

“Standing Woman” by Yasutaka Tsutsui

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Grade: 10
Subject Area: Introduction to Literature
Time Requirement: 2-3 class periods

1. Lesson Objectives

(Common Core Standards)

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1

Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.2

Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.3

Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences.

(Dystopias Unit Objectives)

Express areas of improvement for our country's government and suggest methods of improvement.

2. Summary

The protagonist of the story is a writer who has just completed a story that does “neither harm nor good” (Tsutsui 130). This hints at the oppressive society in which he lives. He avoids thinking about whether he even could write a story that could do harm or good.

On his way to mail the story, he stops at a park and the reader is introduced to something called a “dog-pillar.” Through a conversation the protagonist has with an old man he often sees in the park, the dog-pillar is gradually revealed to be a former living dog that has been “vegetized,” or turned into a plant to serve as greenery for the park. Rules of the society are also revealed: you can't call a dog- or man-pillar by its name; you can't give them new names either. The old man finds out the young man is a writer, and comments that he used to be a writer too, but he stopped writing because he couldn't bring himself to write what he really wanted to write—social criticism—and then pay the price for it. They quickly end this conversation, afraid that someone might be listening. The old man invites the protagonist to stop over at his home sometime and the protagonist agrees, though he knows he never will due to such a meeting being illegal.

The man proceeds down the road and gives his envelop to a man-pillar dressed as a postman. Illicitly, he speaks with the man-pillar, finding out that a comment about low pay is what resulted in his being made into a man-pillar. He also asks a few questions about the vegetation process. The protagonist shares with the man-pillar that his own wife has just been made into a man-pillar for complaining about the government and high prices at a women's get-together.

The protagonist leaves, passing a man-pillar that is fast becoming a man-tree and thinks about his wife; he decides to visit her. He has an emotional conversation with his wife, who wants to

quickly finish her development into a man-tree, losing all of her humanity forever. He finds out that two drunks harassed (and potentially raped) her the night before, though she simply calls it a “prank.” He promises his wife that he’ll have her moved to his yard once she’s become a man-tree. She asks him not to come again and he says he won’t, but then says he probably will.

He goes to a coffee shop where he punishes himself by drinking coffee black, without the cream and sugar. He listens to a few students talk about government protestors being made into man-pillars, then hush themselves out of worry. As he leaves the coffee shop, he notes hopelessly that he already feels like a man-pillar himself.

3. Historical/Literary Context

When literary critics Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, in an interview with Japanese science fiction author Yasutaka Tsutsui, noted that Tsutsui’s 1974 short story “Standing Woman” begins with a rather pessimistic line (“These days, you can’t write stories that might do either harm or good”) Tsutsui concurred that the tone is pessimistic. He replied, “It could have been that I predicted this [politically correct] kind of age” (McCaffery & Gregory 207). Indeed, in 1993, Tsutsui came under fire when authorities opposed including in an elementary school textbook a short story of his which they believed was discriminatory of those with epilepsy (Gottlieb 112). In response, Tsutsui went on a writing strike, refusing to publish any works in print media from 1993-1996 (“SFE”).

Such a strike hardly mattered in terms of his popularity or career, as he was already known by then as one of the “Big Three” of 20th century Japanese Science Fiction Writers (“Profile”) as well as the “guru of Japanese metafiction,” (“SFE”). Tsutsui was born on September 24, 1934, studied and wrote about psychoanalysis and surrealism in graduate school (“Profile”) and was heavily influenced by Darwin, Freud, and the Marx Brothers (“SFE”). In 1961, he created the science fiction fanzine *Null*, and in 1965 he published his first novel, *48 Oku no Moso* [4.8 *Billion Delusions*] (“Profile”). By the 1990’s, he had won many of the top science fiction and mainstream literature awards (“SFE”).

