

“Homecoming?”
by Han Shaogong

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11th Grade IB HL students
English Literature
Time Requirement: Two 60 minute lessons

Summary

One day, the narrator, a man named Huang Zhixian, is walking and discovers a washed-away dirt path that leads him to a mountain village. Upon entering the village, he is welcomed back by the villagers. According to the villagers, he has been gone for ten years. Curiously, all of the villagers think the narrator is named Glasses Ma and not Huang Zhixian. The narrator spends most of the story questioning whether or not he actually is Glasses Ma and whether or not he has been to this village before today. As the story unfolds, we learn several supposed details about Glasses Ma, such as: he is married; he owned a house in the village; he killed a man named Shortie Yang; he hunted with Ai Ba; he was a teacher and distributed Communist material; he taught Fourth Sister's sister acupuncture and was in some way romantically linked to her.

The narrator has an epiphany towards the middle of the story as he is bathing. He sees himself naked and, more importantly, he sees himself as an individual capable of doing something. It is during this bathing scene that he contemplates whether he received the scar on his leg from a football pitch or from killing Shortie Yang. This issue is at the crux of whether or not he is Glasses Ma.

After much waffling as to whether or not the narrator remembers the town and whether or not he is actually Glasses Ma, the narrator decides to run away from the town. He checks into a hotel and decides to call a friend who refers to him as Huang Zhixian. The narrator is confused about being called this name and wonders if this is supposed to be him. The story ends abruptly with the reader questioning the narrator's identity.

Literary Context

Born 1953, in Chang Sha, Hunan Province, China, Han Shaogong grew up during a politically difficult time in China. Han was sent in a rural village for six years during the Mao reign (*Contemporary Authors Online*). It wasn't until the Mao regime lost power that Han began to write stories featuring the destruction caused by China's oppressive government. Han quickly became a member of the "In Search of Roots" literary movement in which writers try to rediscover the cultural values and roots that they lost in the Cultural Revolution. Han did this by visiting ethnic minorities in rural areas of China and recording their legends (*Contemporary Authors Online*). Today, Han is a highly-regarded, award-winning novelist and essayist whose works have been widely translated into Western languages. Some of his most famous works include *Da-Da-Da* and *The Dictionary of Maqiao*. Today, he is a champion of democracy and actively discusses the ways in which China can engage with these ideas.

Historical Context

In order to better understand the cultural context in which "Homecoming?" (1985) was written, an examination of China in 1966-1985 is necessary. Since the "Great Leap Forward" in the late 1950s was a failure, Chairman Mao instituted what he called the "Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution" in 1966. He called on the youth to be Red Guards and reject the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, of which Mao was a "former" member (Feldman). The youth destroyed precious artwork and temples in order to rebel against the status quo. Many intellectuals, visionaries, artists, and Western-educated citizens were killed, denounced or sent into re-education camps (Feldman). In these camps, citizens were sent to remote villages where

they re-learned history and were forced to relinquish their individual ideas and support communism. Within two years, all of the leading party members of the CCP government had been taken out of office and Mao “returned” to power (Feldman). Unfortunately, in the process of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP estimates that 20-30 million people lost their lives; however, a more accurate picture is closer to 40 million (Feldman).

In Shaogong’s story, we see evidence of this rural life in contrast to the urban narrator. The narrator’s struggle with the loss of identity could in fact be someone wrestling with the effects of being a re-educated youth.

Discussion Questions and Answers

I often label my questions into three different categories: literal, interpretive and application. Literal level questions are ones that don’t involve interpretation and can be found directly in the literature. Interpretative level questions are just as they sound; they rely on the reader’s interpretation of the text. Application questions are those that require the reader to extend into his or her own life.

