

“Standing Woman”
Yasutaka Tsutsui

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North Broward Preparatory School
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11th Grade English IB SL 1
Subject Area: Utopia vs. Dystopia/
Alienation from Society/Dangers of Society and/or Technology
Time Requirement: 2 days to 1 week (depending on students and activities planned)

1. Summary

Tsutsui's "Standing Woman" offers a frightening look at a futuristic version of Japanese society in the clutches of an authoritarian government. Paranoia, fear, and conformity are the order of the day, and dissenting voices are silenced through an "urban greening" program in which people are literally planted in the ground, eventually transforming into "mantrees" through the use of the special government fertilizer. These mantrees ultimately lose feeling and emotion, becoming part of nature in an unnatural, terrifying way. We see the helplessness, apathy, and self-contempt of the citizens who, for the most part, know that this policy is inhumane but do nothing to stop it.

2. Historical/Literary Context

Yasutaka Tsutsui was born in Osaka, Japan in 1934. He attended Doshisha University in Kyoto and received his B.A. in 1957. He is an award-winning novelist and playwright, and his works satirize the failings of government and society. After finding frustration with Japanese publishers, Tsutsui went on to help further the Japanese literary server, JALNet, where he continues to publish.

3. Discussion Questions and Answers

- a. What is the protagonist's attitude toward the humanity of mantrees? What about dogtrees and cattrees? Does it make a difference if they're still manpillars, dogpillars, or catpillars? How do you know this?

The protagonist still seems to want to recognize the humanity of the manpillars, dogpillars, and catpillars, although he speaks of them in the gender-neutral pronoun "it." He makes the attempt to speak to the manpillar who was a postal worker in his former existence, and he still feeds dogpillars and feels badly about the condition of the catpillars. Most poignant is his visit to his wife and his attempt to both elicit feeling from her and comfort her. He does seem to make a distinction in the humanity of the animals once they are turned into trees; in fact, he says, "Then there are catpillars that grow branches from their bodies and put out handfuls of leaves. The mental condition of these seems to be completely vegetized – they don't even move their ears. Even if a cat's face can still be made out, it may be better to call these cattrees" (Tsutsui, 135). The protagonist even shows confusion and mild disgust that cats are made into cattrees or catpillars at all: "Maybe, I thought, it's better to make dogs into dogpillars. When their food runs out, they get vicious and even turn on people. But why did they have to turn cats into catpillars? Too many strays? To improve the food situation by even a little? Or perhaps for the greening of the city. . ." (Tsutsui, 135).

- b. What is your impression of the protagonist?

Answers will vary. Students may say that he is a coward because he does not protest against the government with his writing. They may feel sympathetic toward him, in that few stand against authoritarian society. In fact, he loses his wife because she complains about the government. He shows self-contempt, and here again, students may show either pity or disapproval for the protagonist.

- c. What are the attitudes of the other characters in “Standing Woman”?

They vary.

Hiyama: *There is the fearful cowardice of Hiyama, the old man in the park who does not write anymore due to the oppressive nature of the society and is ashamed that he does not have the courage to write in protest of the government. Hiyama is kindly to the narrator and to the dogpillar, but there is sadness in his character. He represents potential action denied, one of many who will not stand up to the policies of the government (like the narrator).*

Students: *Also present are laughing, scornful students who ridicule the recent arrest of other student protestors who are to be planted across from the university on, ironically, Students Row. The students discuss the protester’s snicker, with little awareness or appreciation for the cause of the arrested student. However, they too display the same apprehensiveness indicative of a society that is, in many ways, a police state:*

“They say they’ll be planted in front of their own university, down both sides of a street called Students Road.”

“They’ll have to change the name now. Violence Grove, or something.”

The three snickered.

“Hey, let’s not talk about it. We don’t want someone to hear.”

The three shut up (Tsutsui, 143).

