

A Lesson Plan
for
Standing Woman
by
Japanese author
Yasutaka Tsutsui

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Randolph School
Huntsville, Alabama
August 2007

Literary Criticism and Composition
9th-Grade Students
Four to five 45-minutes classes

Context:

- Randolph School. Independent college preparatory school in Huntsville, Alabama
- Literary Criticism and Composition - 9th grade students
- (15-20 students per class)
- Four to five, 45-minute classes

Summary:

Yasutaka Tsutsui presents a disturbing look at a future repressed society in the science fiction short story *Standing Woman*. In this snapshot of a future Tokyo, the unnamed protagonist feels constrained by a society that will not let him write any story that might do either harm or good. He describes a crowded urban setting with scant green trees. Readers soon discover that because of food shortages, pets were planted and fertilized in order to grow into trees. The cats and dogs are planted as dogpillars and catpillars. They live in this planted state, responding to their environment, before becoming completely vegetized dogtrees and cattrees with branches and leaves growing out of their immobile bodies. Later we learn this society also punishes free-thinking and free-speaking individuals by planting and fertilizing humans to create manpillars and womanpillars that eventually become vegetized trees without any recognizable human features.

The Big Picture:

Tsutsui, a well known Japanese science fiction writer, is an “in your face” writer of unconventional and provocative literature. He is a novelist, playwright, and author born in Osaka and educated in Kyoto. He is known as the Japanese guru of Metafiction. Metafiction, which “poses questions about the relationship between fiction and reality,” is associated with Modernist and Post-modernist fiction. Meta fiction can be loosely seen as when the character in a work of fiction participates in the act of writing or reading literature.

The short story *Standing Woman*, published in Japan in 1974, was published in *Omni* magazine in February 1981 and included in the 1989 collection *The Best Japanese Science Fiction Stories*. This is a great short story to pair with the classic Ray Bradbury science fiction novel *Fahrenheit 451*.

Fahrenheit 451 was originally a short story entitled *The Fireman*. Like *Standing Woman*, *Fahrenheit 451* also deals with a dystopian society where people are punished for dissenting thoughts and actions that don't conform to the norms of an oppressed society. Pairing these short stories is an excellent way to seamlessly include a piece of Asian literature alongside traditional Western literature. Presenting this piece also allows for students to think critically and comparatively about the degrees to which a society can become authoritarian. Students may also see that many human concerns about society are universal and not just Western in nature.

Discussion Questions and Answers:

1. Why do authors write stories? *Stories are written to: entertain people, make people think, make people feel something, inspire people to take action.*
2. What is a “good” story? *A story that: adds meaning to your life, makes you happy, moves you, teaches a good lesson.*

3. What is a “harmful” story? *A story that: scares you, makes you sad, makes you cry, shows you what happens if you make a bad choice, uses bad language, depicts violence.*
4. Who should decide the difference between good and bad/harmful stories? *These are personal and subjective choices. If the stories are neither good nor harmful, would the stories just be boring and predictable?*
5. What type of society would say that you can’t write or read stories that make you feel good, make you think, or even scare you? *A controlling conformist society, a society where everyone thinks the same things.*
6. Why does the protagonist/unnamed writer not think about whether he is able to write stories that might actually be good or harmful? *He doesn’t think about “illegal” stories because if he thinks about it he might want to try and write a story that is not allowed in his society.*
7. What happens to people who read (and think) in Montag’s society? *They end up having their homes burned or being arrested.*
8. What happens to people who think and question society in *Standing Woman*? *They end up being planted in the ground.*
9. The author states that trees are priceless in the megalopolis. What do you picture when the author describes a megalopolis and why do you think trees would be so important? *Answers will vary. Crowded big city with many modern buildings and few green trees. Trees would provide nature and soften the harshness of a concrete jungle. Trees would provide shade and beauty.*
10. What is a dogpillar? *A dog that has been planted into the ground. Food shortages led to pets being planted so there would be more food for the people.*
11. We are first introduced to the author’s sense of loss and sadness when he speaks about his dog. What is the name of the writer’s dog? *Buff*
12. Where was he planted? *He was planted on the edge of town near the cemetery.*
13. What happened that makes the loss of his dog even sadder than normal? *The fertilizer trucks do not go to the outskirts of town often so his dog starved and instead of growing into a green tree he died and became a fossil. He is a bonepillar.*
14. What effect does it have that there are no proper nouns allowed for plants in this society? *The outcasts of society are nameless. People living in the society are encouraged to forget trees that were once animals. They may be living plants but they are less alive than they once were.*

