

“Hands”  
by Xiao Hong

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10<sup>th</sup> Grade  
English II (Survey Course)  
Lesson Plan Time Frame: Three 75-minute blocks

### ***1. Summary***

“Hands” (1936) is the story of Wang Yaming, a dyer’s daughter who has come to a girls’ school with the hope of bettering her family’s life through the promise of education. The story opens with a description of the school “freak,” Wang Yaming, who is teased mercilessly for her dye-blackened hands, poor English, and dull “Haw-haw” (Xiao 175). The unnamed narrator notes, “No matter how the rest of us laughed at her, [Wang Yaming] would never lose her composure . . .” (174).

When Wang Yaming’s father comes to visit her at school, she asks him for a pair of gloves – her father takes off his gloves to offer them to his daughter, and the narrator notices that his hands are even blacker than Wang Yaming’s. After he leaves, the bullied girl expresses embarrassment to the narrator over her father’s lack of social graces, especially his misunderstanding of the tearoom.

The principal continues to berate Wang Yaming over her hands, her failing marks, and her dingy uniform, even forcing her into seclusion when visitors come to the school. When Wang Yaming offers to wear gloves to improve her appearance, the principal laughs and claims, “What we want is uniformity, and even if you wore gloves, you still wouldn’t be like the others” (177-178).

The students go on summer vacation, and at the start of the next school year, the mistreatment of Wang Yaming only increases. The other girls refuse to share a bed with her, and Wang Yaming is forced to sleep on a bench in the hallway. Her attitude remains positive though, and she redoubles her efforts to study and dyes her uniform to fit in with the other students. The narrator becomes increasingly sympathetic to Wang Yaming, especially after noticing that the school custodian deliberately does not let her in out of the snow. She lends Wang Yaming a copy of Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, with which the bullied girl painfully identifies. She tells the narrator about her family’s situation, and explains that she has come to school so she can later instruct her sisters – they could barely afford her tuition.

As the students are leaving for winter break, Wang Yaming works arduously to copy down as many notes from class as possible before her father comes to pick her up, acting “as though everything that went through her mind on her final day had taken on great importance, and she was determined to let none of it pass unrecorded” (186). That night, she sleeps better than the narrator has ever seen. When Wang Yaming’s father arrives in the morning, he asks his daughter if she has flunked out of school. She explains, “No. We haven’t even had exams yet. The principal told me I didn’t need to take them, since I couldn’t pass them anyway” (186). Wang Yaming asks her father if they are going to take a horse cart to the station, and he laughs and tells her they will walk. The narrator stares after Wang Yaming and her father walking in the snow until the glare begins to hurt her eyes.

### ***2. Historical & Literary Context***

#### **Xiao Hong:**

Xiao Hong (real name Zhang Naiying) was born to a landowning family in Northeastern China in 1911 – her mother died when she was very young, and she described her father as a temperamental and violent man. Xiao Hong left home in 1927 to attend a girls’ school, where

she was exposed to the progressive influences of May Fourth ideals and literature, most notably the works of Lu Xun and Upton Sinclair. Xiao Hong was expelled from school after beginning an affair with a teacher, and she returned home. Her father arranged for her to be married to Wang Dianjia in 1930, but she fled to Beijing to escape him. Wang followed Xiao Hong there, impregnated her, and then abandoned her. Xiao Hong found help in newspaper editor and writer Xiao Jun – they began to live and publish stories together (Liukkonen, *Author's*, np). The couple moved around constantly from 1931 to 1936 to avoid the influence of Japanese occupation and censorship, but continued to write and publish together. During their time in Shanghai, they met and befriended Lu Xun, who later published and wrote the preface to Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life and Death*. In 1938, the couple split up (she was pregnant once again), and in 1940 Xiao Hong married leftist writer Duanmu Hongliang and moved to Hong Kong. She died in 1940 due to respiratory problems amidst the chaos of conflict with Japan (Liukkonen, "Review," np).

### Modern Chinese Literature:

Chinese literature in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by an emphasis on modernization and Westernization. Writers made a distinct effort to separate their works from classical Chinese texts, wrote in the vernacular, and embraced the popular Western forms of the novel and short story (Xu, Gary np). Influenced by the May Fourth Movement and colonial rule by Japan, many writers used their works to promote social change and express political ideology. The Confucianism so valued in the past was largely viewed by Modern Chinese authors as backwards and an impediment to modernization (Xu, Gary np). Xiao Hong is unique in that her writing did not necessarily have a political or progressive bent. Zhang Haining, vice president of the Xiao Hong Research association, claims, "Xiao's writing is out of the heart instead of being politically influenced. She never joined the League of Left-Wing Writers that was serving a political purpose at that time . . . . Her writing maintained its independence and standpoint about society, which was quite rare in that period" (Xu Ming np).

