

Discussion and Writing Prompts for “Poems by Mei Yaochen”

In discussing poetry in translation, remember that some details of the translated version do not directly reflect the original language of the poems, especially with languages as different as Chinese and English. However, for most of these questions, we will not attempt to make this sometimes difficult distinction.

“The Boat-Pullers”

1. What is the tone of the speaker’s description of the injured goose? What details of the poem help convey this attitude?
2. What is the effect of the rhetorical question asked in the poem?
3. What does the speaker compare the goose to? (To whom does “their life” in line 7 refer?) What does this comparison imply about them? What additional comparison does he make about them, and what is the point of this comparison?
4. What theme(s) does the poem suggest about the natural world (and by extension, the human world as well)?

“Xie Shihou Says the Ancient Masters Never Wrote a Poem About Lice, and Why Don’t I Write One”

1. In what ways is the title significant or interesting?
2. In what way(s) is this poem surprising? How would you describe the tone of the poem?
3. What themes are conveyed by the rhetorical question at the end of the poem? (Who is “you”?)

“Staying Overnight in Xu’s Library, Xie Shihou and I Are Driven Crazy by Rats”

1. Discuss the poem’s tone (the speaker’s attitude toward the subject) and mood (the emotions of the characters). What details of the poem help convey these characteristics?
2. What is the “goofy plan”?

“Shepherd’s-Purse”

1. What is the speaker’s attitude toward shepherd’s-purse? What is the tone of his description of the people who eat it, and what details convey this tone? Why do some people consider it shameful to eat shepherd’s-purse?
2. What point is the speaker making with the rhetorical question in the fifth stanza?
3. What does the speaker consider true poverty, and why? (Consider why he calls shepherd’s-purse a “rare treat.”) What rhetorical device is this an example of?

“1st Moon, 15th Sun: I Try Going Out to the Lantern Festival, and Quickly Return”

1. What is the subject of the poem? How do the details of the poem reveal this situation? (Consider, for one thing, the significance of the festival date in the title.) What can we infer about “the Yellow Springs”?
2. Describe the speaker’s state of mind. Why is neither going out nor staying home a viable option for him? What effects of the central event referred to in the poem are evident—how have the speaker and his family reacted to this event? Discuss the sense of powerlessness implied by the speaker’s words and actions.
3. Why does the speaker “push the lamp away and lie facing the wall” (line 15)? Discuss the meaning of the last line.

“Lunar Eclipse”

One detail of the poem to consider that the translation does not make clear is that during the Song Dynasty period of China (when Mei Yaochen lived), mirrors were typically round and made of bronze.

1. Why does the maid come running into the house, and how do the speaker’s family members react to this event? What can we infer about the significance of making roundcakes and banging on the mirror? (Consider the speaker’s reference to “that urge to restore” in line 10.)
2. What is the speaker’s attitude toward the beliefs and behavior of the other people in his house? How do you think the sequence of events described in the poem might affect their thinking?
3. What is the dominant mood of the poem, and how do the details of the poem convey this mood? How does the mood shift in the last stanza?
4. Discuss the significance of the moon as revealed in the poem. What rhetorical device is used in the last line, and how does it help convey this significance?

“Eyes Dark”

1. What is the tone of the poem? How does the speaker use imagery and sound devices to convey this tone?
2. Discuss the use of personification in the poem. How does it contribute to the poem’s effect?
3. Discuss the meaning and significance of the last line. How does it contrast with the rest of the poem? What conflicting feelings does it imply?

“Autumn Meditation”

1. Describe the atmosphere established by the speaker’s descriptions of the scene. What details of the imagery in the poem help convey this atmosphere? How does the atmosphere relate to the tone—the speaker’s attitude toward autumn? (How does he describe his experience of autumn?)
2. What rhetorical devices are used in line 3? Discuss their effect. To what “false promise” is the speaker referring?
3. Discuss the philosophical problem created by the speaker’s state of mind and raised in the last stanza. Why do you think the speaker leaves the closing rhetorical question unanswered?

“A Little Village”

Note that “Huai” is the name of a river.

1. What is the effect of the speaker’s description of the scene? How do the details of the imagery contribute to this effect? Discuss the symbolism of the mulberry trees lining the bank. What attitude does the speaker seem to have toward the villagers?
2. Interpret the tone and meaning of the statement “O, this is how they live.” What implied political and social statement is the speaker making in the last stanza?

Questions for further discussion and writing

1. Based on these poems, what do you see as the most important characteristics of Mei’s poetry? What kinds of things is he interested in or concerned about? Discuss specific examples from these poems.
2. How would you describe Mei’s poetic voice (assuming there is no distinction between Mei himself and the speaker of the poems)—the personality, tone, and rhetorical style of these poems?
3. Describe the language of the poems as rendered in English by David Hinton. What are the dominant characteristics of the poems’ sound and structure? Discuss specific examples from the poems.