

## **“The Priest of Shiga Temple and His Love” by MISHIMA Yukio**

### **Summary:**

The Great Priest of Shiga Temple, a man of eminent virtue, meditates one evening near the edge of the lake. After viewing the springtime scenery, The Great Imperial Concubine drives by the same lake. The priest falls in love and is unable to concentrate on his quest for the Pure Land. Thinking that if he could see her once more his love would vanish, the priest travels to her residence. After he is allowed to clasp her hand, the priest leaves and a few days later achieves rebirth in the Pure Land.

### **Activities for students:**

#### **Pre-reading**

##### *Background:*

1. Handout on Buddhism
2. Information on author MISHIMA, Yukio. It is included in Modern Japanese Literature Coursebook from Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School, Summer 2000.

##### *Activities:*

1. Vocabulary handout. Give some class time to define words. Give definitions for words that may be difficult to define in the context of the story. Ask students to define the words not completed as homework.
2. Warm-up activity. Ask students to take out a sheet of paper or their journals. Tell students to close their eyes and imagine the most beautiful nature scene they can. The teacher will use appropriate “nature” background music while students imagine for two – three minutes.

Ask students to freewrite or write a journal entry about that beautiful scene, using specific sensory images and details. They may even choose to exaggerate the beauty.

Use about ten minutes for the writing activity.

Ask students to choose the best sentence from their writing and volunteer to read that sentence. After four or five volunteers, read the first eight paragraphs of the story.

Discuss. Compare/contrast those paragraphs with their language, content, imagery, or whatever you may have covered recently.

### **Post-reading**

1. Review using 5 W's technique.

When: Spring during the time period of the Court system

Where: Shiga, Japan. Later in the story the priest travels to the Great Imperial Concubine's residence in the Kyogoku area of the capital.

Who: The action revolves around the virtuous Priest of Shiga Temple and the Great Imperial Concubine.

What: The priest, while meditating, catches a glimpse of the Great Imperial Concubine as she gazes at a lake. The priest had removed himself from the Floating World (life and its relationships) so completely that he felt immune to it. However, "In the twinkling of an eye the present world...wreaked its revenge with terrible force on the priest" (*Modern Japanese Literature*, 85).

How/Why: He was consumed with thoughts of the concubine. Others had noticed the priest gazing at the concubine and reported that since he had seen her, he had acted as one who was crazed. Even though he tried various methods of meditation, he could not rid himself of her image. Eventually he traveled to the

capital to see her. When he did, he simply held her hand, wept, and left her presence. A few days later he died and achieved rebirth in the Pure Land.

## 2. Literary Analysis

*I have deliberately switched the discussion questions with literary analysis.*

Divide students into five groups. Each student will need his Short Story Terms sheet and the handout on Buddhism.

Group 1 – Using your Short Story Terms sheet and the story “The Priest of Shiga

Temple...”, find examples of as many of the terms as possible in paragraphs 1-6. Write the term, give the story page number and quote the first four words of the example. If the example is of imagery, tell which sense is being appealed to.

Group 2 – Do the same as Group 1 but for pages 294, paragraph 7 through page 300, space near bottom of page.

Group 3 – Do the same as Group 1 for page 300, last paragraph through the end of the story.

Group 4 – Find and explain references to terms, beliefs, and practices of Buddhism on 294, paragraph 7 – page 300, space near bottom of page.

Group 5 – Do the same as Group 4 but for page 300, last paragraph through the end of the story.

## 3. Discussion questions

- What are some of the specific beliefs of Buddhism that you found in this story? Use your group notes as you answer.

- What literary elements did you find in this story? Narrator? Person (first or third)?  
Elements from short story terms sheet?
- Why do you think the priest cried and then left after he met with the Great Imperial Concubine ?
- Some people see this story as being less about the priest and more about the concubine.  
Why do you think people might have this perception? Which way do you read the story? Why?
- Read two setsuwa tales, “The Failure” on page 116 and “Not Exactly the Land of Bliss” page 118 from Traditional Japanese Literature coursebook on Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School, summer 2000.

These tales are examples of failed “rebirth” tales. How does “The Priest of Shiga Temple” seem, at first, to be a “failed” rebirth tale? Does the priest truly fail?

#### 4. Writing prompts

- Expand your freewrite or journal warm-up activity into a descriptive essay. Be sure you use specific nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and strong verbs.
- Write a monologue of the Great Imperial Concubine’s thoughts from the moment she learned the priest was standing in the corner of her garden until the moment she told her maid to invite the priest to come in and kneel outside her blind. Use first person (the concubine’s point of view). What did she think when she first learned of the priest’s presence? Why did she become frightened? What made her finally invite him in? How do her feelings about the Pure Land affect her decision?
- Write a monologue of the Priest of Shiga Temple’s thoughts from the moment he sees the Great Imperial Concubine until the moment he leaves her presence. Use first

person (the priest's point of view). What did he think when he first saw the concubine? What was it about *this* woman which tempted him to break his vows of chastity? What was the priest fighting (page 300, bottom)? How do his feelings about the Pure Land affect his decision? Why did he finally decide to leave after simply holding her hand?