### **3. Discussion Questions & Answers**

Introductory Questions/Interest Grabbers (before reading –all answers will vary widely!):

1. What is the social purpose of uniforms?

*Ideally, uniforms work to eliminate class distinctions within a group of people – while wearing a uniform, onlookers cannot tell who can/cannot afford name brand or designer clothing, shoes, bags, etc. Uniforms also help to eliminate distractions within a school or workplace, as you do not have to worry about how what you are wearing compares to what everyone else is wearing. Finally, uniforms provide a sense of unity and cohesion within a group, a "we're all in this together!" attitude that is present within sports teams, schools, etc.*

2. What can you tell about a person from his/her hands?

*Hands are one of the first clues to a person's age and occupation. For example, an artist's hands might be stained with paint, a mechanic's hands might be covered with grease/oil, and a guitarist's hands might be callused. Someone's hands might also be an indication of strength in terms of size and power (ex. "He has a weak handshake). In Western tradition, a wedding ring also signals a person's availability and (possibly) wealth.*

3. How important is education in bettering oneself?

*Along with factors of gender, race, and socioeconomic status, education is one of the most important indications of how “well” a person may do in life. Education opens doors in terms of occupation, networking, and developing interests and talents. Most students will probably respond to the “bettering” aspect in terms of increasing wealth, but the cultural, developmental, and social benefits of a good education cannot be denied.*

Discussion Questions based on “Hands” (after reading):

4. How does Xiao Hong characterize Wang Yaming? Is she an admirable character, a pitiable one, or something else altogether? (plot)

*Wang Yaming is an interesting mix of provincial naiveté with a quiet dignity and drive to succeed. Even when humiliated by her teachers and classmates, Wang Yaming “would never lose her composure . . .” (Xiao 174). Instead of being a distinct individual to be admired or pitied, she seems to be an emblem of the working class always striving to better itself, but ultimately failing due to circumstance.*

5. How does the narrator’s attitude toward Wang Yaming change throughout the story? What do you think is the impetus for this change? (plot)

*The narrator moves from a character who participates in the bullying of Wang Yaming (“We called her ‘The Freak’” (Xiao 174)), to an impartial bystander that is slightly uncomfortable with the situation (“This was the first time I had ever called her name, and it gave me a strange, awkward feeling” (175)), to someone who feels empathy and confusion over the plight of Yaming (“She obviously had a very troubled heart” (186)). There doesn’t seem to be any external or plot impetus for the narrator to become more sympathetic to Wang Yaming, but symbolically, the narrator’s changing feelings could represent the shift in China’s focus on classical Confucianism to the May Fourth emphasis on modernization and social change.*

6. What is the significance of the narrator not having a name or many defining characteristics? Do you think she could represent Xiao Hong herself?

*Instead of representing a single, individual personality, the unnamed and anonymous nature of the narrator allows her to represent the portion of the Chinese population that is empathetic toward those who are striving to better themselves through progress and education. Elements of Xiao Hong’s life that might indicate her presence in the narrator are her stint at a girls’ school, her strained relationship with her father, and her exploration of gender issues divorced from the political bent of her fellow authors. The narrator seems to be an avid reader, as we assume Xiao Hong would have been, and the custodian also refers to the narrator as “Miss Xiao” on page 183 of the text.*

7. If this story is read allegorically, what might each character (besides the narrator) represent? What major symbols support this reading?

- **Wang Yaming:** *The portion of the Chinese population dedicated to improving their lives through education*
  - o *Dye-stained hands = status as lower class*
  - o *“Haw-haw” (Xiao 175) laugh = lack of social grace; markings of lower class*
  - o *Desire for gloves = class consciousness, wanting to cover origins*
  - o *School notebook = failure, misunderstanding*
  - o *The Jungle = recognition of the hopelessness of class system*
- **Wang Yaming’s father:** *Inevitability of poverty & lack of understanding of nature of class system/wealth*
  - o *Hands (even blacker than daughter’s) = stain of poverty; inevitable nature of class*
  - o *Misunderstanding of tea/reception room = lack of understanding/class consciousness that cannot be overcome through education*
- **Principal:** *Perceived purity/goal of education; loss of self when sacrificing everything for appearance*
  - o *White hands = complete lack of understanding of the plight of the lower classes (vs. Yaming’s “stained” hands) and the lack of life that results when giving oneself over to progress/education/wealth. Her inhumanity is illustrated when she “reached out her bloodless, fossil-like transparent fingers” (Xiao 1770).*
- **School girls:** *cruelty and those who provide no opportunity for the working class/uneducated*
  - o *Will not share bed with Wang Yaming*
  - o *Laughter at Wang Yaming’s English pronunciation, English representing the upper class/educated*