Factory Workers: *There are two factory workers who point and laugh at Michiko, the protagonist’s wife, also unaware of anything wrong with this scenario.*

Postal Worker Mantree: *There is also the former postal worker who has been turned into a mantree. His seems to be an attitude of understanding for the protagonist’s suffering and acceptance of his own condition. There is also a certain amount of apathy or lack of feeling and expression, which, he indicates, is a result of the special government “fertilizer”:*

“Don’t you get hungry or cold?”

“You don’t feel it that much,” he replied, still expressionless.

Anyone who’s made into a manpillar soon becomes expressionless. “Even I think I’ve gotten pretty plantlike. Not only in how I feel things, but in the way I think, too. At first, I was angry, sad . . . but now it doesn’t matter. I used to get really hungry, but they say the vegetizing goes faster when you don’t eat.”

He stared at me with lightless eyes. He was probably hoping he could become a mantree soon. “They say they give people with radical ideas a lobotomy before making them into manpillars, but I didn’t get that done, either. Even so, no more than a month after I was planted I didn’t get angry anymore. It got so I couldn’t care less about human society” (Tsutsui, 136).

Despite his indifference, though, he still exhibits concern when he realizes that someone dear to the protagonist must have been recently planted, so much so that the mantree asks the protagonist. Later, too, he warns him not to tarry too long speaking to him or to visit the protagonist’s wife, because someone may be watching.

Michiko: *Finally, there is the character of the protagonist’s wife, Michiko, who has been made into a manpillar for criticizing high prices and the government at a housewives’ meeting. She has only been planted for three days, but she is already beginning to lose her emotions and is trying to accept her situation. Although she has apparently been violated in some way by two drunks the night before, resulting in blood on her skirt, she*

tries not to be concerned. The main emotion she displays is mild concern that her husband will also be arrested if he continues to visit. Although she seems to take comfort in her husband's declaration that he'll have her moved into their backyard once she is a mantree, for the most part she is passive and peaceful. In fact, the author refers to her several times as a beatific Buddha. She has, in some way, transcended her pain and humiliation, but not quite.

- d. What does the author want the reader to think of this futuristic Japanese society?
Students will probably make reference to most of the characters' fear of being overheard or seen doing something they shouldn't in order to indicate the hallmarks of an authoritarian or fascist society. Fear is a hallmark of most of their actions and behavior. Sadder still is the seeming inevitability of conformity to the government's policies. Anyone who speaks out will be "planted," and this fear seems to create in the populace those afraid of dissenting and those who condone the government's behavior and actions. Students should also eventually comment on the terrifying prospect of "progressive technology," which allows people, dogs, and cats that are deemed either useless or a danger to the government to become part of the landscape, thoughtless, emotionless: part of the scenery. Students may go further and discuss technological aspects of our own culture or other cultures in the world that they find disturbing.
- e. How does the author's representation of this futuristic Japanese society comment upon Japan's society and/or government when this story was written?
Students will already have been lectured about Japan's change from a "closed" society to one that was almost forced to embrace trade with the British and Americans, thereby exposing it to the rest of the world and their traditions, cultures, and technologies. Most of Japanese modern history is about coming to terms with "modernity." When Japan became "modern," it sought to emulate some of the other major European empires and their style of acquisition. Japan needed to conduct a quick Industrial Revolution, to industrialize the everyday processes of life. In the Japanese model, political change was minimized, and economic change was maximized. They almost overnight wildly taxed the middle class and farming class of the outlying areas of Japan. The Japanese started with the latest technology and didn't have to develop their own technology. After World War II, their infrastructure was wholly destroyed, so when they rebuilt, they started with the latest technology and got a running start, in effect. Early on, though, they industrialized at a cost to the average person and to agriculture (Wilson).
- f. When does the reader first begin to suspect something is not quite right in this society?
 Be specific and use selections from the text.
Students might first suspect something is amiss the very first time the author says he can't write stories that do good or harm: "As to whether I have it in me to write stories that might do harm or good, I do my best not to think about it. I might want to try" (Tsutsui, 130-1). Students might also be confused upon the first references to dogpillars and catpillars they encounter. By page 134, students should be able to reference the protagonist's explanation of the entire process from catpillar to cattree, and by page 135, students understand that people, too, have been planted.