Literal Level Questions

1. Identify references to images of the body. Cite the exact quote.

- “Much of the dirt track had been washed out by water running down the slope [...] like a body stripped of skin and flesh, with sticks of dry bone and lumps of shriveled innards fully exposed” (Han 126).
- “I saw in the distance a few figures threshing something on the ground...it was not until I saw one of them move towards a cradle and start breast-feeding a baby, and then noticed the earrings they all had on, that I realized they were women” (Han 128).
- “It was a man, naked to the waist, his bulging muscles hard and angular like rock, not smooth and curved” (Han 130).
- “The body seemed a stranger, seemed alien” (Han 136).
- “There was only my naked self, the reality of my own self. I had hands and legs, so I could do something; I had intestines and a stomach, so I had to eat something; and I had genitals, so I could produce children” (Han 136).
- “The track had been so badly washed out by water running down the slopes that it looked like a body stripped of skin and flesh, leaving exposed sticks of dry bones and lumps of shriveled innards to bear the trampling of the straw sandals of the mountain folk” (Han 141).

2. Identify references to the pastoral or bovine elements of the village.

- Rocks looked like calves’ heads (Han 127).
- Calves were born old, they had inherited old age at birth (Han 127).
- Tree struck dead by lightning (Han 127).
- Reference to the threshold (Han 129).
- Ai Ba enters carrying a buffalo’s head (Han 130).
- Examine the run-down house of Third Grandpa (Han 134).
- Cows in the village, the call for the cows sounded like “mama” (Han 134).

- References to the rice and opium that was being farmed in the community (Han 135).
- The tree at the entrance of the village has died too (Han 135).
- Shortie Yang being strangled by a “curb” or cow rope (Han 137).
- Description of the mountain cliff and night sky (Han 139).
- Image of the old, dead tree again (Han 141).

3. What “facts” do we learn about Glasses Ma throughout the story? List as many as you can find.

- It has been ten years since he has been back to the town (Han 128).
- He is married to Liang (Han 128).
- He was supposedly thrown in jail (Han 130).
- He hunted with Ai Ba and once during a hunt got boils all over his body (Han 131).
- He was superstitious (Han 131).
- He was a teacher and Ai Ba kept books he gave out when he was a teacher. The books were about the 1911 Revolution–Marx’s essays on the peasants’ movement. [Presumably, Glasses Ma was a part of the Cultural Revolution.] (Han 132).
- He came from somewhere else to teach and was quite starved when he arrived (Han 132).
- He killed Shortie Yang (Han 133).
- He knew Third Grandpa (Han 134).
- He used to live in a house that was converted into a cow shed one year ago (Han 137).
- Fourth Sister’s sister hated Glasses Ma (Han 140).
- He taught acupuncture to Fourth Sister’s sister (Han 140).
- Fourth Sister’s sister has become a parrot and calls on Glasses Ma every day (Han 140).

4. Identify moments in the story when the narrator is confused about his identity.

- He questions his sanity, memories, and his ability to recall information (Han 127).
- He had no idea how he got to the town (Han 127).
- He has trouble understanding the vocabulary of the people in the town (Han 132).
- He knows he gave the barbell disc to Third Grandpa (Han 134).
- Narrator is now sure he had never been to the town before (Han 135).
- He questioned the cause of his scar on his leg – a football pitch injury or a nasty bite by a short, dwarfish man? Did he kill the dwarfish man? (Han 137).
- He is certain he has never been to the town before (Han 137).
- Conversation with Third Grandpa. There are no quotation marks around the dialogue. Is this a real conversation? Imagined? (Han 138).
- He says he should have come earlier to visit Third Grandpa. It never occurred to him that things changed so much (Han 138).
- He doesn’t answer to the name Huang Zhixian (Han 142).

Interpretative Level Questions

Group A

1. The old, dead tree struck by lightning, the threshold, and Third Grandpa’s house are all personified. Why? Could there be any links between them?

Not only are these important details in the setting, all three of these are important symbolically in the story. At the end of the story, the tree is described as having branches “stretching out like convulsing fingers. The owner of those fingers had died in a battle and turned into a mountain, but he was still struggling to hold up his hands, to grasp at something” (Han 141). I saw this as a symbol for the government stifling and killing the individual.

