

“On Visiting Taoist Recluse of Tai-T’ien-Shan and Not Finding Him,” Li Po; and  
“Autumn Dusk at a Mountain Lodge,” Wang Wei

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**Creative Writing and Analysis Lesson Plan:  
“On Visiting Taoist Recluse of Tia-T’ien-Shan and Not Finding Him” Li Po and  
“Autumn Dusk at a Mountain Lodge” Wang Wei**

**Context:**

This lesson will be used in Expository Writing, which all Cranbrook Kingswood 10<sup>th</sup> (and some 11<sup>th</sup>, usually ESOL students,) grade students take, gender separate. The class maximum is sixteen students. The class is run in a seminar/discussion format, with little lecturing. The lesson will conclude a unit on learning to closely read and analyze poetry, the first unit of the year. Students will become familiar with literary and poetic devices while studying form, tone, etc., by analyzing poems each night, and then discussing them the next day. When they encounter Li Po and Wang Wei’s pieces, they will be ready to work with found images from the text in a creative exercise first, and then move to analyze the translations. At the end of the lesson, students will transition to the next unit by encountering language and art from the American Transcendentalist movement, comparing and contrasting it with the texts in this lesson. This work will probably span three class periods, which are forty-five minutes in length. (This time estimate does not include the Transition Exercise (Activity #4, below.)

**Summaries:**

While both poems focus on nature and contain common images, Li Po’s poem, set in the spring, is full of lively, optimistic natural imagery, until its conclusion, which highlights the futility of searching for the way (Tao), represented by the recluse. The imagery in Wang Wei’s piece, set during and autumn evening, is influenced by Buddhism, and is more peaceful, highlighting people co-existing with nature in a mountain setting.

**The Big Picture:**

Both poets wrote during the T’ang Dynasty (618-907 CE), considered an “early cosmopolitan moment” during which China saw itself as a highly developed nation. (Wasserstrom). Li Po’s work is characterized by an economy of words that are nonetheless bold, joyful and unrestrained, and influenced by his Taoist beliefs. Wang Wei’s poems reflect Buddhist tenets, focusing on the love of natural beauty and human existence in nature. (Kennedy) Both poets lived at the same time, Li Po c. 700-762; and Wang Wei c. 699-759 (Bartleby.com).

## Discussion Questions and Answers:

There is considerable overlap in this section and the Activities section (and its respective Appendices) below. As mentioned above, our classes are run in a seminar format. Since the goal of this lesson is to solidify our study of poetic images and form through reading and writing, the discussion will largely evolve from the constructed definitions and poems the students create. There will be few, if any, definite answers.

### 1. Pre-Reading Discussions of *Tao Te Ching*, Buddhism and Chinese Landscape Painting (Activities 1A, 1B & 1C, below):

a. *Students will share their responses to Appendix A, and work toward a constructed definition of Taoism. The primary question will be: what is the Tao (way), and how do we find it?* The answer is, of course, that will likely come after discussion (although some students will have been introduced to these beliefs in their 9<sup>th</sup> grade world religions course) that if we seek it, we will not find it, as it “transcend[s] language and logic” (Schirokauer 14). *Students will also be asked the importance of inaction (wu-wei), since this is so diametrically opposed to their lives, which are full of action. How can inaction be the way?* The hope is that they will reflect upon allowing for harmony by not forcing one’s actions / beliefs upon another being.

b. *Buddhism: What are the Four Noble Truths?* “1. Life is suffering.. a life of good deeds will lead to reincarnation at a higher level...but the ultimate goal is to achieve *Nirvana* and never be born again; 2. The cause of human suffering is craving or desire; 3. To stop the suffering, desire must be stopped; 4. [following an] eightfold path accomplish[es] this: right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration” (15).

c. *Discuss the prominent figures and composition elements of the landscape paintings. How do you think the painter regards it/them?* Students will likely notice the prominence of one central natural element, such as mountains, and the use of monochrome (or a few colors). Since I have yet to share Chinese art with my students, given my experience using other works of art, I think they will recognize the reverence for nature displayed in the predominance of the mountains mentioned above. I also think they will question the minimal use of color, and we will try to come to an understanding about simplicity and how it can be much more powerful than the polychromatic images with which they are bombarded daily. We will then connect this simplicity and beauty to the tenets of Buddhism to come to an understanding of the artists’ intentions.