- g. What choices does the author make structurally and stylistically to achieve his impact on the reader, and what impact does the author achieve?
Students may reference the author's choice of diction in his created terms "dogtrees, catpillar, mantree, etc." If they are intuitive, they may pick up on the similarities between the government's terms for these planted organisms in "Standing Woman" and Newspeak in 1984, where all terminology is changed and standardized, like the term "crimethink" for an illegal thought. Some students may comment on the structure of the story, in that the reader is not immediately aware of the setting or cultural background of the futuristic society. Readers don't immediately know that dissenting humans are becoming converted into trees. Students may pick up on the use of gender-neutral pronouns to describe animals and people. Students should also pick up on the language of fear and paranoia inherent in the story.

4. Activities

- **Creative Writing:** Have the students write a short essay, imagining that someone they love has been planted. Who is it? What is their relationship to that person? What crime did they commit? What is your reaction? Students should imagine how they function within this society in order to imagine their realistic reaction. Alternatively, students could also imagine that they themselves have been planted. The same questions apply: what crime did they commit? Who did they leave behind? What is the process like, and how do they feel?
- **Creative Writing II:** Split the students into pairs or groups. Tell them that the protagonist decides to meet Hiyama for lunch at his house, an incendiary act in the story. Ask them to write an alternate ending for the story. Groups will then share their endings with the class.
- **Pattern Blocking:** Have students use colored markers or highlighters on computers to denote patterns in theme, diction, imagery, point of view, style, characterization, or any other major linguistic device. Have the students share their findings with their fellow students.
- **Group Text Charting:** Split the students into groups and chart similarities and differences between "Standing Woman" and other, similar texts (such as the ones listed below) on to flip chart paper.
- **Group Online Ethics Discussion:** Have the students break into groups. Each group can be assigned a technology that has polarizing ethical implications (such as the use of stem cells, genetically modified food, cloning, etc.), or the students may begin by going online and finding this type or types of charged technology. Students will use their online research skills to gain an understanding of the various viewpoints regarding this technology, and the group will designate one student who will take notes for the group, recording the findings. Groups will then compile a list of the complexities that surround this new technology. Finally, each group will elect a speaker to present the findings to the class.
- **Artistic Exploration:** Invite the students to create artwork that visually represents the society of Tsutsui's future Japan. Students can also be asked to visually represent a particular sentence from the story.
- **Contextual Vocabulary:** Have the students list out words on the board that are unfamiliar to them in the context of Japanese history and culture. Suggested words from the text:

- i. Manpillar/Mantree
- ii. Geta
- iii. Diet
- iv. Ginza
- v. Dystopia
- vi. Utopia

5. Connections to Other Literary Works

This short story can easily be compared to Edogawa's "The Hell of Mirrors" as a cautionary tale of the dangers of advanced technology. The tortured, maniacal friend of the protagonist is a clear parallel to power and technology unchecked. A nice contrast would be Tao's "The Peach Blossom Spring." Students could draw upon the peace and tranquillity of the people who live in the utopia of the mountain pass as they live within nature, marking their time with the passing of the seasons. These people are not beholden to any government, and indeed, the fisherman who returns to civilization betrays their confidence and the message of their idyllic lifestyle in his report to the government and is thereby denied ever finding the lovely village again. "Standing Woman" meshes very nicely with Orwell's *1984*. The parallels to the dangers of a futuristic society completely determined by the authoritarian government are clear. Big Brother controls all behavior, and citizens who don't adhere to the decrees of the government are "adjusted" to be useful (read: harmless and emotionless), or they simply disappear. Finally, Vonnegut's "Welcome to the Monkey House" would be a useful pairing, since it portrays characters who act against the government (albeit in extreme ways) and characters who have been conditioned to believe that the government has their best interests at heart.

6. Citations

Edogawa, Rampo. "The Hell of Mirrors." *Japanese Tales of Mystery and Imagination*. Trans. James Harris. Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle co., 1956. 109-122.

Japan Literature Net. *Profile of Author Yasutaka Tsutsui*. 18 August 2010. Web.

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