In much the same way, Grandpa’s house is described as having weeds that were “sinister [in their] determination” and “tongue-like blades quivering, waiting to swallow up the little house as if they were about to devour the remaining bones of a clan” (Han 134). I also saw this as symbolizing the government trying to stifle an individual or a memory of a former life, especially if the occupant of the house won’t stay dead or continues to commune with the living.

In addition, the threshold is also described in great detail as the “grain of the wood spread out on the threshold like yellow moonbeams” (Han 129). The description continues as various types of people struggle to cross the high threshold into the dark insides of the house. Unlike the previous images, this one provides the reader with a feeling of passing through into another world. Potentially setting up the dream narrative or representing how difficult it truly is to return home.

2. What is the narrator’s connection to the Third Grandpa?

Presumably Third Grandpa and the narrator have a close relationship since Grandpa calls him “my child.” Grandpa appears to be a father figure to him since he seems to have been worried about the narrator’s wellbeing. He told him to “go away, far, far away, and never come back” (Han 138). Grandpa also demonstrated his love by making pickled cucumbers for the narrator. In addition, Grandpa had taken care of the narrator by fudging the accounts to make it look like the narrator had done more work than he had in gathering firewood. All of these things demonstrate the fondness Grandpa has for the narrator.

3. How is the title (and its punctuation) significant to this story?

The punctuation of a question mark in the title appears to be a good fit for the short story. It highlights the reader’s central question about whether or not it is truly a homecoming for the narrator.

4. Do you think the narrator is actually Glasses Ma or not? Support your answer?

- There are convincing arguments on both sides and getting the students to engage with the text is the most important part.
- Students could argue that he isn’t Glasses Ma, but assumes his identity with the power of persuasion. He is constantly flipping back and forth between accepting and denying the identity. However, the last scene where he doesn’t recognize the name Huang Zhixian seems to speak to his taking on the Glasses Ma identity.
- Students could argue that he is in fact Glasses Ma and has forgotten (or been asked to re-identify himself during the Cultural Revolution). He first denies being Glasses Ma on page 128. He does think that details of the village look familiar and then other times they don’t. He has a vivid memory of how Shortie Yang was killed, and he feels a strong pull of the

earth downward towards the end of the story (Han 139). This could represent his remembering or becoming Glasses Ma again.

- Another interesting spin is that he is actually dead throughout this story. Much of the talk of bones and especially the discussion with Third Grandpa makes me think he could already be dead and he is walking around in a world in the afterlife.

Group B

1. There are many references to the body in this short story. How are these body images significant to the story?

The story opens and ends with images of the dirt track to the village being described as “a body stripped of skin and flesh, with sticks of dry bone and lumps of shriveled innards fully exposed” (Han 126). In the narrator’s dream at the end of the story, this image of the track being “so badly washed out by water running down the slopes that it looked like a body stripped of skin and flesh, leaving exposed sticks of dry bones and lumps of shriveled innards” (Han 141) appears again. It could be interpreted as the track resembled a decaying body on account of the lives that were lost in defending the village. It could also represent the narrator’s struggle to die in order to return to his village. It could even represent a track into the underworld. Of course, interpretations could vary.

A few other body references are noteworthy. When the narrator watches people working the field upon his arrival in the village, he is unable to tell that they are women. His inability to distinguish gender seems to highlight his inability to know who he truly is.

The most significant reference to the body is when the narrator is bathing on page 136. His body “seemed a stranger, seemed alien” (Han 136). He appears to have an epiphany as he realizes that he could do something, that he could be an individual. This appears to be a turning point in the story for the narrator as he confronts the death of Shortie Yang. It also could be interpreted as an awareness of the cultural re-education he underwent. He was supposed to be one of the crowd and forget his past life, but now he can’t.

2. What do you think happened between Glasses Ma and Fourth Sister’s sister? What does this tell us about why Glasses Ma left?

