**Twilight of a Crane Drama Analysis**

**Summary of The Drama**

1.Twilight Crane, a contemporary Japanese play by Junji Kinoshita, begins when a group of children arrive at the isolated country hut of Yohyo, a peasant. They are regular visitors because Yohyo’s wife Tsu will good-naturedly play with them and sing, even now in the snowy winter. They wake the sleeping Yohyo, and though he grouches at them, he comes out to play when they cannot find Tsu because she has gone out. When she does return, Yohyo lovingly persuades her to join him with the children.

Conflict arrives with the appearance of the remaining two characters who are men from the village: Sodo, who hopes to persuade Yohyo to let him broker the fine cloth Tsu weaves, and Unzu, who is Sodo’s sidekick, and previously has purchased this fine cloth. They barge right into the unoccupied house and only apologize when Tsu finds them. They question her about the fantastic cloth—could it be the famed semba ori (made from 1000 feathers plucked from a live crane), but she appears not to understand, and flutters, birdlike, away.

Sodo and Unzu want Yohyo to make Tsu weave more cloth, but he has noticed that every time she weaves she becomes thinner. They wonder at his luck in getting Tsu as his wife and find that she arrived at his door one night and has been loving wife since then. Sodo recalls to himself a folktale about a man helping a crane once. The crane became the man’s wife in gratitude. Could this folktale be happening in real life?

Because of Sodo’s promise of more money than he has ever imagined and travel to Tokyo, Yohyo persuades Tsu to weave more cloth, even though he had promised she would not need to do so. She knows she is losing her simple husband to the greedy villagers. She agrees to weave again, and reminds Yohyo he must NEVER look in on her while she is weaving.

Sodo and Unzu have been hiding nearby. When they see Tsu has gone to her weaving, they rush to fine Yohyo. Sodo intentionally breaks the “no look” rule and peeps into the weaving room where he sees a crane weaving in place of Tsu. Unzu and then Yohyo also peek.

When Tsu emerges very thin and weak, she has made not one, but two beautiful pieces of cloth. She knows he has broken the “no look” promise also. She tells him she has lost most all her feathers and now has just barely enough to allow her to fly back. She asks him to keep one piece of cloth because she has made it for him with her heart (not for material gain). Tsu disappears from the stage just as the children come once again to play. One of them sees a crane flying away in the distance.

**II. Historical/Literary Context**

Twilight Crane’s author Junji Kinoshita (1914–2006) bases this example of contemporary Japanese theatre on the Japanese folk tale “The Crane Wife.” Yuzuru (Japanese title) was first presented in 1949. Due to increased wartime censorship, he had departed from more traditional historical/contemporary themes and began to develop a new genre of folk plays. Yuzuru is arguably his most prominent (Kinoshita). Actress Yasue Yamamoto performed the lead role in 1949 when Twilight Crane was first produced. Both she and Kinoshita received national awards, and in 1952 when the play was again performed, accolades increased, which was also a boon to her company Budo no Kai, for which he also became a leader (reader). Others would adapt the script into opera and Noh play (Keene 483). (See Huffman chapter 6 for additional background on Japanese history of this time period.)

Later, Kinoshita and Twilight Crane would come under fire due to his leftist ideology. In the early 1980’s a school textbook company which had been planning to use the play for an elementary level text succumbed to political pressure to remove the selection--due to both the selection itself and the author’s reputation. Opponents of the play inclusion objected to its  “anticapitalist” theme. Only due to press articles and public protest did the censorship not  take place (Nobuyoshi).

After the wartime era Kinoshita returned to historical and contemporary themes including war guilt and humanity being held accountable for its actions. He continued as a playwright until the late 1970’s. Additionally he is well known as a translator of Shakespeare and other western playwrights and as a theatre essayist. Finally, he is a famed student of the Japanese language itself (Kinoshita).