15. When the writer/protagonist meets the older man Hiyama in the park they do a few things which are illegal. What do they do that is illegal? *They break the law by using proper nouns when referring to their dogpillars. They criticize the law against proper nouns for plants. They discuss writing.*
16. Why did Hiyama give up writing? *Because "It's become a hard world to write in." He didn't want to become exposed. He decided to keep his comfortable life by conforming.*
17. What does he say about regretting his decision to stop writing? *He thinks he should have written boldly and been arrested.*
18. By saying it is better to be arrested, what is he saying about his current life? *That it might have been more honorable to speak out about what you believe instead of keeping quiet. Maybe his life is not better if he can't express himself through writing.*
19. Why do the two men stop talking about writing and the past? *Because they don't know who will be listening.*
20. Why does the protagonist know he will never accept Hiyama's invitation to his house? *They say two writers getting together is illegal assembly.*
21. One sees giving up writing as a gesture of conforming to society and the other sees giving up writing as a gesture against society. Which man is right? *Answers will vary.*
22. What did the Postman do which resulted in him being planted? *He complained about his wages.*
23. What is ironic about this man being planted near a hospital? *Because a hospital is for helping people and keeping people alive. This man is slowly "dying" and becoming a tree, and there is no help for him in this society.*
24. Why is the writer's wife becoming a tree? *She complained about the prices of items at the stores, but her worst offence was complaining about the government.*
25. What evidence can you give that shows how the protagonist feels about his wife? *He says his heart "winced with pain" and that he feels anguish when he tries to forget that his wife will soon become a tree. He goes to see her even though he could get in trouble for talking to her. He worries about her getting wet in the rain and being hungry. He feels furious rage when he discovers that some people hurt her. He tries to comfort her by saying that he will have her moved to their back yard when she is fully changed into a tree.*
26. Why do you think the author makes a point to drink his coffee black because of what is happening to his wife? *He feels numb, and he doesn't think he should enjoy the pleasure of sugar when his wife suffers. He wants to suffer and feel alive by tasting the bitterness of black coffee. The society is so bland he can't feel anything.*

27. How would you feel if someone important to you were planted, and what might you do? *Answers will vary.*
28. Why does the protagonist feel like a manpillar at the end of the story after he visits his wife? *He feels stifled and dead after his painful encounter with his once lively wife who is becoming more stiff and tree-like. He feels like part of himself is with his wife and becoming a pillar. He feels so numb that he wants to taste the black bitterness of his coffee in order to feel more alive. He hears about more people being turned into manpillars.*
29. What do you think the protagonist means at the end of the story when he implies that the people living in this world are dried grasses? *He means that the people are dried-up/dead. The people were once healthy/green. The people were not “watered” and dried-up.*
30. What literary device is the author using when he compares the people to grass without using the words “like” or “as”? *Metaphor*
31. What is the difference between healthy green grass and dried grass? *Healthy green grass is provided rich soil and water.*
32. The protagonist mentions that dried grasses do not flower. How do people flower in society? *If people are give opportunities they may succeed. People think of new ideas when they read and write. People grow from learning, talking, and reading books that change them and inspire them.*
33. Why can't people flower in this particular time and place? *They can't read harmful stories because the stories might cause them to think and possibly change their behavior. They can't read good stories that might make them happy. They can't express themselves. They can't complain about how much they are paid or how much things cost because they will be planted like the postman or the writers wife. They just aren't allowed to think or question anything.*
34. Suppose *Standing Woman* was expanded into a full-length novel, how might the protagonist end up showing courage as the story progresses? *Answers will vary. Meeting with Hiyama and other writers. Speaking out against what is going on. Writing harmful and good stories to wake people up. Meeting and protesting with college students like the ones he heard about in the coffee shop.*

Activities:

Assign list of vocabulary words for students to define as a pre-reading homework assignment. Review vocabulary list in class. See **Appendix A**. Assign the students to read the short story online that night. Ask students to jot down any additional words they are unfamiliar with that are not on the vocabulary list.

During the next class period (or two) lead a class discussion with the discussion questions or divide the discussion between four to six groupings of students. After the students have worked together to answer their assigned questions they take turns reporting the answers to each of the questions to the class.

Have pairs of students use paper, scissors, glue, and colored markers to make 3-D graphic organizers to represent ideas or themes from the story. Have each team show and explain their idea with a specific quote from the work to the class. See **Appendix B** and **Appendix C**.

Finally, have students complete the chart examining themes represented in both *Standing Woman* and *Fahrenheit 451*.

See **Appendix D**.

Connections to Other Literary Works:

This science fiction story is to be taught in conjunction with *Fahrenheit 451*, another writer's vision of a future world that controls individual thoughts and actions. Have students individually complete worksheets connecting ideas present in both *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury and *Standing Woman* by Yasutaka Tsutsui. Worksheet assists in reviewing ideas and specific excerpts of text to prepare for in-class essay writing assignment. See **Appendix D**. Students may use the comparison chart to formulate a thesis statement and compose an in-class essay connecting both science fiction stories to one theme or idea.

Resources:

Alvis, Andra. Lecture notes: "Modern Japanese Literature." Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School. Indiana University Bloomington.

Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. Ballantine Books: NY, 1978.

Diet of Japan . Wikipedia 15 August 2007. < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diet_of_Japan >

Fisher, Douglas, Nancy Frey and Dinah Zike. *Foldables: Improving Learning with 3-D Interactive Graphic Organizers*. Classroom Notes Plus. National Council of Teachers of English. August 2007.

<<http://www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/cnp/articles/127704.htm>>.

