxiao’s appearance and behavior makes the old grandfather of the household tease her frequently about how she should be a coed herself. An illegitimate pregnancy nearly jeopardizes Xiaoxiao’s place in her husband’s household, but a mix of inertia and logistics (plus the fact that she gives birth to a boy) allows her to stay. By the story’s end, Xiaoxiao is a wife and mother of two. She no longer ponders the possibility of becoming a coed herself, but dreams of this alternative for future generations.

“The Wounded,” by Lu Xinhua, trans. by Kenneth J. DeWoskin

Set in the post Cultural Revolution period, “The Wounded” deals with the physical and emotional scars left on families caught up in this movement and its aftermath. Wang Xiaohua abandoned her mother nine years ago in order to shore up her own allegiance to the Communist Party. Her mother was accused of being a traitor by the Gang of Four, and her sullied name affects Wang Xiaohua’s prospects. After moving away, Wang Xiaohua finds acceptance with

her Communist Youth League friends, but still faces certain limitations professionally, politically, and personally because of her mother's situation. Learning that her mother is gravely ill, and that her name has been cleared, Wang Xiaohua takes a train back home, hoping for reconciliation. Filial piety has proven stronger than politics in the end. Alas, she is too late. Her mother dies without seeing her, and Wang Xiaohua is left with bitter regret and lingering questions about her own choices.

Discussion Questions about the Stories, Based on Close-Reading Journals

Rather than traditional reading-comprehension questions on the stories, this lesson plan seeks to promote active reading and to elicit student generated questions and comments as they carefully read. In a smallish class, students should be seated in a circle at desks with the text at hand. One student would begin reading “Xiaoxiao” aloud, but could be stopped at any time by a question or comment from the circle; or the student may care to make a comment or pose a question herself. When this first reader is tired of reading, she will turn the reading aloud over to another student, and so on. This could go on for 20 – 30 minutes. In a larger class, it might be better to structure this activity as a partnered reading—with pairs of students sitting together and taking turns reading aloud with the same stop-and-start method. Students would then be instructed to finish reading “Xiaoxiao” for homework, with a pen and reading journal at hand. Journal responses should include questions about the text; comments on character, plot, setting, etc; quotations from the text that seemed meaningful, striking or curious; unknown vocabulary words and their definitions after consulting a dictionary; recognition of themes or other literary motifs; and comments on what the reader might do or feel if facing the circumstances encountered by the characters. All notations should include the appropriate page reference, as they will be the basis for class discussion the next day. These journal responses would be quickly graded (check plus, check, or check minus) in class, based on detail and length of responses. The same process would be followed for the reading of the second story, “The Wounded.” What follows are sample questions and comments, with some answers, based on one reader’s response to the text.

Sample Journal Response to “Xiaoxiao”

p. 97

Vocab: palanquin: *A covered litter carried on poles on the shoulders of two to four men.*

Obviously arranged marriages are the cultural norm.

“For her, marriage meant simply a transfer from one family to another.” *Quote shows how Xiaoxiao feels like a possession of these families, that the decision is out of her hands, and that she is essentially accepting of her situation of being married at age 11.*

That she is to have a 2-year-old husband is a bit of a surprise.

p. 98

Xiaoxiao seems to be more a babysitter than a wife.

“Those who do nothing at all but play / Wind up with bad dreams at end of day.” *Quote is an indication of cultural values—productivity is valued; all else is considered nonsense. Xx is considered a dreamer.*

p. 99

“That was a real treat.” *Quote describes Xiaoxiao’s first look at sunflowers in the a.m., a simple luxury. Xx seems to notice beauty and care about pleasure—in this way she is counter-cultural.*

“To speak of summer nights is to dream.” *Quote hints that narrator is like Xx, a dreamer.*

Vocab: mugwort: *cannot find word in dictionary, must be an herb (like St. John’s Wort).*

Coeds are different. They wear their hair differently. “Well, in a word, everything seemed out of place with them.” *Quote indicates that this difference is viewed negatively.*

p. 100

Xiaoxiao is said to be like a coed—she doesn’t fit in.

