

2012 Suggestions for Teaching *The White Snake* adapted by Mary Zimmerman

Before seeing/reading the play

1. *The White Snake* has been a popular tale in Chinese art and popular culture since the Tang dynasty, appearing in such forms as stories, operas, stage plays, dance pieces, movies and television series. Research some of the story's incarnations. How has it transformed over time? What elements, in your opinion, might have made *The White Snake* so appealing for so many centuries? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://www.chinahighlights.com/travelguide/culture/white-snake-legend.htm>
2. One of the earliest recorded versions of the White Snake story appeared in an anthology of classic Chinese folktales published in the latter half of the Tang Dynasty. Research this historical period. What contribution did the Tang Dynasty make to Chinese culture? What was the status of women during it? What religions were prevalent and what practices did they engage in? What advances were being made in the field of medicine? These and other web sites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tang_Dynasty
<http://history.cultural-china.com/en/48H8675H13178.html>
<http://www.chinaknowledge.de/History/Tang/tang.html>
3. Research Buddhism in China. When and how was it introduced? What was its status among Chinese philosophies? How were Buddhists and Buddhism regarded during the Tang Dynasty? What is the relationship among Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism in China? These and other web sites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_Buddhism
<http://buddhism.about.com/od/throughasiaandbeyond/a/chinahistory.htm>
<http://asiasociety.org/countries/religions-philosophies/buddhism-china>

4. Research snakes in mythology. What are some of the positive qualities attributed to snakes? Negative qualities? Find stories in other cultures in which serpents take on human (or semi-human) form and engage with humans. These and other web sites provide information:
<http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Sa-Sp/Serpents-and-Snakes.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snakes_in_mythology
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serpent_\(symbolism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serpent_(symbolism))
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_reptilian_humanoids

5. *The White Snake* begins with a rain storm on the banks of a lake. In the Taoist concept of Wu Xing, or the Five Phases, what does water symbolize? What is the color green associated with? The color white? These and other web sites provide information:
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_\(Wu_Xing\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Water_(Wu_Xing))
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Color_in_Chinese_culture

6. Research the Chinese Dragon Boat (Duanwu) Festival. When, why and how was/is it celebrated? What is the symbolism of the dragon in this context? These and other web sites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Duanwu_Festival
<http://www.ncsu.edu/midlink/dec97/holiday/boatz.html>
<http://chineseculture.about.com/library/weekly/aa052998.htm>

7. At the Dragon Boat Festival, celebrants traditionally drank realgar wine. What is realgar? What were believed to be the benefits of drinking realgar wine? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Realgar>
<http://traditions.cultural-china.com/en/14T68T28o.html>

8. One of White Snake's trials is to procure a plant, called in various versions of the story "miracle mushroom," "resurrection plant," and "magic herb," with which to revive her husband. Students of the story suggest it may be the reishi mushroom (*ganoderma lucidum*). What qualities of the reishi make it a good candidate for the life-restoring plant? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://www.reishi.com/>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lingzhi_mushroom

9. Research the star Canopus. What Chinese deity is associated with the star? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Canopus>
<http://www.oneminuteastronomer.com/2788/canopus-star-old-age/>

10. What characteristics are associated with the stag in Chinese animal lore? With the stork? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://primaltrek.com/IMPLIEDMEANING.html>
<http://www.feng-shui-tips-for-wealth.com/stag.html>

11. What is the significance of the Leifeng Pagoda? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://www.seeraa.com/china-attractions/leifeng-pagoda.html>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leifeng_Pagoda

12. Research Director and Adapter Mary Zimmerman's career. Describe her process in creating a play. What are some of her signature works? Why might *The White Snake* be a fitting story for her repertoire? These and other web sites provide information:
<http://www.mccarter.org/education/secretinthewings/page9.htm>
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Zimmerman

Other Resources:

Film

- *The Sorcerer and the White Snake* (2011), directed by Siu-Tung Ching, with Jet Li as Fa Hai
- *Madame White Snake*, many film versions (1956, 1960, 1962, 2006).
- YouTube has many clips of various performances of *The White Snake*, including:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMPgzR_2z00
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_K8MmaOgVP4
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e2YVN6-tv2w&feature=related>

