Spring-Watching Pavilion Study Guide

Spring-Watching Pavilion by Hồ Xuân Hương

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Introduction

It is believed that Ho Xuan Huong wrote "Spring- Watching Pavilion" sometime in the late 1700s or early 1800s in her native Vietnam. Her poems were copied by hand for almost a century, and were originally published in Vietnamese in a woodblock edition in 1909. However, they were not published as type until 2000, when John Balaban translated them into English and published them in the United States in *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*. This publication was historic for many reasons. It was the first time Ho Xuan Huong's poems had been published in the United States and it was the first time they had been published in English. Perhaps most importantly, Balaban and his publisher included versions of the poems in both English and Vietnamese, as well as the original version in Nom□the nearly extinct ideographic Vietnamese script in which Ho Xuan Huong wrote her poetry. *Spring Essence* was the first publication in history to print Nom as type, and its publication was lauded by scholars, popular readers, and even President Clinton, who commented on the cultural importance of the book at his own historic visit to Vietnam in 2000.

Ho Xuan Huong was an eighteenth-century concubine known for her provocative poems, which challenged the Confucian authority of her time. Some of her poems, like "Spring-Watching Pavilion," also criticized her country's institutionalized religions, in this case Mahayana Buddhism. This poem depicts the poet seeking solitude in nature, where she realizes that it is nature itself, not any organized religion or other construct of the human world, which holds the key to the search for nirvana. A current copy of "Spring-Watching Pavilion" can be found in the paperback version of *Spring Essence*, published by Copper Canyon Press in 2000. One should note that, in Vietnamese, a person's surname is listed first. In other words, Ho Xuan Huong's last name is Ho, not Huong. This entry preserves that style, and will refer to the author as Ho throughout the rest of the entry. Finally, to simplify the difficulties of rendering the tones of the Vietnamese language into English, accents and diacritical marks have been dropped.

Author Biography

Many scholars believe that Ho, whose name means "spring essence," was born sometime between 1775 and 1780, in a village near present-day Hanoi, in North Vietnam. Unlike the records of Western nations, Vietnamese records at this time are sketchy at best, as are the factual details of Ho's life, many of which are derived from her poetry. Scholars believe that Ho was a concubine□a second wife, lower in stature than the official, first wife. Many women were concubines during this time, since the dowry and wedding rules were too complex and expensive for all women to become official wives. Ho was a rarity in Vietnam, where the patriarchal rules of Confucianism often prevented women from receiving the same education as men. Even when women did receive classical educations, there were few accomplished poets, especially ones that received the immediate fame that Ho did. Ho's poetry itself was a rarity. Her poems challenged male authority and included double entendres, or ambiguous meanings, that were distinctly sexual in nature. This writing style was shocking and dangerous for a woman in a Confucian society, since Confucianism forbade depictions of the erotic. Despite her irreverent writing, Ho was saved from persecution by her poetic talent□which has always been highly prized in Vietnam. Ho also criticized the institutionalized religions of her time, as she does in "Spring-Watching Pavilion."

Despite the lack of facts about Ho's life, she has enjoyed a rich legend, which has been passed down for centuries. According to this legend, Ho's father died early, at which point her education stopped, and she lost her marriage prospects. The legend also says that Ho ran a tea shop in what is now modern-day Hanoi and that she married her first husband after he successfully completed a difficult piece of poetry that she assigned to him. However, many scholars debate the details of the legend, and some scholars even question whether Ho ever really existed. These scholars believe that Ho's poetry was written by others who were too scared of persecution to write under their own names. Even for those scholars who do believe in the existence of Ho, there is no consensus on which poems can be attributed to Ho. If Ho did exist, many scholars believe that she most likely had died by the 1820s.

Poem Text

A gentle spring evening arrives
airily, unclouded by worldly dust.

Three times the bell tolls echoes like a wave.
We see heaven upside-down in sad puddles.

Love's vast sea cannot be emptied.
And springs of grace flow easily everywhere.

Where is nirvana?
Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten.