8. When the narrator looks at Wang Yaming’s notebook, she notices that Yaming “had copied it all down incorrectly. [Yaming’s] English words had either way too few or way too many letters. She obviously had a very troubled heart” (Xiao 186) – how do you interpret this passage, especially in conjunction with the story’s ending?

*The garbled nature of Wang Yaming’s notes indicate that she has misunderstood what needs to be done (education, social graces, etc.) in order to improve her family’s social status. Wang Yaming sleeps deeply and contentedly her last night at school because it is a relief to abandon the attempt to try to understand the upper class. When the narrator “kept looking [after Wang Yaming and her father] until the glare from the snowy landscape hurt [her] eyes” (Xiao 187), it is indicative of the fact that SOME members of the higher classes recognize the plight of the lower classes. Unfortunately, the narrator does not see an end to their suffering/tradition in sight.*

#### **4. Activities**

In the following activities, students will analyze Xiao Hong’s “Hands” in its historical/literary context along with a more New-Critical emphasis on the text itself. The focus will be on a close reading of the short story with an emphasis on color symbolism.

GRADE LEVEL: This unit is designed for a tenth-grade English II class, but could be easily adapted for any grade level.

TIME: This unit is designed to cover three 75-minute class periods.

MATERIALS: Smartboard, copies of Xiao Hong's "Hands," iPads/computers for access to online images

#### DAY ONE:

1. On smartboard, project the three Introductory Questions/Interest Grabbers (numbers 1- 3 from section 3 above); divide students into three groups (they will come back to these groups several times in the course of the unit) to answer questions, and then share insights in a whole class discussion. (30 minutes)
2. Introduce the historical/literary background of "Hands" using the information in section 2 above – students need to have a good understanding of Confucian tradition, the May Fourth movement, and Xiao Hong's biography before reading the story. (15 minutes).
3. On smartboard, project images of white, gray/black, and red (see *Appendix A*) – give students a few minutes to record their emotional responses to each image in the chart provided (see *Appendix B*) – i.e. "How does this color make you feel?" → answers will vary WIDELY. After they have recorded emotional responses to each image, they will get together with same group from first activity and share. Groups will then brainstorm together to come up with instances of color symbolism from texts with which they are already familiar, and record in same chart. I have provided an example on chart (*Appendix B*) to get them started. (30 minutes)
4. Homework: read Xiao Hong's short story "Hands"

#### DAY TWO:

1. As a whole class, return to the introductory questions from day one (numbers 1-3 in section 3 above) and see if their responses from day one have changed/evolved after reading the story. Next, project questions 4-8 on smartboard and discuss– make sure students make connections to Chinese history and literature from the lecture given on day one. (35 minutes)
2. Have students get in the same three groups as day one – using the text of "Hands" group one needs to find textual references to the color white, group two to black/gray, and group three to red. Each group should record their textual references in the same chart they began on day one. Once the groups have finished their individual colors, they will share their findings with the rest of the class to record. (40 minutes)
  - *White references:*
    - *Winter landscape (Xiao 175)*
    - *Principal's hands (177)*
    - *Principal's face (177)*

- *Wang Yaming's father's towel (179, 186)*
- *Marija's (The Jungle) death in the snow (184)*
- *Scarf around Wang Yaming's head (186)*
- *Narrator staring after Wang Yaming in snow (187)*
- *Black/Gray references:*
  - *Wang Yaming's hands (174, 175, 176, 179)*
  - *Wang Yaming's father's hands (177)*
  - *Wang Yaming's dark circles (178)*
  - *Uniform (178, 181)*
  - *Eggs from dye pot (182)*
  - *Dyeing socks (181)*
  - *Clouds in winter sky (183)*
  - *Description of family's dyeing responsibilities (183)*
- *Red references:*
  - *Wang Yaming's bloodshot eyes (176)*
  - *Principal's "bloodless" hands (177)*
  - *Cobbled road to school (179)*
  - *Wang Yaming's elder sister's hands (185)*
  - *Elder sister as "murderess" (185)*