Discussion Questions (cont'd.):

2. Poetry Analysis (Activity 2, below, using of parts of Appendix B):

- a. *Li Po, "On Visiting Taoist Recluse of Tai-Tien-Shan and Not Finding Him"*
- i. *Where is the speaker?* In a wild, natural setting in the spring, in which he seeks the Taoist recluse.
  - ii. *How does the imagery express the mood or tone?* Student should focus on the vivid verbs, colors, animals and vegetation (dogs *barking*, *gurgling* water, peach blossoms *thickening*, *wild* bamboos, *flying* fountains.) This is a lush, lively scene, and knowing it is spring, they will certainly recognize the literary tradition of spring as a reawakening and rebirth.
  - iii. *Is the conflict resolved?*
  - iv. *What about the end of the poem?*
  - v. *Can you connect this to our introduction to Taoism?* For iii-v, students may at first feel that the conflict is not resolved, since the speaker does not find the recluse; however, when pushed to make connections to Taoism, they should discover that perhaps the speaker has learned a valuable lesson—that in seeking, he will not find. The recluse himself represents the Tao; and actively searching is not the way to the Tao.
- b. *Wang Wei, "Autumn Dusk at a Mountain Lodge"*
- i. *Describe the speaker's surroundings and compare them to the scene in Li Po's piece.* This poem is also full of simple, naturalistic beauty; however, students should notice that the author's quiet verbs and description (*empty* mountains, air *rising*, spring *flow[ing]*, boats *glid[ing]*, grass *wither[ing]*) are strikingly different. This contrast should reinforce our continual focus on the power of strong verbs. In addition, they will again recognize the convention of season in this evening, autumn scene, in contrast to the spring setting of Li Po's poem.
  - ii. *Choose one common image in both pieces, and discuss how the poets treat them differently.* Both use water (Li has flying fountains and gurgling water; Wang uses fresh rains and boats gliding in it). Again, this will highlight the contrasting sound and tone of both poems, mentioned above.
  - iii. *Continuing the above discussion, draw upon your knowledge of Buddhism and discuss how Wang Wei infuses his piece with its principles.* Students should continue to notice the simplicity of the language, and how clearly it renders the scene's beauty. The speaker is struck by this simple grace.
  - iv. *What is the author's intent?* He displays reverence for nature and clearly shows how people live in it and by it, in harmony, as Buddhism prescribes.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> (Note: these questions will not necessarily follow this order. They are so tightly related that the students will likely move between them on their own.)

## Activities:

### 1. Pre-reading—Responding to Taoist and Buddhist tenets:

#### A. Constructed Definition of Taoism:

For homework, students will be given quotations from *Tao Te Ching* (Appendix A) and will respond in writing, coming to their own understanding by explaining, connecting, and asking questions. The following day, they will discuss their work in small groups, and then share their common understandings and questions with the entire class. With our small class size (max. 16), we are able to have fluid discussions easily, and have the luxury of being flexible with them (e.g., if the small discussions are going very well, we may have the class discussion the next day, etc.)

#### B. Response to Chinese Art:

Landscape paintings from the T'ang<sup>2</sup> and later dynasties will be projected on the SmartBoard. One image will remain for fifteen minutes while students fast-write their immediate responses, imaginations, etc. about it. They will be asked to consider composition, tone, meaning, and even tell a story if they are so inclined. We will discuss their impressions, and then compare them later, in Activity #2, below, to see if common themes arise.

#### C. Excerpts about Buddhism and Taoism:

As homework, students will read excerpts from Schirokauer and Clark (14-15) and Thurman (9-11) for information about these beliefs. We will then compare their constructed definitions of Taoism to the text.

#### D. Found Poetry—Creative Writing:

Students will receive the translated texts of the poems, in their initial forms, i.e., the character-by-character translation that is in column format in the text. At this point, they will not be given the completed translation of the poems. They will be asked to construct a found poem from one of the options provided, using the extant words, and filling in with their own to create a piece that has meaning for them. The goal will be to synthesize the techniques we have studied during our poetry unit, and apply them by adding elements such as figurative language, alliteration, etc. to create meaning from the given words. They will be encouraged to experiment with the language and play with form and imagery. Their final piece will be typed, with credit given to the original author, and they will share it by reading it to the class.

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<sup>2</sup> I currently only have small images of landscape painting from the T'ang dynasty from the National Palace Museum Website; however, The Smithsonian's Freer Gallery website has great images from later dynasties that will project clearly on the SmartBoard.