Plot Summary

Stanza 1

"Spring-Watching Pavilion" starts with Ho's description of "A gentle spring evening," which is immediately contrasted with the idea of "worldly dust." Ho is referring to worldly dust in a metaphorical way. A metaphor is a technique where the poet gives an object a secondary meaning that does not normally belong to it. Ho does not literally mean that the spring evening is "unclouded" by dust; she means that the "dust" of humanity□the aspects of the human, material world□is not present in this spring evening out in nature. Although Ho does not state it in explicit terms, the fact that "worldly dust" is not present to cloud the evening points to the fact that the poet is out in nature, away from her village or city. This worldly dust is negative, because it, unlike the spring evening, is "clouded." Worldly dust could stand for many negative aspects of the human world. When this poem was written, sometime during the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, Vietnamese society was very unstable, having experienced many civil wars and colonization attempts, so the dust could be referring to this political instability. However, it is more likely that she is referring to organized religion, since the term, "worldly dust," specifically belongs to Mahayana Buddhism.

Stanza 2

This peaceful structure and mood is jarred in the second line not only by the abrupt, shortened sentence structure, but also by the sound of the "bell tolls," whose "echoes" come from the village or city "like a wave." The use of the word "like," identifies this part of the sentence as a simile. Like a metaphor, a poet uses a simile when he or she wants to indicate that one thing has a secondary meaning. However, unlike a metaphor, which says that something "is" something, similes are less direct, saying that something is "like" or "as" something. In this case, Ho is saying that the echoes are traveling from the village or city to the countryside like a wave. The tolling of bells could be meant to represent more than one thing. First, they could be representing the sounds of one of the aforementioned wars. Communal bells have often been used to warn of impending danger, such as an invasion. If one interprets the poem as an indictment of the human wars of Ho's time, then the echoes that come into the countryside "like a wave" can represent the waves of soldiers that are advancing on the city or village. As a result, heaven can only be seen "upside-down in sad puddles," because the strife of war drives a wedge between the human world and heaven, or nirvana. As a result, only reflections of heaven can be seen, not heaven itself.

However, since Ho has already informed the reader through the use of the term, "worldly dust," that she is commenting on Mahayana Buddhism, she may also be referring to the echoes from the kind of bells used by Buddhists after their religious ceremonies. A bell has long been considered a divine instrument, and for many societies has symbolized the contact between heaven and earth. The bell itself is a

human object, made on earth, but the musical harmony it produces is representative of the harmony of the celestial world. Out in nature, away from the poet's village or city, these bells are far enough away to be mere echoes. This fact is significant. Ho is setting up the second half of the poem, by distancing the sound of the bells, a symbol of organized religion, from the nature that the poet is experiencing. As with the war interpretation, the puddles that the poet looks into are sad, because organized religion can only offer a pale, sad reflection of heaven, not nirvana itself.

Stanza 3

After setting up the inferiority of the human world in the first two stanzas, Ho turns more completely to nature, discussing "Love's vast sea" and "springs of grace." Once again, Ho is using metaphorical language. She is not literally describing a sea that is full of love or springs□natural bodies of water that issue from the ground□that are made of grace. However, she is using the image of the sea to talk about the lasting power of love, which "cannot be emptied." Likewise, grace, a religious term that means divine assistance freely given to humans, flows "easily everywhere," because the divine is present here in nature. This is a surface interpretation, which could stand on its own. However, the lines take on a much deeper meaning for those who know more about Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhists believe that one can find divine assistance from bodhisattvas, Buddhists who have achieved nirvana but who have chosen to remain in the human world. In their striving for kindness and compassion, bodhisattvas guide other humans to the correct path for reaching nirvana. When viewed in this context, "Love's vast sea" and "springs of grace" represent the loving and compassionate vow of bodhisattvas to save other humans, which is as eternal as the sea. Since Ho is equating the natural symbols around her with the eternal guidance of the bodhisattvas, she is indicating that she is in a holy place. In this natural place, "springs of grace flow easily," since this place is removed from the "dust" of the human world.