**III. Discussion Questions and Answers**

QUESTIONS

1. What references/foreshadowing are present in the children’s games in the opening scene?

Eiderdown cover/quilt from song (reference to down used for human covering); bird in a cage game (later Tsu physically is the bird that is trapped)

2. Compare/contrast the characters of Sodo and Unzo.

Compare-Both characters are greedy and want to take advantage of Yohyo’s simplemindedness; in fact, Unzo already had made money from the first piece of cloth. Contrast-Sodo is the leader of the two, with bigger plans. Sodo is also derogatory from his first appearance, calling Yohyo stupid (139), he is the first to peep in on Tsu weaving, and he derides Unzu for having compassion for Yohyo at the end. Unzu is more a reflection of a “negative Yohyo” — a bumbling fool.

3. Why has Tsu come to be wife to Yohyo?

When Tsu was a crane Yohyo found her wounded by an arrow. He removed the arrow and let her fly away. She arrived out of gratitude. She believes he is different from other men because of his kindness to her.

4. Why does Tsu make the first cloth?

Tsu makes the first cloth to provide income sufficient so that Yohyo does not need to struggle to survive.

5. Explain what sempra ori is and how it is made.

Sempra ori is a rare, fine cloth made from crane feathers. It is made by plucking 1000 feathers from a live crane and weaving them on a loom into the cloth.

6. Identify multiple descriptions/comments of Tsu in human form that suggest her animal form.

p.140-”looking at him with her head on one side like a bird” and “with a fluttering movement”;

p. 141-”she looked just like a bird ;

p. 157-”I have used all my feathers…”;

 p. 158-”I can no longer remain a human being.”

7. On one hand, Tsu speaks the language of the men. Yet, she also comments that she does not understand the words of “terrible” men. How can this be?

Tsu understands everyday language and the language, words and actions of love; she does not comprehend the greediness of humans, taking more than they need. She does, however, sense the evilness of what she does not understand.

8. In the play, Sodo is the only character aware of the folktale upon which the play is based. Find evidence to support this statement. Why is the ignorance of Yohyo and Unzu significant?

Sodo is the character that mentions the story first on p. 141 after he has noticed the presence of a feather in the weaving room when he enters it the first time. He mentions the story to Unzu. Unzu is so unnerved that Sodo then lies to Unzu and tells him there is really no such story. This provides exposition for the reader, but does not enlighten the other male characters. As for Yohyo, he spends all night and day looking for Tsu AFTER he has seen the crane weaving the cloth.

9. How does Yohyo change after he sells the first cloth?

 At first Yohyo is happy to have sold the cloth; he has been a hard worker, and having money now he can rest in his hut; he only desires more money after Sodo and Unzu persuade him he needs more. Then he goes to Tsu for more even though he has promised not to request cloth. He wants money to travel to the capital. Due to peer pressure from Sodo and Unzu, he is infected with their greed.

10. Which characters provide comic relief? Identify examples.

Unzu—when he is scared by the folktale crane story Sodo tells; when he almost (Sodo stops him) tells Yohyo the true value of the cloth Yohyo—when he doesn’t “order” Tsu to make cloth, but meanders around the request; when he verbally argues with himself whether to look at the crane in the weaving room.

11. Why does Yohyo break his promise not to ever look in on her while she is weaving?

After Sodo and Unzu peek, Unzu announces there is a crane in the room. This wonder is too great for Yohyo to resist.

12. Why does Tsu want Yohyo to remain in the country hut with her, avoiding Sodo and Unzu-- and the capital?

Tsu hopes that if she can just keep Yohyo away from people like Sodo and Unzu, who represent corrupt society (on several levels), they will remain happy together.

13. Would it make any difference if Yohyo were rich instead of being a peasant? Explain why or why not.

Answers will vary. Some students may believe so; others will point out that flaws in human nature allow for greed, or the fact that the isolation Tsu craves is not realistic.

14. Tsu agrees to make one more cloth, but actually presents Yohyo with TWO. Explain her initial reason for agreeing to weave another piece. At what point do you think she decided to make the second, and why would she make this decision?