There appears to have been some romantic link between Glasses Ma and the sister. She gave him a strand of her hair and in return, Glasses Ma taught her acupuncture. Since Glasses Ma didn’t know the local customs, he somehow offended the sister by letting her carry a few cobs of corn. While he was gone, a “vicious” man named Hu did something to the sister. Now the sister has died and has become a bird who calls and searches for Glasses Ma each day. This shame that Glasses Ma experienced, could potentially explain why he left the village.

3. How is the reader supposed to interpret the last lines of the story, “I’m tired, I’ll never be able to get away from that gigantic ‘I! Mamma!’” (Han 142)?

Students could approach this in various ways. One interpretation might be that it is the narrator’s acceptance of who he was as Glasses Ma. He is tired of denying it. He is literally calling out his name “Ma” or “Mama” the sound the villagers make when calling cows.

Another interpretation could be how he is tired of running from the gigantic “I” or the oppressive government that forces you to conform and forget yourself.

4. Do you think the narrator is actually Glasses Ma or not? Support your answer?
See answer under Group A question.

Application Level Questions

1. What does this story say about the nature of memory? Can you relate it to a modern-day example?

Answer will vary, but students may discuss any of the following ideas. It questions whether or not it is possible to forget a former life. This may in fact lead some students to the way the Chinese Cultural Revolution forced people to re-remember or re-learn a new life. In addition, students may discuss how people or places can help you trigger a memory or how some people want to block a traumatic event. Or on the other hand, students may choose to discuss whether or not it is possible to mistake someone for someone else.

2. Is it possible to forget one’s identity? Can you relate it to a modern-day example?

Again, answers will vary, but students could begin to discuss how it is possible that people could be forced to reinvent themselves through torture, persuasion, or the power of suggestion. I am sure they will come up with interesting examples. Connections to the Cultural Revolution can be made here too.

3. How does this story tell us about China’s Cultural Revolution?

In the beginning of the story, there are examples of strife that took place in the town. For instance, in the blockhouse there are “blank staring gun embrasures, and dark walls that looked as if they had been charred by smoke and fire, as if they were the coagulation of many dark nights. I had heard that bandits had been rife in these parts in the past” (Han 127). Many agitators from the city along with the youth were sent to small villages as part of their cultural education. There are many instances of theft. In addition to this small example, I think the whole story can be read as an example of what happened to people during the Cultural Revolution. The narrator had presumably been teaching and touting Marxist / peasant uprising ideas. We could assume that he was sent to be re-educated and now can no longer remember his past life. So much so that when he returns to his village, he doesn’t recognize it as such, nor does he recognize himself. There is a great moment of self-awareness and triumph of the individual when he is bathing. He sees himself as someone who can do something.

Activities

This lesson is designed to take two class periods of roughly 60 minutes each. There is also pre and post homework in order for the lesson to run smoothly. My target audience is my International Baccalaureate English 11th grade class, but with some small tweaks, it could be adjusted to various ages and levels.

Materials Needed:

Each student needs a copy of “Homecoming?” by Han Shaogong

Several large sheets of poster board paper

Markers

Several copies of materials listed in the 30 Second Debates

Homework prior to the first day: Read “Homecoming?” by Han Shaogong.

Day One–60 minute lesson**Literal Level Questions** (Time: 25–35 minutes)

1. Write one of the literal level questions at the top of each of the four sheets of poster board paper.
2. Students should form groups around the questions. Each group is given five minutes to answer the question by citing specific lines from the short story. They should record their answers on the poster board with the markers.
3. After five minutes is up, the group rotates to the next question and adds on to the previous group’s ideas.
4. Once everyone has rotated through all the groups, each group should present the final poster to the class.

30 Second Debates

Goal is to provide background on the Chinese Cultural Revolution (Time: 20–25 minutes).