Stanza 4

With this revelation, Ho asks herself□and her readers□"Where is nirvana?" As she has increasingly demonstrated throughout the poem, it is not likely that nirvana will be found within the "worldly dust," which can cloud one's vision. Whether one views this dust as the human strife of war or the distant echoes of the organized religious ceremonies, it does not matter. Following either will only lead to a pale reflection of heaven, which appears "upside- down in sad puddles." Instead, like the "gentle spring evening" that the poet is enjoying, the answer is in nature itself. It is only when the poet retreats to nature that she envisions the love of the bodhisattvas in the sea and springs around her. As a result, she concludes of nature that "Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten." In other words, Ho does not totally rule out the fact that a Buddhist might find nirvana while in the human world. After all, she says that nirvana is in nature "nine times out of ten." However, these are not great odds, so she is saying that it is highly more likely that a

person will find nirvana only when he or she leaves the worldly dust behind and communes with nature.

Themes

Nirvana

The main theme of "Spring-Watching Pavilion" is the search for nirvana, a state of eternal bliss and understanding. At the end of the poem, Ho indicates that she has found it, or at least has found the way to find it: "Where is nirvana? / Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten." The search for nirvana is the primary focus of Buddhism, a religion that says the only way to achieve nirvana is to transcend the human, perishable world by eliminating the desires of the self. Theravada Buddhism claims to be the descendant of the original Buddhist teachings, and says that the only way a person can achieve nirvana is to follow the path of Buddha, an ancient prince. For Theravada Buddhists, this path must be followed alone, without assistance. Mahayana Buddhism, the type of Buddhism referenced in the poem, offers more options for its followers. Mahayana Buddhism says that its followers can receive guidance from bodhisattvas, Buddhists who have achieved nirvana but have stayed in the human world to guide others. The poem contains many ideas central to Mahayana Buddhism, including "worldly dust," which refers to the perishable world, and "Love's vast sea" and "springs of grace," both of which refer to the bodhisattvas' attempts to save others and show them the way to nirvana.

Nature versus the Human World

The poet comes out to enjoy the "gentle spring evening," and get away from the human world. These two opposites, nature and the human world, comprise the two different options that Ho describes in the poem. From the beginning, nature is depicted in positive terms, while the human world is depicted in negative terms. Nature, as represented by the spring evening, is "unclouded by worldly dust." In this sense, the words "worldly dust" are used in a negative manner to express the murky effect that the human world can have on the search for nirvana. The human world only "clouds" this search.

Organized Religion

Ho considers the organized religions of her time part of the worldly dust that clouds humanity. Organized religion, represented by the "bell tolls," only provides a flawed reflection of heaven, which the poet sees "upside-down in sad puddles." If the echoes of the religious bells that she hears coming from the village or city were truly the way to find nirvana, then the puddles would not be sad. Nature, not organized religion, is the key to nirvana "nine times out of ten" cases, says Ho.

Style

Lu-Shih

A lu-shih is a type of poem that was originally practiced by Chinese poets in classical times and which was borrowed by Vietnamese poets like Ho. A lu-shih is similar to the Italian sonnet□which itself has been borrowed by many poets writing in English. Like the sonnet, which consists of four- teen lines and which requires poets to adhere to a system of rules, the lu-shih is a rigid form of poetry. Lu-shihs, like "Spring-Watching Pavilion," always have eight lines, and each line always has seven syllables. Unfortunately, in Balaban's English translation, the syllable structure is one aspect that is sacrificed. Instead of seven syllables per line, each line in Balaban's version contains anywhere from seven to twelve syllables. In addition, in a lushih, rhymes generally occur at the end of the first, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth lines. This unyielding structure made lu-shihs a challenge to poets, but Ho would often exceed these requirements. Once again, the rhyme scheme of her original version of "Spring-Watching Pavilion," and of the lushih form in general, is lost in Balaban's English translation. For example, the first two lines end with the words, "arrives" and "dust," respectively, in the English version. In fact, in Balaban's English version, the lines do not have end rhymes.

Symbolism

A symbol is a physical object, action, or gesture that also represents an abstract concept, without losing its original identity. Symbols appear in literature in one of two ways. They can be local symbols, meaning that they are only relevant within a specific literary work. They can also be universal symbols, meaning that they are based on traditional associations that are widely recognized, regardless of context. "Spring-Watching Pavilion" includes the latter. In the first line, Ho sets the stage by talking about a "gentle spring evening." Spring has long symbolized a rebirth, since it follows winter, which traditionally represents death. In this rebirth, the poet makes reference to many bodies of water, such as a "wave," "puddles," the "sea," and "springs." Water is also traditionally associated with birth and creation. The combined effect of these two creation symbols underscores the religious theme of the poem, and gives the reader the sense that the poet is experiencing a new beginning. In this case, the poet has traveled to the countryside, where she realizes that nature is a better way to experience nirvana than the worldly ways of men, including institutionalized religion, which is represented by the "worldly dust" and the "bell tolls."