Western science fiction writers have long had a fascination with Japan as a setting (Posadas 37), perhaps because of Japan’s economic success, particularly in the areas of economics and video games, as well as the modernization of their urban centers, in the latter part of the twentieth century (Ferrell, qtd. in Posadas 37). “Standing Woman” is interesting when read in this literary and historical context, as it presents a sort of reaction against Westerner’s perceptions of Japan, in that technology, combined with governmental control, has produced a dystopian society in the story.

According to Japanese literary critics, the influence of Buddhism present in Heian poetry is still present in modern works (Rexroth, qtd. in Posadas). Accordingly, twice in “Standing Woman,” the protagonist’s wife, who has been turned into a man-pillar, is described as looking like a statue of the Buddha. Just before the protagonist notices blood on his wife’s skirt, he notes, “When I raised my head and looked at her again, she was gazing steadily at me with eyes that had lost a little of their luster, her whole face beaming in a faint smile like a carved image of Buddha. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile like that” (Tsutsui 141). Similarly, when the protagonist leaves, he looks back to find “Michiko was following me with her eyes, still

smiling like a graven Buddha” (Tsutsui 142). This is very ironic. While it’s true that as a man-pillar the wife will feel no more pain as soon as she can no longer desire anything—the less she eats, she says, the less hungry she feels (Tsutsui 140)—she did not become a man-pillar/”metaphorical Buddhist” by choice but by angering the totalitarian government. Posada writes, “This [Buddhist] sense of perfection in sheer nothingness might be better considered an anti-utopia”. “Standing Woman” fits well into the genre of dystopian fiction.

4. Discussion Questions and Answers

Plot Comprehension Questions:

- a. *What is the profession of the protagonist?* Writer.
- b. *Describe two things the protagonist and the old man talk about when they meet in the park.* They talk about feeding the dog-pillar; the old man’s former pet and his fate in becoming a dog-pillar as well; the fact that the old man used to be a writer but stopped writing because he couldn’t bear to write under the current government; the old man gives the protagonist his address and invites him over.
- c. *Why was the postman turned into a man-pillar?* He complained that a postman’s pay is too low and his boss heard him.
- d. *What exactly is a dog-pillar, or cat-pillar, or man-pillar?* They are a living dog, cat, or man, planted into the ground in a special liquid fertilizer that somehow turns them into a plant. They may or may not be lobotomized before planting, and the change from man to man-pillar to man-tree is slow enough to observe.
- e. *Why was the man’s wife turned into a man-pillar?* She complained at a friend’s house that prices were too high and criticized the government as well, and a friend turned her in.
- f. *List two things the man says or does that show he feels bad for his wife’s situation.* He visits her; he asks her if she’s hungry; he offers to bring her food; he risks his life by talking to her; he is concerned about the two drunks harassing her; he promises to have her replanted in his yard after she is vegetized.
- g. *List two things the wife says or does that show she is losing her humanity.* She asks him to bring food; she asks him not to come and visit her anymore; her eyes have lost their luster; she is described as looking like a Buddha, without any desire; she doesn’t seem that concerned by the drunks who have hurt her, causing her to bleed.
- h. *Explain the mindset of the man when he leaves the coffeeshop.* He seems to have given in. He feels hopeless. He is humming a song—likely propaganda—about man-pillars. He says he already feels like a man-pillar.

Key Thought Questions:

- a. *What type of government do you think the protagonist lives under? Use lines from the story to support your point.* The protagonist likely lives under some kind of totalitarian government. The government is always watching its citizens. For example, although the protagonist tells the old man he will stop by sometimes, he thinks to himself, “I had no intention of visiting his house. This is a world where even two or three writers getting together is considered illegal assembly” (Tsutsui 134). The right to assembly is a basic human right, so clearly the protagonist is living under a totalitarian government. Later in the story, the students in the coffee shop who are talking about the critic and thirty students who have just been turned into man-pillars ultimately end their conversation with “Hey, let’s not talk about it. We don’t want someone to hear” (Tsutsui 143). Clearly everyone in this society is under government watch, under the thumb of “Big Brother.”
- b. *Despite the oppressive society in which they live, in what ways do the characters defy their government?* Although there are many, one good example of this occurs when the protagonist goes to visit his wife. He knows he should not be seen talking to her. As they talk he notices “The hardware store mistress, tending shop, saw me. With an air of feigned indifference, she averted her eyes and retired to the back of the store” (Tsutsui 139). Thankful for her consideration, the protagonist continues to talk to his wife, who tells them that the people who own the store are “kind at heart” (Tsutsui 140) and have asked her if she needs anything. The protagonist has also asked the postman man-pillar if he needs anything. These citizens are risking becoming man-pillars themselves by not acknowledging the dehumanization of their friends and relatives until they are forced to by its literal completion.
- c. *Do you respect the actions taken by the protagonist in the story? Why or why not?* Although he does risk his safety by talking to both the postman man-pillar and his wife, the protagonist misses opportunities for social criticism—through his writing and through sharing with the reader that he will likely never go to the old man writer’s house to meet with him. The protagonist clearly doesn’t want to rock the boat. The scene at the end of the story at the coffee shop also seems weak: “The bitterness of sugarless, creamless coffee pierced my body, and I savored it masochistically. *From now on I’ll always drink it black.* That was what I resolved” (Tsutsui 142). His wife has basically just been murdered for a simple statement. And the only thing he will do about it is drink his coffee black?! That doesn’t sound like punishment to me! I think the protagonist is a bit weak.
- d. *Japan saw a period of flourishing development in the area of technology and urbanization in the last half of the twentieth century. In what way is this story a reaction to that development?* In many ways, this story is a warning against technology. Just because we have the technology to do something doesn’t mean we should do it. In the real world, advanced technology has often led to ethical debates—e.g. in the areas of privacy regarding the internet or cell phones, or medical research and stem cells. And while maintaining green space in urban centers is a good thing, using pets (because of a food crisis, which is hinted at on p. 135) as greenery and using humans which dissent against the government as greenery is, of course, unethical.

e. *One of the tenets of Buddhism is to end all pain and suffering by ending all desire. How and where is Buddhism reflected in this story?* Twice, the protagonist’s wife, who has been turned into a man-pillar, is described as looking like a statue of the Buddha. Just before the protagonist notices blood on his wife’s skirt, he notes, “When I raised my head and looked at her again, she was gazing steadily at me with eyes that had lost a little of their luster, her whole face beaming in a faint smile like a carved image of Buddha. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile like that” (Tsutsui 141). Then again, when the protagonist leaves, he looks back to find “Michiko was following me with her eyes, still smiling like a graven Buddha” (Tsutsui 142). Earlier in the story, the protagonist describes a man-pillar that has almost become a man-tree. He notes of it that “The heart has sunk into the tranquil world of plants” (Tsutsui 138). All of these quotations point to a type of existence that is Nirvana-like; however, there is great irony and sadness in the fact that these people didn’t choose this “Nirvana.” It was forced upon them due to their expressing desire—desire to have lower prices or higher pay, a desire for money or fairness in government. Though she looks like a Buddha, the man’s wife has actually been raped of her life by the government (as well as probably having been raped by the two drunks). The story indicates that life without desire is more like death than any kind of heaven.

5. Activities

Time: 2-3 Class Periods

Materials: Copies of “Standing Woman,” fake greenery, LCD projector and screen

Instructions:

Day One:

- a. Show students the “Images of Tokyo” slideshow (Appendix 1). Have them take out a piece of paper and write down words that come to mind as they view the images. Have students pair-share their words and then select a few volunteers to share with the class. Likely, students will note the heavily concreted land surface as well as the bright and colorful lights of a highly technologized society. (10 minutes)
- b. Briefly show them the chart of green space in world cities, noting that Tokyo is near the bottom. Remark that today we will be reading a science fiction story about a Japanese city that has come up with an “interesting” way to solve their lack of green space. (3 minutes)
- c. Share the background of Yasutaka Tsutsui as described in the historical/literary context of this lesson plan, including the “Tsutsui Incident,” in which Tsutsui refused to write for three years in response to the “politically correct” movement. In other words, because the world had become so sensitive to language, he feared nearly everything he wrote would be perceived as social criticism. He felt censored and thus refused to write in a censored world. (5 minutes)
- d. Hand out post-it notes to students. Instruct them to write three “thick” questions about the story as they read. Remind them that “thick” questions are questions that do go beyond the plot of the story. They are questions that are discussable. They may have more than one answer, or involve the reader’s opinion. Students should write their questions on the post-it note as they read the story, and place the post-it note on the portion of the story that prompted the question.