1. Divide the class in half. Half of the class are pro-Mao supporters and the other half of class are anti-Mao supporters. Explain to the students that the goal of the debate is using their knowledge from the material. They will be trying to convince a hypothetical Chinese citizen to join their side. Each group should receive multiple copies of their side’s materials.
2. Have the groups read all of their materials and collectively come up with five strong arguments based on the materials for someone to support their side. The groups should identify five of their students to present these arguments. For the sake of clarity, these presenters will be called “affirmation presenters” (10 minutes).
3. Then the groups should anticipate their opponents’ arguments and try to identify five additional ways to refute the claims. The groups should identify five new students to be “refutation presenters” (5 minutes).
4. Ask the five “affirmation presenters” from each side to line up across the front of the room. They should stand alternating between sides (i.e.: pro-Mao, anti-Mao, etc). Each student gets 30 seconds or less to present their case (5 minutes).
5. After “affirmation presenters” have gone, ask the “refutation presenters” to walk to the front of the room and line up in the same way. Repeat this 30 second or less format for these presenters. “Refutation presenters” should feel free to use any of the arguments previously given and refute the claim. This should be lively and fun. Plus, it is a great way to engage students in learning the cultural background for the short story (5 minutes).

Materials for the “Pro-Mao” Side:

- “A Cultural Revolution Scene.” Images. *History Study Center*. Web. 8 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.historystudycenter.com>>.
- Mao Zedong. “Reform Our Study.” Yenan. May 1941. Speech. *Marxist.org*. Web. 9 Aug. 2012. <marxists.org>.
- Hodson, H. V. and Bishakha Bose, eds. “Chu Teh (Zhu De) (1886-1976).” 1977. *The Annual Register, 1758-2001*. *History Study Center*. Web. 20 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.historystudycenter.com>>.

Materials for the Anti-Mao Side:

- An excerpt from: Feldman, Harvey. “From Mao to Deng.” *The World and I* 14.10 (Oct. 1999): 40. *History Study Center*. Web. 8 Aug. 2012.
- Kramer, Barry. “China Opens an Attack to Subdue Clamor For Individual Freedom and Democracy.” *Wall Street Journal* (16 Apr. 1979): 17. *ProQuest*. Web.

Homework: Break the class into two equal groups (10 per group is ideal, but adjust according to your class size). Assign one group to be “Group A” and the other “Group B.” The students should type answers to the interpretive and applied level questions **for their group only** in preparation for the fishbowl discussion the following day. The more detailed the notes the better, but it is best if this is done in bullet point form. Students should seek to use specific examples from the short story (See appendix for “Homecoming?” Pre-Fishbowl Homework handout).

Day Two:

Fishbowl Discussion (Time: 60 minutes)

1. Ask students to pull out their notes and the short story for the fishbowl discussion. Group A will sit in a circle in the center of the room and will be called in the inner circle. Group B will surround the inner circle and will be called the outer circle.
2. Ask students in the outer circle to pick one inner circle partner. While the inner circle discusses, the outer circle will remain silent and take notes. The outer circle partner will also be taking notes on how their inner partner is doing on the handout entitled “Fishbowl Partner” (see appendix).
3. After about 10-15 minutes of the inner circle discussion, have the inner and outer circle switch position. Now the “old” outer circle begins to discuss in the inner circle spot. Repeat this rotation at least two times, or until time or attention allows.

Homework: Have students type up a reflection on the fishbowl discussion. See the handout “Homecoming?” Reflection Paper (see appendix) for details.

Citations

“A Cultural Revolution Scene.” Images. *History Study Center*. Web. 8 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.historystudycenter.com>>.

Feldman, Harvey. “From Mao to Deng.” *The World and I*. 14.10 (Oct. 1999): 40. *History Study Center*. Web. 8 Aug. 2012.

“Han Shaogong.” *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale Cengage, 9 April 2003. Web. 6 Aug. 2012. <<http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CH1000148025&v=2.1&u=iuclassb&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>>.

Han Shaogong. “Homecoming?” *A Place of One’s Own: Stories of Self in China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore*. Ed. Kwok-Kan Tam, et al. Trans. Martha P. Y. Cheung. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Han Shaogong. “Reflections on Democracy: A Chinese Perspective.” Trans. Shaobo Xia. *ARIEL* 41.2 (2010): 153+. *Literature Resource Center*. Gale Cengage. Web. 6 Aug. 2012. <http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA259013661&v=2.1&u=va_s_109_0251&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w>.