Historical Context

The Importance of Water in Vietnam

In "Spring-Watching Pavilion," Ho makes several references to water. In addition to their symbolic meanings, the many water references underscore Vietnam's water-based geography, climate, and lifestyle. Vietnam is a wet country, featuring many lakes, rivers, streams, and other bodies of water. This wet climate is ideal for growing rice, which has always been Vietnam's main agricultural product. Rice is planted in wet paddies, shallow basins that hold the rice seeds. During the summer rainy season, floods of water carry nutrients from upland down to the paddies, nurturing the rice seeds. However, this process requires a delicate balance of irrigation. If the paddies receive too much water, they can overflow, washing away the seeds. If the paddies receive too little water, they can experience droughts. Both extremes can be destructive to the rice crop, which most Vietnamese peasants rely upon to survive. Unfortunately, Vietnam has always been a land of extremes, most notably in its precipitation. The rainfall in Vietnam fluctuates so wildly that it is hard to compute an average rainfall, as scientists do in other areas of the world. This erratic rain pattern has always been especially dangerous in areas like the Red River delta in North Vietnam, where Ho lived. The Red River delta is situated below the mountainous backcountry of North Vietnam. Since the mountains deflect most of the rain, the flow of the Red River can become dangerously high when the rainy season is particularly wet. Historian Joseph Buttinger says, in his 1972 book, *A Dragon Defiant: A Short History of Vietnam*: "Steadily increasing human efforts to reduce this danger□going back to the earliest periods of Vietnamese history□have still not entirely succeeded in taming the Red River."

Vietnamese Government and Agriculture

Since Vietnam's populace depended heavily on its agricultural production in Ho's time, any problems were blamed on the country's leadership. While this is often true in other human societies, in Vietnam, these accusations had a religious justification. Although Vietnamese citizens followed many different religions, the country itself was ruled by those who believed in Confucianism, which stated that the country's emperor, known as the Son of Heaven, was appointed by heaven. Although the emperor was not divine himself, he provided the link between the human world and heaven. While this may seem to be an enviable position for exercising power, the emperor was held accountable for disasters, which usually were related to agriculture. Anytime natural occurrences like the aforementioned floods happened, they were viewed as a sign of heaven's disapproval of the emperor.

Religious Control and Corruption

In the poem, Ho talks about "worldly dust," a reference to the world of man and its impure struggles. In Ho's time, this worldly dust included institutionalized religions, such as Mahayana Buddhism. The Confucianist leaders feared that Buddhism's emphasis on independent and unregulated thought and action could undermine the power of the government. As a result, the Confucian government attempted to control the Mahayana Buddhists by requiring monks and priests to take state-sponsored religious examinations to receive their ordination. In addition, the government set quotas for the number of clergy allowed in certain temples; paid the salaries of certain clergy and named temples after them to gain their allegiance; and forced the temples to perform rituals for dead government soldiers. For these reasons, Ho did not believe that organized religion held the key to finding nirvana. John Balaban says, in his introduction to *Spring Essence*: "she saw corruption in the religious institutions of her time and cast some of her wickedest slurs on venal, lazy, or decadent clergy." However, Balaban also notes that, while she did not believe in institutionalized religion, she still followed the Buddhist precepts, as noted by her discussion of bodhisattvas in the poem.

Critical Overview

In the short time that *Spring Essence* has been in print, many critics have given the book good reviews. Sam Howe Verhovek says, in his 2001 review of the book for the *New York Times*: "The book has drawn glowing reviews on both sides of the Pacific and was mentioned by President Bill Clinton in a toast during his trip to Vietnam." Much of the attention for the book has not centered on the poetry itself, although this book does mark the first major publication of Ho's poems. Instead, the book has been hailed for its groundbreaking achievement in linguistics, namely its typographic representation of Nom□the nearly extinct Vietnamese ideographic script that Ho used to write her poems. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer in 2000 says, "It's the backstory more than the actual English renderings of these poems that has been generating pre-pub attention for this title." This pre-publication attention was also encouraged by a huge media campaign by Copper Canyon Press, the small literary press that published *Spring Essence*. This included "Nine Times out of Ten: John Balaban and the Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong," a critical essay□written by Michael Wiegers, Copper Canyon's managing editor□that was published in the prestigious *American Poetry Review*.