Related stories from around the world

- *The Little Mermaid* (Denmark), Hans Christian Andersen
- *Nagamandala* (India), Girish Karnad
- Quetzalcoatl (Mexico)

- Beauty and the Beast (France)
- Melusine (France)
- Asclepius (Greece)
- Medusa (Greece)
- Isis and Osiris (Egypt)

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on the Tang Dynasty. How are the social and cultural characteristics of this period reflected in *The White Snake*?
2. Refer to your research on snakes. What traditional snake-like qualities do White and Green display? How do they confound your expectations of how snakes should behave?
3. How does White win Xu Xian's love? How does she contribute to his well-being? What ordeals does she undergo for him?
4. What heroic qualities does Xu Xian possess? What attracts White to him? Why does Green consider him a worthy husband for the White Snake Spirit?
5. What features of the Buddhist monastery system might have contributed to making the Buddhist abbot Fa Hai the villain of the White Snake story?
6. How does Fa Hai justify his enmity toward White? Why does he regard her as a monster? What monstrous actions does she perform? Why, in White's opinion, is Fa Hai the true monster?
7. Refer to your research on Canopus, the stag and the stork. Why are they, symbolically, suitable guardians for the restorative plant White seeks? Which of her qualities persuade them to give her the plant?
8. Tell the story from the point of view of White, Xu Xian, Green and Fa Hai. In each telling, emphasize the character's wishes, intentions, emotional connections and importance to the story. What is at stake for each? To what extent is the outcome happy for each? To what extent is it sad?

9. It is a convention of Western fairy tales, myths and fables that most of the central characters are of high station, such as princesses or kings. In *The White Snake*, the hero is a clerk in an apothecary shop who rises to be the proprietor, while his wife works as a healer. What is the effect of having a middle-class heroine and hero? What does this tell you about the values of the culture from which the story comes?
10. Find instances of literal and metaphorical disease within the play as well of instances of health and healing. What elements contribute to illness and decay in *The White Snake* and what to well-being and balance? Make the argument that the world of the play is more in need of healing by the end of the story than it was at the beginning. Make the argument for the opposite.
11. Refer to your research on the symbolism of water according to Chinese Taoist thought. In what ways does the presence of water at the play's opening set the tone for the story that follows? How do the elements it represents play a role in the action of *The White Snake*?
12. Referring to your research on the meaning of colors in Chinese culture. In what ways do White and Green embody their names? In what ways do they not?
13. One of the functions of myths and fables is to present recurring archetypal problems and to, at times, resolve them. What situations—including first love, relationships, misunderstandings, trust, betrayal and sacrifices—does *The White Snake* portray? How are they dealt with?
14. Compare the obstacles to the love of Xu Xian and White Snake with the obstacles that face Romeo and Juliet.
15. If you are seeing *Medea/Macbeth/Cinderella*, compare Medea and White. Why does each choose to leave her home and follow her beloved? How does each embrace and enrich her adopted land? How is each betrayed by her husband? How does each respond?

16. Compare White and Green to the principal women in this season's Shakespeare plays (*Romeo and Juliet*, *As You Like It*, *Henry V*, *Troilus and Cressida*). Which of this group have women friends in whom they can confide and which do not? How does having a friend help each woman? What roles do the confidantes assume for their friends? How do the confidantes influence the action? How are they rewarded for their loyalty or punished for their disloyalty?
17. In an interview at www.osfashland.org, director Mary Zimmerman states, "Texts like that [*The Odyssey*] rather than texts that are written as plays are actually more cinematic than plays are. They're as fleet, they move so quickly through time and space. And there are just a few tricks you can use onstage to make that happen. You don't need a whole lot of scenery to make those little shifts." Describe some of the moments in the production of *The White Snake* that rely on these minor tricks described by Zimmerman rather than on more literal visual effects. To what extent are you especially engaged as a playgoer because you are obliged to supply details through your imagination?

Members of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's Education department—Hilary Tate, Sarah Langan—created the "Suggestions for Teaching *The White Snake*."

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