**Activities (cont'd.):**

**2. Poetry Analysis:**

This is the more traditional part of the lesson. Students will receive the full text of the poems and will seek to find meaning by studying not only the basic elements of poetry, (Appendix B) but also by applying their recently acquired knowledge of Taoism and Buddhism. They will analyze the poems as homework (using Appendix B); then share their work in groups; and finally, report their conclusions to the entire class. We will then look back to their journal entries on landscape painting to see if any common themes and ideas arise.

**3. Comparison / Contrast Essay:**

Students will write a timed, in-class essay comparing their constructed poem to the translation of the piece. In the essay, they will be expected to discuss their intent and word choice, and compare them to the poet's intent and effect.

**4. Transition Exercise—Constructed Definition of Transcendentalism:**

Like Activity #1A above, students will be given excerpts from Emerson and Thoreau's works (Appendix C). Each student will be assigned one quotation to prepare and discuss with the class the next day; however, they will be expected to make notes on all of them, so they are ready to discuss their classmates' mini-presentations. They will also complete a journal exercise like #1B above, in which they will respond to a landscape painting from the Hudson River School. During the class discussions, we will come to a constructed definition of Transcendentalism, make comparisons and contrasts to Buddhism and Taoism both in literature and art, and then move into a more structured study of the movement.

**Connections to Other Literary Works:**

While I am confident the students will make connections to the poetry that will precede this lesson, the most overt connections will spring from Activity #4 above, focusing on the authors' and painters' reverence for nature and beliefs about human existence within it. By studying poetry first in the academic year, the students learn to read closely, focusing on descriptive language, tone and meaning. The lesson above will serve them as we move on to the Transcendentalists and then to their contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne (short stories). As we read Hawthorne, we will focus on the author's rich description and his contrary treatment of nature.

## Resources:

*Bartleby.com: Great Books Online*. 15 August 2004 <http://www.bartleby.com/reference/>.  
<http://www.bartleby.com/61/18/L0191800.html>;  
<http://www.bartleby.com/65/wa/WangWei.html>

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. "Nature," and "Self Reliance." *The Spiritual Emerson: Essential Writings*. Ed. David M. Robinson. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2003. (24-62; 85-109).

*The Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery: Collections, Chinese Art*.  
Smithsonian Institution: The National Museum of Asian Art for the United States. 2004.  
24 August 2004 <http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/chineseHome.htm>.

*Index of Hudson River School Painters*. 31 July 2004. The Desmond Fish Library Website. 15 August 2004 [http://dfl.highlands.com/DFL\\_Painters/Index.html](http://dfl.highlands.com/DFL_Painters/Index.html).

Kennedy, Larissa. "Pre-Modern Chinese Literature: Philosophy and Poetry." Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. 22 July 2004.

Lao, Tzu. *Tao Te Ching*. Trans. Ellen M. Chen. NY: Paragon House, 1989.

Li, Po. "On Visiting Taoist Recluse of Tia-T'ien-Shan and Not Finding Him." *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres*. Ed. & Trans. Wia-lim Yip. Duke University Press, 1997. (183).

Schirokauer, Conrad, and Donald N. Clark. *Modern East Asia: A Brief History*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Thomson Learning, Inc., 2004.

Thoreau, Henry David. "Walden." *Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*. Ed. Brooks Atkinson. NY: Random House, 1965.

Thurman, Robert A. F. *Essential Tibetan Buddhism*. San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1995.

Wang, Wei. "Autumn Dusk at a Mountain Lodge." *Chinese Poetry: An Anthology of Major Modes and Genres*. Ed. & Trans. Wia-lim Yip. Duke University Press, 1997. (188).

Wasserstrom, Jeffrey. "Imperial China." Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. 22 July 2004.

*Works by Category: Landscapes*. National Palace Museum Website. 15 August 2004  
[http://www.npm.gov.tw/english/dm/painting/b\\_02.htm](http://www.npm.gov.tw/english/dm/painting/b_02.htm).