This way they can readily refer to direct lines from the story during tomorrow’s discussion. (5 minutes)

e. Allow students to read the story “Standing Woman” and write their thick questions. (30 minutes)

Day Two:

a. Begin with a brief reading check, using the plot comprehension questions from part 4 of this lesson plan. Collect reading checks to grade at home. (5 minutes)

b. Have students meet in groups of three or four and share their thick questions for a brief, student-led discussion. Encourage them to share the quotations from the story which prompted the questions and use quotations in their responses. As the students discuss in small groups, rotate around the room and note questions/quotations that should be shared with the class. (5-10 minutes)

c. Prompting individual students from the notes you have taken, initiate a whole class discussion that begins with student questions and finishes with the thought questions from part 4 of this lesson plan. (10 minutes)

d. Finish by discussing the first line of the story—what it means to write a story that “does harm or good.” What kinds of statements do people make that do neither harm nor good? What kind of statements do harm? Are these statements inherently bad? Should they be exempted from society? What kind of statements do good? Why would anyone want to rid society of these statements? (5 minutes)

e. Have students pair off and pretend that one of them has been turned into a man-pillar. To inspire them, give each pair a piece of fake greenery. Students should think carefully about what they might disagree with about our current government that could cause them to become a “man-pillar” if we lived under totalitarianism. (Make sure students understand that Japan is a constitutional monarchy which includes a multi-party system and that this is a fictional story!) They should also think carefully about ways people have taken action against their governments in the past. Together, pairs should write a dialogue modeled after the dialogues the protagonist has with the postman and with his wife. The students’ dialogues should include the offense that led to the person becoming a man-pillar, how it feels to be a man-pillar, and what the other person intends to do about the situation. (See rubric in Appendix 3). Their story can end hopelessly, like Tsutsui’s, or hopefully. They can write a story that does neither harm nor good, that does harm (school appropriate!) or does good. (25 minutes)

f. Conclude by telling students they may volunteer to perform their dialogues tomorrow.

Day Three:

a. Give students time to rehearse their man-tree dialogues, including acting them out with the fake greenery. (10 minutes)

- b. Have students perform their dialogues. If time permits and students are interested, allow time for class discussion of the civic issues the students bring up that caused them to be turned into man-pillars. (10-30 minutes)
- c. Depending on how many students want to perform, if time allows, view the CNN videos on green space in Tokyo, as well as the cartoons, at <http://tokyogreenspace.com/about/> and compare and contrast them to the images of Tokyo viewed before reading the story and to the society in the story (10 minutes)

6. Connections to Other Literary Works

Yasutaka's "Standing Woman" will fit excellently into a unit on dystopias, merging well with works commonly taught in U.S. schools such as Ayn Rand's *Anthem*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, Lois Lowery's *The Giver*, and Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron," as well as more contemporary novels such as Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* and Veronica Roth's *Divergent*.

Perhaps more importantly, one could consider teaching the short story in combination with a chapter from Barbara Demick's *Nothing to Envy*, about the lives of 6 defectors from North Korea. Though "Standing Woman" is fictional and Demick's book is nonfiction, many parallels can be drawn between lives of the people in the stories.

7. Citations

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Appendix 1 Images of Tokyo



“Tokyo, Japan -- National Geographic’s Ultimate City Guides.” *National Geographic*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 July 2014.