However, despite the fact that many reviewers focus on the book's background, some critics do address the poems themselves. Donna Seaman says, in her 2000 review of the book for *Booklist*: "But all such historic concerns pale in the presence of Ho Xuan Huong's saucy voice, vital imagery, and nimble, teasing, sexy, and wise protestations and philosophical observations." Seaman says that these poems "transcend time, geography, and culture with startling directness, relevance, and verve." Likewise, Verhovek notes that the "poems are often good for a laugh and many have not-so-hidden sexual imagery." Verhovek also likes other, less overt poems, which "use timeless natural images and simply sound beautiful, both in Vietnamese and now in Mr. Balaban's translations." Not everybody gives the English translations glowing praise, however. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer notes that "the translations, as tightly wound as they are, won't bear repeated perusals." This reviewer also comments on the book's racy cover, which features a topless woman with her face covered. The reviewer says, it is a "lame, bare-breasted attempt at titillation."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Poquette has a bachelor's degree in English and specializes in writing about literature. In the following essay, Poquette discusses the effects of translation on Ho's Vietnamese poem.

Some of the most famous poetry in history was written in a language other than English. For example, Homer's epic poems, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, were originally written in Greek, but their translated versions have inspired writers and readers for thousands of years. Despite this fact, there is always the danger that something will be lost when a poem is translated from one language into another, especially if the two languages use radically different systems of writing. In Balaban's translation of "Spring-Watching Pavilion," he does lose certain aspects of the poem, while others remain intact through the translation process.

For examining how much of the poem has been retained through the translation process, it helps if one looks at the poem from the outside in. That is, examining the greater structure before moving on to the specific meanings of individual lines and stanzas. When one compares the Vietnamese and English versions of "Spring-Watching Pavilion," as they are printed in *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*, they appear to be very similar. Both are composed of eight lines, which are broken up into four stanzas of two lines each. In addition, the sentence structure is the same, with periods at the end of lines two through eight. However, the Vietnamese version is a true lu-shih, since it has seven syllables in each line and it features end rhymes on lines one, two, four, six, and eight. Balaban's English version does not have a consistent syllable count and does not feature end rhymes.

Although structure is important to poetry, it is not the only aspect of poetry that determines the identity of a poem. Good poetry is also based on meaning. Unfortunately, translating Vietnamese poetry into English is a tricky business. As Balaban notes in his introduction, Vietnamese is a tonal language, in which the meaning of a word can change just by pronouncing it in a higher or lower tone. Balaban says, "With a music of pitches inherent in every poem, an entire dynamic of sound inoperable in English comes into play." Ho is a clever poet, and she often uses these tonal changes in skilful ways to create a double entendre, or hidden meaning, in her poems. This second meaning is almost always sexual, which is one of the reasons that Ho has enjoyed such a strong reputation from the eighteenth century until today. In her own time, when the male, Confucianist authorities banned sexual discussions, writing about sex was very dangerous. By embedding these sexual meanings within the subtle use of tonal changes, Ho was able to create two different poems, a surface poem about one subject, and a hidden poem that had a second, sexual meaning. Although most readers, including the Confucianist government leaders, could read into these second meanings, Ho's poetry was subtle and clever enough for her to avoid being persecuted for writing outright obscenities.

English, on the other hand, is not a tonal language. When English-speaking people pronounce a word in a higher or lower pitch, it generally just indicates a person's accent, mood, or style of speech. As a result, when a translator tries to render Ho's multifaceted tones in English, something is inevitably lost. In addition, if the translator tries to compensate to better communicate the original, Vietnamese meaning, he or she can run into problems. Balaban says, again in his introduction, "one of the many dangers for a translator of Ho Xuan Huong is driving any poem too far toward one pole of meaning." Unfortunately, some reviewers feel that this is exactly what Balaban did in *Spring Essence*. In her 2000 article about the book for *Publishers Weekly*, Bridget Kinsella says: "In the English translation it is easier to see the double entendres that are part of Xuan Huong's style." Likewise, in his review of the book for the *New York Times*, Sam Howe Verhovek notes that many of the translations of Ho's poems "have not-sohidden sexual imagery."