“Actually, Xiaoxiao had no idea what was wrong with being a coed.” *Quote shows that Xx relates to the coeds and doesn't share all the values of her community.*

Coeds are educated city-dweller, come to country for vacation.

Vocab: innocuous: *harmless*

In the country cars are known as motorized boxes, an apt description.

“They don't tend cattle themselves, but they'll drink cow's milk and sheep's milk like a little calves and little lambs; the milk they buy is canned.” *Shows how the farmer feels about the coeds, who live off the land but don't work it. The products they consume come from the land, but seem not to, as they are canned.*

p. 101

“In a word, everything about them is weird, totally different from the lives of farmers, and some of their goings-on are not to be believed.” *Expresses disdain, disapproval and shock at the coeds.*

p. 102

Summer means pleasure and relaxation for “city sophisticates,” but it means hard work for country folk. This goes a long way in explaining resentment toward the coeds.

pp. 103-104

Motley Mutt makes sexual innuendos that Xiaoxiao doesn't grasp.

“When Xiaoxiao was fourteen, she had the figure of an adult, but her heart was still as unschooled as that of a child.” *Quote seems to apply to many fourteen-year-olds today, as well.*

p. 105

Xiaoxiao looks at her reflection in a pond to judge how she'd look w/o a braid—like the coeds.

“But what is a man compared with a mountain?” *Quote refers to how nature wins out in the end—seems culturally significant to me.*

p. 106

Xiaoxiao begins sexual relationship with Motley Mutt, becomes pregnant.

Re. Motley Mutt: “A big physique gets you into trouble easily, but small courage puts you at a loss as to how to work your way out.” *Funny and true.*

p. 107

Motley Mutt leaves.

p. 108

Who are the Bodhisattvas she prays to? A type of Buddha? *Historical background section will answer this question.*

p. 109

“By rights, she should have been drowned, but only heads of families who have read their Confucius would do such a stupid thing to save their family’s honor.” *Obviously narrator takes a dim view of Confucian values.*

“Lately, if one asked who was making up the rules and customs, whether the patriarch or matriarch, no one could rightly say.” *A burgeoning feminism? Shows confusion of the time and, perhaps, openness to change.*

But Xiaoxiao is really only saved by fact that her baby is a boy.

p. 110

Xiaoxiao has the last word. In the story’s last lines, she dreams of a coed in the family, not her but as a wife for her son.

Sample Journal Response to “The Wounded”

p. 592

Wang Xiaohua wears a long, black braid, like Xiaoxiao.

Like Xiaoxiao looking at her reflection in a pond, she looks in a mirror.

WX seems deeply ashamed to be crying—doesn’t want anyone to see.

Everyone else on the train seems able to sleep, but not WX. She is not at peace.

p. 593

Need more detail on the Red Guard. *Historical Background section will cover this.*

Wang Xiaohua experiences inner conflict. “She was obliged to listen to both the voices within and without her, criticize her own petit-bourgeois thoughts and feelings, and draw a clear boundary between herself and her mama.” *Separation from mother is difficult for her.*

WX is not much older than Xiaoxiao she leaves her family; and for her it is a more painful rift.

p. 594

Meets Su Xiadem on train.

p. 595

“In the embrace of warm, communal living, Xiaohua gradually forgot the family life that had made her suffer so.” *This seems almost a typically adolescent experience—the preference for friends over family.*

p. 598

Vocab: Laconic: *terse or concise.*

p. 600

It is 9 yrs. Since she cut ties with her mother. Now she is bound for home.

p.603

Vocab: bund: *a political association.*

p. 604

Wang Xiaohua is still loyal to the party.

WX is less developed as a character than Xiaoxiao—less complex, more a representative (of misguided party loyalty and subsequent suffering) than a full-fledged person.

Themes, Symbols, and other Literary Techniques and Related Activities

Obviously, from the title of our lesson plan, we believe that mirrors (or ponds) function as symbols of the character's quests for identity in the stories. An activity to focus on this symbol follows:

Magic Mirror

Ask students to "hold a magic mirror up to Xiaoxiao and Wang Xiaohua." This mirror reveals who the subject was in her past, who she is currently, and who she will become beyond the end of the story. Student should write a brief essay on what each character sees in this magic mirror. In keeping with theme of furthering students' own quests for identity, ask students to now hold the same magic mirror up to themselves and write a brief personal essay.