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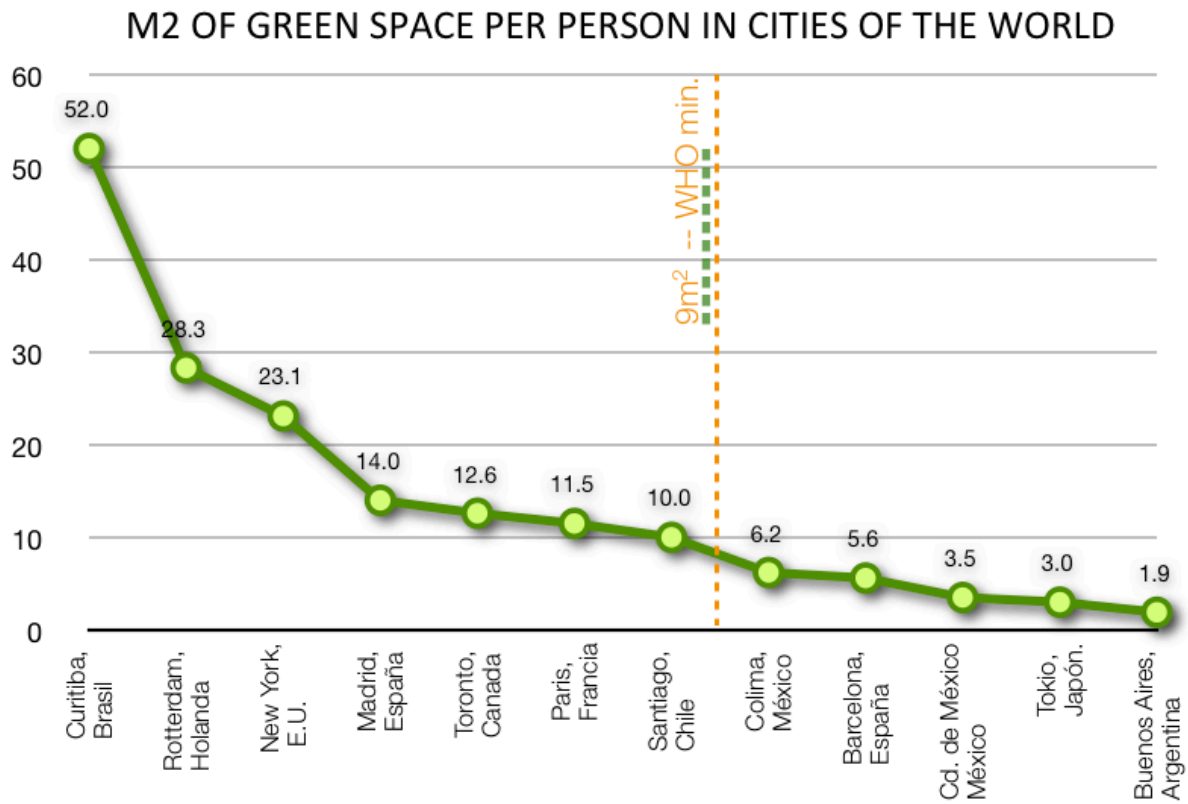


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Appendix 2



“How Much Green Space Does Your City Have?” *Sustainable Cities International Blog*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 July 2014. <<http://blog.sustainablecities.net/2011/07/13/how-many-metres-of-green-space-does-your-city-have/>>.

Appendix 3
Sample Scoring Rubric

	10-9	8	7
Incorporates civic offense	Includes a carefully articulated criticism of current school, local, state or federal government practice	Government criticism may not be clear or specific	Government criticism may be absent
Describes being a man-pillar	Incorporates and builds on descriptions of man-pillars in the story	May not incorporate or build on descriptions in the story	Descriptions may be absent or underdeveloped
Includes a response to situation	Dialogue ends with either a sense of hopelessness or hopefulness; either “does no harm or good” or tactfully “does harm” or “does good”	Tone of hopelessness or hopefulness may not be clear	Tone of hopelessness or hopefulness may not be clear; if writers elect to “do harm” they may do so without tact