The opposite appears to be true for "Spring- Watching Pavilion," in which the hidden meaning seems to be totally lost in translation. To visualize this, it will help to reproduce the Vietnamese version of the poem:

Em ai, chieu xuan toi khan dai
Lang lang chang bon chut tran ai.
Ba hoi chieu mo chuong gam song.
Mot vung tang thuong nuoc lon troi.
Be ai nghin trung khon tat can.
Nguon an muon truong de khoi voi.
Nao nao cuc lac la dau ta?
Cuc lac la day, chin ro muoi

In his discussion of "Spring-Watching Pavilion" in the endnotes section of *Spring Essence*, Balaban discusses the hidden meaning in this particular poem. Balaban says, "Huong is punning tonally off *ai*." As Balaban notes, Ho uses this word in various ways, including strategically placing it so that, when it is combined with other words in the lines below it, the vertical reading gives the poem a hidden meaning. Balaban notes the example of lines five and six, in which the second word on each line, "*ai*" and "*an*," respectively, "can be read vertically as one word, *ai-an*, meaning 'love.'" Ultimately, Balaban says that Ho's many clever tonal manipulations make it seem "as if compassion is spreading throughout the poem. Dust and dissolution engender love." In other words, in the surface poem, Ho is discussing the necessity of returning to nature to find nirvana. While readers can see that Ho is separating herself from the human world by secluding herself physically in nature, the hidden meaning is more direct. As the poem progresses, and Ho retreats from the human world, compassion grows. Taking this idea to its logical end, the total retreat from the "dust" of the human world results in physical death, which is represented by the term dissolution, or decay. It is only here, in death, that love is engendered, or procreated. Ho is saying that humans must die before they can be born into true love, which could be understood as nirvana. These kind of tonal manipulations are impossible to reproduce in English, so Balaban is not able to retain this exact message.

So far, it looks like Balaban has been able to save very little of the original meaning. Given this fact, why should English readers think that they are reading most, if any, of Ho's original poem? The answer is imagery. No matter what structural or tonal changes have been lost, the poem retains Ho's original imagery. One of the most powerful aspects of poetry is in its use of images. This poem employs two main types of imagery□natural and man-made. The poem begins with the mention of "a gentle spring evening" in the first line. As the poem continues, the reader sees that the natural images dominate the poem, indicating the poet's preference for natural religion over the man-made variety found in institutionalized belief systems like Mahayana Buddhism. Most of the natural images are related to water. The poet describes "bell tolls" that echo "like a wave"; heaven is viewed "upside-down in sad puddles"; love is depicted as a "vast sea"; and grace exists in "springs" that "flow easily everywhere." Like Vietnam itself, this poem is very wet.

When poets use such blatant imagery, it is usually intentional. In this case, Ho's reasoning becomes clear when one examines the traditional symbolism of water. In general, water is a symbol for life or creation, and is often associated with femininity, since humans are born from a woman's fluid-filled womb. Because of this, the poem takes on strong overtones of creation. In addition, the vastness of the sea, the largest body of water found on the earth, represents cosmic infinity, where everybody originates and must eventually return. Collectively, these images emphasize the cyclical role of nature in life, death, and the search for nirvana. This is powerful imagery in any language.

In the end, while it was impossible for Balaban to retain Ho's tonal manipulations, he has preserved her imagery. This imagery is ultimately the most important part of Ho's poem, since "Spring- Watching Pavilion" is a poem that is based on nature, and nature does not change regardless of the language in which it is depicted. Verhovek says of the poems in *Spring Essence*: they "use timeless natural images and simply sound beautiful, both in Vietnamese and now in Mr. Balaban's translations." In his introduction, Balaban makes readers fully aware that his translation "almost certainly contains inevitable errors of provenance as well as errors that are purely of my making, a foreigner." However, this ultimately is not important, because Balaban's translations, including his translation of "Spring-Watching Pavilion," still retain enough important elements to make them worth reading. This is why Balaban notes that, while he was "swimming in waters way over his head" during his translations, he was still "cheered by shouts from Vietnamese standing on the far shore." While it is certainly the goal of any translation to accurately communicate all aspects of a poet's message, this goal is not always attainable. It would be a tragedy if the world was deprived of the work of poets like Ho, simply because a translator was afraid that he or she might not get it totally right.