Answers may vary. Tsu originally decides to make another cloth to make Yohyo happy and keep him with her; at the end she presents him with two, one for him to keep, which she may have decided to make after she found he had peeked into the room.

15. What is the significance of the children returning to play in the final scene?

 The children’s reappearance brings the cycle of the play back to the beginning and emphasizes the loss of the happiness, love and inner beauty of Tsu.

16. Will Yohyo sell Sodo the final cloths Tsu has woven? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. Students may argue that Yohyo again will be persuaded by the others, (even though we do see sadness in Unzu); others may argue he will keep one as Tsu had requested; idealists may believe he has “learned his lesson” and will keep both.

17. Does Yohyo ever realize who Tsu is? Explain.

Answers will vary. Yohyo does not understand what has happened at the end of the play. The play takes place over a short amount of time. Students may argue he will understand when he has a chance to think. Others may see him as needing someone to explain, or never really knowing.

18. Explain a major theme of The Twilight Crane.

Possible themes: man’s greed destroys nature; man’s greed destroys happiness/natural balance; society corrupts the individual; wild animals cannot thrive in captivity; capitalism corrupts society; and there may be others.

\*19. What political and social factors would be present in Japan during WWII that would prompt the author Junji Kinoshita to turn to folktales for inspiration as opposed to the historical or contemporary ideas he had used previously?

Adapting a folktale would be considered a “safe” or culturally acceptable topic at this time. Promoting a political stance, historic or contemporary, would be dangerous in the war climate unless it rubber stamped official government ideology. Since Kinoshita’s personal political beliefs did not mimic Japan’s, his prudent or self-preservation choice was to select a nonpolitical subject.

\*20. This play was almost censored from a Japanese elementary school text in the early 1980’s due to political concerns. Modern Japan is a capitalist society; some politicians viewed the play as Marxist. Use your knowledge from World Studies class to infer the controversy regarding this censorship issue. Some Japanese politicians saw the play as a condemnation of Japan’s capitalist society because the author was known to have leftist (Marxist) leanings (Alvis).

\*21. How had Japan’s political and economic climate changed so significantly between the WWII era and the 1980’s that the subject of a folktale went from being considered politically “safe” to igniting the censorship controversy of the 1980’s?

Japan had moved cataclysmically through the frenzy of world war, atomic disaster, reconstruction, and an eventual embracing of capitalism. Its fear of socialism and/or Communism was increased by the proximity of North Korea and the USSR.

\*22. Review the definition of the term allegory. The Twilight Crane could be read as a “destruction of innocence” allegory on a couple different levels. Select ONE of the following to show your understanding of the term.

• \*Explain how The Twilight Crane could be viewed is as a political allegory regarding censorship in question 20.

• Compare to the Bible’s Garden of Eden story. Be sure to include which characters from the play would represent which biblical characters.

o Allegory—a story or poem where the characters, settings and/or events stand for other people, events, situations or ideas. An allegory has at least two meanings: the literal one from the surface story and symbolic one, used to teach a moral or lesson.

o \*Political allegory—This would be the ‘capitalism corrupts society’ theme: due to the capitalist greed of Sodo and Unzu, Yohyo is corrupted and so loses his blissful life with Tsu in which they had communally lived happily together. (See Nuboyosh citation for related activity. This article would be an excellent addition for discussion with upper level classes.)

o Eden allegory—Yohyo loses his Eden/paradise/Tsu when he allows Evil (Sodo/Unzu) to tempt him to break the on e rule Tsu has while weaving. When he does, he loses her/paradise forever.

\*23.What is the significance to Japanese culture that this folktale uses a crane as the specific type of bird to become the woman character in the story?

In Japanese culture the crane is a well-known symbol of honor and loyalty. Tsu represents an honorable and loyal wife in that she loves and cares for her husband, acquiesces to his wishes when he reneges on his promise, and even provides for his future living needs when she must leave him again for the animal world.

\*denotes question linked to social studies-cultural, political, or economic forces.