Hodson, H. V. and Bishakha Bose, eds. “Chu Teh (Zhu De) (1886-1976).” 1977. *The Annual Register, 1758-2001*. *History Study Center*. Web. 20 Aug. 2012. <<http://www.historystudycenter.com>>.

Kramer, Barry. “China Opens an Attack to Subdue Clamor for Individual Freedom and Democracy.” *Wall Street Journal* (16 Apr. 1979): 17. *ProQuest*. Web.

Mao Zedong. “Reform Our Study.” Yenan. May 1941. Speech. *Marxist.org*. Web. 9 Aug. 2012. <marxists.org>.

Appendix

“Homecoming?” Pre-fishbowl Homework

Directions: For homework tonight, type your answers to all of the questions for your group. It is okay to write answers in bullet form. When possible use quotes from the story.

Group A

Interpretative Level Questions

1. The old, dead tree struck by lightning, the threshold, and Third Grandpa’s house are all personified. Why? Could there be any links between them?
2. What is the narrator’s connection to the Third Grandpa?
3. How is the title (and its punctuation) significant to this story?
4. Do you think the narrator is actually Glasses Ma or not? Support your answer.

Application Level Questions

1. What does this story say about the nature of memory? Can you relate it to a modern-day example?
2. Is it possible to forget one’s identity? Can you relate it to a modern-day example?
3. How does this story tell us about China’s Cultural Revolution?

Group B

Interpretative Level Questions

1. There are many references to the body in this short story. How are these body images significant to the story?
2. What do you think happened between Glasses Ma and Fourth Sister’s sister? What does this tell us about why Glasses Ma left?
3. How is the reader supposed to interpret the last lines of the story, “I’m tired, I’ll never be able to get away from that gigantic ‘I! Mamma!’” (Han 142)?
4. Do you think the narrator is actually Glasses Ma or not? Support your answer?

Application Level questions

1. What does this story say about the nature of memory? Can you relate it to a modern-day example?
2. Is it possible to forget one’s identity? Can you relate it to a modern-day example?
3. How does this story tell us about China’s Cultural Revolution?

Fishbowl Partner: “Homecoming?”

INNER CIRCLE – fill this in while discussion is happening to keep track of your thoughts. You should also take notes on things said so that you can refer back to them or bring them up later.

Your Reactions:

I agree with...

I disagree with...

Main Ideas/Critical Issues Raised (and who raised it?)

Ideas you have that the seminar participants failed to mention:

What was the best idea shared or question raised in the seminar (and who said it?)

What conclusions can you draw after listening to your classmates’ discussion?

Any further observations (regarding the participants’ behavior, involvement, etc? Be specific!

OUTER CIRCLE – fill this in while discussion is happening. You should also take notes on things said so that you can refer back to them or bring them up later.

Your Name _____ Partner's Name _____

Helpful Contributions

If your partner does one of the following, put a check mark in the box.

- Looks at the person who is speaking
- Answers a question
- Provides evidence from the text to support a point
- Asks a question
- Responds to another speaker—agrees/disagrees
- Let someone else talk, even when wants to share

Unhelpful Contributions

- Interrupts another speaker (rude)
- Talks to neighbor about other things
- Talks too much / dominates discussion
- Lacks volume / cannot be heard
- Does not provide textual evidence to support point
- Does not speak

After the Discussion

What was the most interesting thing your partner said?

What would you like to have said in the discussion?

“Homecoming?” Reflection Paper

Directions: After finishing our fishbowl discussion, I would like you to reflect on your own performance. Please type your answers and write in complete sentences.

1. Evaluate your own performance during the fishbowl discussion. Assess yourself and justify your assessment.
2. What is the most valuable piece of information or idea that you took away from the fishbowl discussion? (This can be anything from insights into the story to learning something about discussions—allowing others to speak, flow, disagreements, etc.)
3. What can you improve on for your next fishbowl discussion?