Long, black braids are worn by both characters and seem to function as symbols of tradition and conservative values. Ask students to consider inward feelings versus outward appearances. To what extent is a long braid reflective of each character's inner self?

One theme common to both stories is the obligations of family. Another is the clash of traditional values with more modern approaches to living. Motherhood is a theme in both stories. Wang Xiaohua is haunted by her abandonment of her mother. Xiaoxiao serves as a mother figure to her young husband before becoming an actual mother. As mother to her husband, she has somewhat of an opportunity to rear him in a way beneficial to herself. Students in our all-girl's school might enjoy writing about or discussing how they would wish to shape their future life partners if they had the same opportunity.

Aphorisms feature strongly in the story "Xiaoxiao." The following activity should help students learn to recognize this literary technique and see its benefit to storytelling.

Finding Aphorisms in “Xiaoxiao.”

Explain to students that an aphorism is a short statement of truth or opinion; an adage. Ask them to form small groups and hunt for aphorisms in “Xiaoxiao.” One group member reports back at the end of the allotted time, and aphorisms and their page references are listed on board or on an overhead. Then the whole class considers each aphorism in turn and jots down what it means in terms of the story and how it might apply today to our modern lives. After each silent writing time, their findings are discussed.

Aphorisms in “Xiaoxiao.”

1. *“Those who do nothing at all but play / Wind up with bad dreams at end of day.” (p.98)*
2. *“To speak of summer nights is to dream.” (p. 99)*
3. *“In the country, one day is like any other day in the world: they change only with the season.” (p. 102)*
4. *“But what is a man compared to a mountain?” (p. 105)*
5. *“A big physique gets you into trouble easily, but small courage puts you at a loss as to how to work your way out.” (p. 106)*

Activity

Scroll-Writing

The following quotes are taken from The Book of Filial Piety for Women, attributed to Nee Zheng (ca. 730), trans. by Patricia Buckley Ebrey, and written as an instructive text for girls and a companion to Confucius's Book of Filial Piety. Divide class into thirds and have each third focus on one particular quote. Quotes should be mounted on large paper scrolls on walls of class. In turns, students should jot down their thought on what the quote means, how it applies to the stories "Xiaoxiao" and "The Wounded", and how, if at all, it applies to contemporary life. "Conversations" about the quotes can take place on paper. Once everyone has had a turn to write on the scroll, the teacher can review key points from each scroll with the class at large.

The quotes:

1. "The husband is heaven. Can one not be devoted to him? A wife acts first to extend her love broadly, then her husband will not forget to be filial to his parents. She sets an example of rectitude and virtue, and her husband enthusiastically copies it."
2. "Let me comment on the way a woman serves her husband. From the time her hair is arranged and she meets him [during the wedding ceremony], she maintains the formality appropriate between an official and ruler. When helping him wash or serving him food, she maintains the reverence appropriate between father and child. When reporting her comings and goings, she preserves the manner appropriate between siblings."
3. "Anyone who is a mother needs to understand the ritual properties. Get along with your child through kindness and love. Offer a model to your child by being stern and correct."

Source: Under Confucian Eyes; Writings on Gender in Chinese History, ed. By Susan Mann and Yu-Yin Cheng, University of California Press, 2001, pp.47-70.

Other Literary Works

Works from a variety of genres fit well into this lesson plan's focus on women's roles and identity. Here are some good matches:

- "Who's Irish?," short story by Gish Jen in Who's Irish?, Vintage Books, 1999.
- The Awakening, novel by Kate Chopin.
- Medea, drama by Euripedes.
- No More Masks; An Anthology of Poems by Women, ed. By Florence Howe and Ellen Bass, Anchor Books, 1973 (many poems in this anthology would work well).

Glimpses in the Mirror; Women's Identity in the Modern Chinese Stories

“Xiaoxiao” and “The Wounded.”

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