Japan Literature Net. *Profile of Author Yasutaka Tsutsui*. 15 August 2007. <

<http://www.jali.or.jp/tti/en/prof-en.htm>>.

Merriam-Webster Online. <http://www.m-w.com/>

Tsutsui, Yasutaka. Standing Woman. 15 August 2007. <
<http://www.jali.or.jp/tti/en/short/standing-woman1-1.htm>>.

Appendix A

Use the Merriam Webster online dictionary to define the following vocabulary words that appear in the Japanese science fiction short-story *The Standing Woman* by Yasutaka Tsutsui.

1. Desolating
2. Diet of Japan (see wikipedia instead of m-w.com)
3. Falteringly
4. Feigned
5. Ginza
6. Graven
7. Guffawing
8. Haberdashery
9. Lobotomy
10. Luster
11. Masochistically
12. Megalopolis
13. Self-contempt
14. Uproariously
15. Vivacity
16. Winced

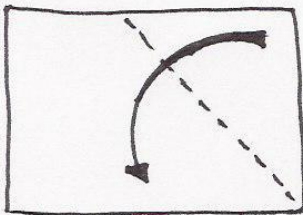
Appendix B

Key ideas for graphic organizers
Keeping Order
Violence
Spying

Writing/reading
Self-expression/speaking out
Punishment

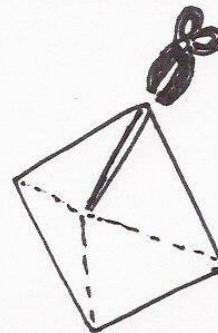
Conformity
Silence
Loss

①



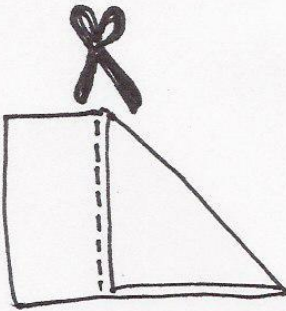
Fold up lower corner of 8 1/2 x 11 paper

⑤



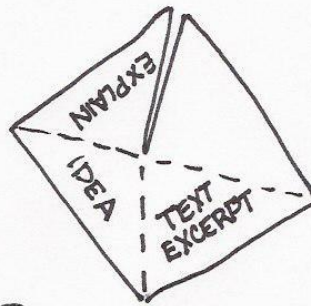
cut on one fold to the center

②



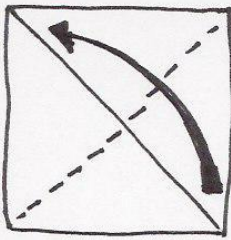
cut off excess paper and unfold

⑥



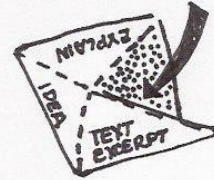
Students write on three sides

③



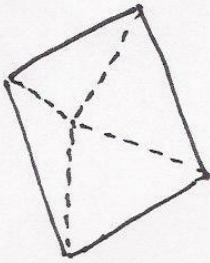
Fold in half again and unfold

⑦



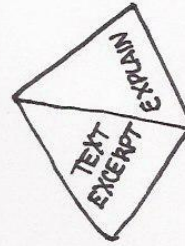
Glue blank side under to form pyramid

④



Turn upside-down so point of pyramid is up

⑧



Pyramid of thinking graphic organizer

Appendix C

See image above.

Instructions for graphic organizers:

Students will choose a key concept to write on one triangle of their graphic organizer pyramid. On another triangle they will find a specific excerpt from the work that is connected to this concept. On the third triangle they will explain in their own words the connection between the text and the idea/theme. The students may make small drawings or add synonyms to further express the main concept on the first triangle. Students will stand and explain their graphic organizer to the class.

Appendix D

| Theme /work | Direct quote from story | Explain how the quote is connected to theme/idea |
|------------------------|---|---|
| Silence 451 | <i>Listen to it! Nothing and nothing. So much silence, Millie, I wonder how you'd take it? Would you shout, Shut up, shut up! Millie, Millie. And he was sad. (142)</i> | <i>The silence is a contrast to the hum of noise he left behind. He is sad to leave his wife even though she would hate the silence he is enjoying. He is sad even though Millie betrayed him.</i> |
| Silence SW | <i>It'd be better if you didn't come again [she said]...For a few minutes we were silent. Then my wife spoke abruptly. 'Goodbye.' (Chapter 2 online)</i> | <i>She feels lost and knows he should not be talking to her. She doesn't want him planted. She feels less human and it hurts her to be reminded of when she was human and lived with her husband.</i> |
| Control (internal) 451 | | |
| Control (internal) SW | | |
| Conformity 451 | | |
| Conformity SW | | |

| | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|--|
| Keeping Order 451 | | |
| Keeping Order SW | | |
| Loss 451 | | |
| Loss SW | | |
| Violence 451 | | |
| Violence SW | | |
| Punishment 451 | | |
| Punishment SW | | |
| Speaking out/ Self-expression 451 | | |
| Speaking out/ Self-expression SW | | |
| Spying 451 | | |

| | | |
|------------|--|--|
| Spying SW | | |
| Reading451 | | |
| Writing SW | | |