### **Related Activities:**

Divide the class into groups. Each group will choose one of the following activities.

1. Research Buddhism and as many of the terms in the first six paragraphs as you can find. Which form of Buddhism do you think is predominant in this story - or is there a combination of forms?
2. Research the court system, especially as it applies to the position of women within the court. Consider why concubines were common, what rights they had, what their social and political positions were.
3. Within your group write a renga (linked verse) using some aspect of this story. It could be from the point of view of the concubine's maid, the person who reported the priest's infatuation, or another view of your choice. Be sure you follow the requirements of the renga format and content.

### **Related Reading:**

L'Amour, Louis. "Trap of Gold" – a short story about giving up self and family to reach a goal

Soto, Gary. "The No-Guitar Blues" – a short story about Fausto, a boy who wanted something so powerfully he compromises his values and beliefs

Tyler, Royall, translator and editor. *Japanese Tales*. New York: Pantheon, 1987. Taken from Traditional Japanese Literature, coursebook for Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School, Summer Workshop 2000.

The setsuwa tales in Tyler's book are ancient Buddhist Miracle Tales used for teaching values and morality. Mishima's more recent story is patterned after the ancient tales.

### Vocabulary

- |                          |                           |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. cordon – p. 292       | 22. ineffable – p. 296    |
| 2. lapis lazuli – p. 292 | 23. subjugate – p. 297    |
| 3. daises – p. 292       | 24. refulgent – p. 297    |
| 4. paeans – p. 292       | 25. severed – p. 297      |
| 5. ablutions – p. 292    | 26. sutra – p. 297        |
| 6. pellucid – p. 293     | 27. degeneracy – p. 298   |
| 7. viands - p. 293       | 28. prelate – p. 298      |
| 8. wafted – p. 293       | 29. rakes – p. 299        |
| 9. trammels – p. 293     | 30. mien – p. 299         |
| 10. mundane – p. 293     | 31. ecclesiastic – p. 299 |
| 11. yojana – p. 294      | 32. requited – p. 299     |
| 12. eminent – p. 294     | 33. paramours – p. 299    |
| 13. ascetic – p. 294     | 34. dalliance – p. 299    |
| 14. carnal – p. 295      | 35. pathos – p. 299       |
| 15. winnowed – p. 295    | 36. bereft – p. 300       |
| 16. terrestrial – p. 295 | 37. tonsure – p. 300      |

17. evanescent – p. 295

18. transcended – p. 295

19. austere – p. 296

20. wreaked – p. 296

21. apparition – p. 296

38. sougning – p. 300

39. insipid – p. 300

40. paltry – p. 300

41. dispersal – p. 300

42. paradoxical – p. 301

43. diadem – p. 301

44. baldachins – p. 301

45. obdurately – p. 302

46. guiles – p. 303

47. succumb - 307

48. pallid – p. 307

49. imbued – p. 307

50. sutra – p. 307

Use 20 of the vocabulary words as you write a setsuwa tale. Remember that the purpose of a setsuwa tale is to teach a moral or a lesson. Underline each vocabulary word.

## Short Story Terms

1. imagery
2. protagonist
3. antagonist
4. static character
5. dynamic character
6. round character
7. flat character
8. allusion
9. dialect
10. idiom
11. connotation
12. denotation
13. theme
14. point of view
15. tone
16. verisimilitude
17. hyperbole
18. juxtaposition
19. metaphor
20. simile



## Buddhist Themes in Medieval and Edo Literature Names and Terms

1. Buddhism: a religion that originated in India approximately 2500 years ago with the teachings of the historical Buddha. It arrived in Japan, via China and Korea, in the sixth century. Buddhism teaches that desire (for money, glory, love, etc.) traps human beings in an endless cycle of rebirth and suffering; ultimate relief from suffering, however, a state known as enlightenment, can be achieved by eliminating desire.
2. esoteric Buddhism: a branch of Buddhism that entered Japan in the eighth century. It holds that individuals can achieve enlightenment through their own efforts and stresses ritual meditation (reciting sutras or Buddhist scriptures), the contemplation of sacred diagrams of the cosmos (mandalas), etc.
3. Pure Land Buddhism: a branch of Buddhism that began to flourish in the twelfth century. It holds that individuals cannot achieve enlightenment through their own efforts; their only recourse is to throw themselves on the mercy of Amida Buddha (of the Pure Land Paradise) by calling on his name.

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