### DAY THREE

1. Begin with lecture on the traditional meaning of white, black/gray, and red in Chinese culture (each is also traditionally associated with an element). (20 minutes)
  - **History:** In traditional Taoist belief, there were only two colors – black and white, which represented the complementary principles of yin-yang. Later, when the ancient Taoists developed the Five Elements Theory, the spectrum of main colors (and their associated elements) included black (which is commonly considered blue-black), white, red, green, and yellow (“Symbolism” np).
  - **White** (metal): There are some positive connotations for white, such as purity and righteousness (Olesen np), but it also represents mourning, withering, sadness and the presence of ancestral spirits – it is considered the appropriate color for funerals (“Symbolism np).
  - **Black/Gray** (water): The Chinese word for black is “hei,” which indicates bad luck or irregularity (Olesen np). It is traditionally the color for young boys to wear, and has some conflicting meanings – positively, it can represent depth, knowledge, and power (“Symbolism” np), and negatively, it is cruelty and suffering (Olesen np).
  - **Red** (fire): Red is the traditional bridal color, and represents luck, happiness, joy, fertility, celebration, and enthusiasm (Olesen np).
2. Conduct a class discussion on the meaning of the colors in “Hands” versus those colors’ meanings both in Chinese tradition and in the literature with which students were familiar (reference chart from days one and two). As a class, come to a conclusion about what Xiao Hong was doing with her use and manipulation of color

in “Hands.” Generally, the story uses white and black/gray in a traditional way – the school and associated white landscape, along with the principal’s pallor is symbolic of mourning, withering, and death for Wang Yaming; the black/gray of Wang Yaming’s hands and the dyeing profession is the source of her suffering. Conversely, the color red in “Hands” seems subversive to tradition – the red of the school and on Wang Yaming’s elder sister’s hands are sources of suffering, not the traditional joy/celebration of red). Xiao Hong might have used colors in this way to represent the tension between traditional Confucian belief and the progressive ideals of the May Fourth Movement. Direct students to fill in the last column of the chart during the discussion. (30 minutes)

3. As a closing activity, have the students (in the same groups as days 1-2) find an image of their color (via technology) that better corresponds to that color’s meaning in “Hands” – groups will present their image and explain their choice to the class. (25 minutes)

### 5. Citations

Gray Wood Background. Digital Image. *Headless Horseman NYC*. Wallpaper Cave, 12 Nov. 2013. Web. 16 Aug. 2015.

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“Symbolism of Colors.” *NationsOnline.org*, 1998-2015. Web. 5 Aug. 2015.

*White Landscape*. Digital Image. *Pholugum Blog: Through the Camera Eye*. Word Press, 21 Feb. 2013. Web. 16 August 2015.

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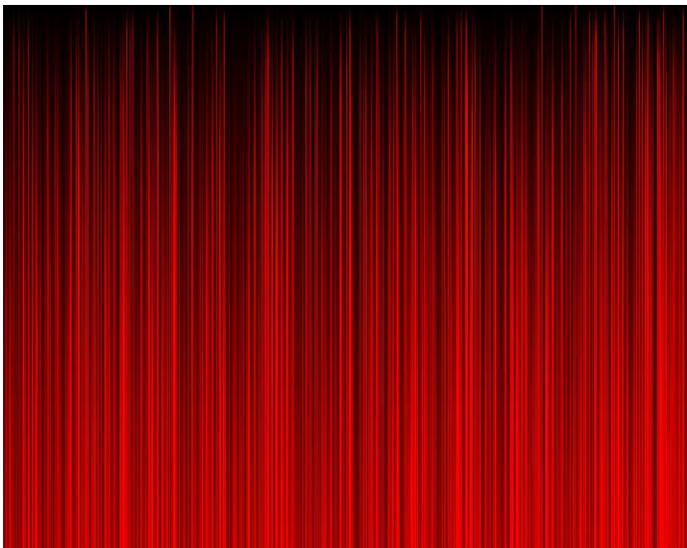
*Appendix A*



(Winter np)



(Gray np)



(Red np)

**Appendix B:** Chart for student use and activities days 1-3

## Color Symbolism in “Hands”

	White	Black/Gray	Red
Emotional response to initial image			
Symbols in literature and associated meaning of color	Ex) Snow White = purity & innocence		
References to color in “Hands”			
Traditional Chinese meaning of color			
Conclusion about use of color in “Hands”			