## Appendices:

**Appendix A:** Excerpts from *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu

**Appendix B:** Studying Poetry and Terms

**Appendix C:** Introduction to Transcendentalism

**Appendix A:**

**Excerpts from *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu**

1. Tao that can be spoken of,  
Is not the Everlasting Tao.  
Name that can be named,  
Is not the Everlasting name. (1)
2. When all under heaven know beauty as beauty,  
There is then ugliness.  
When all know the good [is] good,  
There is then the not good. (2)
3. Do not honor the worthy  
So that the people will not contend with one another.  
Do not value hard-to-get goods,  
So that the people will not turn to robbers. (3)
4. Act by no-action,  
Then, nothing is not in order. (3)
5. A tree whose trunk is of a man's embrace,  
Begins from something extremely tiny.  
A tower of nine stories high,  
Is built from a heap of earth.  
A trip of a thousand miles,  
Begins right at one's feet.  
He who acts fails,  
He who holds on to loses.  
Therefore the sage does not act so he does not fail,  
He does not hold on to, so he does not lose. (64)
6. Tao is a whirling emptiness,  
Yet in use is inexhaustible.  
Fathomless...(4)
7. The sage has no set mind.  
He takes the mind of the people as his mind.  
The good I am good to them,  
The not good I am also good to them.  
This is the goodness of nature. (49)
8. When a superior person hears Tao,  
He diligently practices it....  
When the inferior person hears Tao, he roars.  
If Tao were not laughed at,  
It would not be Tao. (41)

## Appendix B:

### Studying Poetry

By responding to these points, searching for examples of the terms, and thinking about what they add to meaning, you will have carefully considered, or analyzed a poem. As always, look up any words whose denotation (dictionary definition) you do not know! Always read poems at least 3 times each!

1. **Speaker:** Who is the voice of the poem? What do you know about him/her?  
To whom is s/he speaking? Differentiate this from the **author** if possible.
2. **Setting:** When/where?
3. **Paraphrase:** Summarize in your own words, what is happening? (Not word for word here)
4. **Theme:** What is the central purpose, theme or meaning?
5. **Tone:** What is the mood? What words show you?
6. **Conflict:** What is the conflict? Is it resolved?
7. **Word Choice:** What words are especially strong or meaningful? Where are there effective images, examples of figurative language, etc.?
8. **Sound:** Where does the author use the sound of words for emphasis? (see list below)
9. **Form:** Look at the structure: stanzas, line breaks, etc. What do they add?
10. **Commentary:** Your opinion of the poem's strengths/weaknesses.

### Terms

Look for examples of the following, and think about how they add to the meaning or experience of the poem. Don't forget **simile, metaphor, and personification!**

- alliteration:** close repetition of initial consonant **sounds**  
**allusion:** reference to other literature or history  
**assonance:** close repetition of vowel sounds (not necessarily initial **sound**)  
**connotation:** the suggested meaning of a word, beyond its definition  
**consonance:** close repetition of final consonant **sounds**  
**denotation:** dictionary definition of a word  
**figurative language:** any use of words or images where the meaning is beyond denotation  
**list:** can be any part of speech, consecutive or throughout poem—a type of repetition  
**hyperbole:** exaggeration  
**imagery:** using language to represent sense experience  
**irony:** when the unexpected occurs (**situational irony**)  
when the implication of words is opposite of what is said (**verbal irony**)  
**onomatopoeia:** when the **sound** of the word mimics meaning (e.g. buzz)  
**paradox:** something that seems contradictory but can be true  
**paraphrase:** to restate in your own words; for our purposes, a summary is enough  
**repetition:** of word, phrase, grammatical construction  
**rhyme:** is there a pattern? why?  
**rhythm:** fast? slow? varied? why?  
**symbol:** something that represents something else  
**tone:** the author's attitude toward the subject (see above)  
**understatement:** to represent something as less than it is

## Appendix C:

### Introduction to Transcendentalism

#### **From Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*:**

1. ...for man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.
2. But I would say to my fellows, once for all, As long as possible live free and uncommitted. It makes but little difference whether you are committed to a farm or the county jail.
3. I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.
4. Our life is frittered away by detail.
5. Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and see how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains.
6. It is remarkable how easily and insensibly we fall into a particular route, and make a beaten track for ourselves.
7. If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music he hears, however measured or far away.
8. Love your life, poor as it is....the setting sun is reflected from the windows of the almshouse as brightly as from the rich man's abode.

#### **From Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Nature*:**

9. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity ...which nature can not repair.
10. In the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets or villages.
11. Nature always wears the colors of the spirit...Then there is a kind of contempt of the landscape felt by him who has just lost by death a dear friend.

#### **From Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Self-Reliance*:**

12. To be great is to be misunderstood.
13. There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse...
14. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you...
15. Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members.
16. A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do.