Source: Ryan D. Poquette, Critical Essay on "Spring- Watching Pavilion," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Covintree holds a bachelor's degree in English and is currently pursuing a master of fine arts in writing at Emerson College. In this essay, Covintree examines various ways to interpret specific lines in the text in relation to the search for nirvana.

Written during a time of political turnover and upheaval in her home country of Vietnam, Ho Xuan Huong's poem, "Spring-Watching Pavilion," found in the collection *Spring Essence*, captures a calm moment of serenity. In this poem, Ho discusses the discovery of enlightenment in the midst of an environment where such discovery could seem impossible. John Balaban has translated the poem from its original into English. In his poetic translation, Balaban has attempted to maintain the flavor of the original poem while making it easier to comprehend for the English reader. Fortunately, as Balaban explains in the Introduction to *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*, Ho was a master "in composing two poems at once, one hidden in the other" that would appeal to both the common people and the aristocrats. Balaban includes footnotes to many of the poems to help the English reader discover the second or hidden poems. Still, there are many lines and ideas in the poem that could be interpreted in various ways. Though it is difficult to know which of the interpretations is correct, it is interesting to observe the variety of possibility and the impact the different readings have on the understanding of the text as a whole.

In the fourth line of her poem, Ho writes, "We see heaven upside-down in sad puddles." This line can be interpreted in a few ways. With the statements of "worldly dust" and the "bell" that tolls three times, Ho has brought images into her poem that could be seen as elements of the city. When put in combination with these noisy and dirty images and when the line has been translated to "sad puddles," it is easy to interpret this line to mean that if the poet were to view heaven in this environment, it would be distorted by the bustle and busyness of the city. This would not be heaven at all, only a "heaven upside-down" and therefore a hell. In this interpretation, the line is in the context of the village and city that has been left behind.

But, this line can be read differently. To see heaven upside-down in a puddle is to encounter the reflection of heaven while still on earth. Perhaps the puddles are not in the city, but just outside the pavilion where the poet is making her observations. By the fourth line in the poem, the reader already knows that the current evening is "gentle" and "unclouded." To see heaven in this environment is to find peace in the unexpected. Perhaps this glimpse of heaven is what helps the poet come to the final conclusion about nirvana, that "Nirvana is here, nine times out of ten." With this last line, Ho places the reader immediately in a place of spiritual enlightenment.

How can a reader determine which interpretation is more accurate? Since this poem is a translation, it can be helpful to return to the original text. In his Introduction to *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*, Balaban includes a literal translation of the poem, "Spring-Watching Pavilion." In the literal translation, the fourth line reads, "one puddle mourning water turned over heaven." In this translation, a new possible image

comes forth□a view of heaven covered over by a puddle. Here, it becomes unclear as to which noun is turning. Is it the water turning or heaven? Perhaps it is the water that propels heaven to turn and become visible to the poet and then the reader. It is also possible that the heaven of this line could simply be the earth near the pavilion that has been covered over by a puddle from a spring rain. Both of these ideas would still support the idea that heaven is present in the here and now.

This explanation, however, does not fully clarify why the puddle would be in "mourning." If the puddle is personified, or given human attributes, that allow for the puddle to show emotion, why would Ho choose sadness? Perhaps, because in this line, heaven is covered over, and therefore still inaccessible. Heaven is still just beyond reach. By focusing on this word, the reader would again have found support for the first interpretation, that this would not be heaven at all, but only a "turned . . . heaven."

It is then good to look at the following line that says, "love's vast sea cannot be emptied." In the literal translation it reads, "sea love 1,000 immense cannot splash out shallow." With the addition of this line, heaven becomes connected with the vast sea of love. In this way, the water that covers over heaven is indeed love, and the combination of love and heaven "cannot splash out." These two things will always exist in this moment. Though one may not always recognize their presence, they cannot dissipate. "Nine times out of ten," heaven will be available.

In both Balaban's literal and poetic translations, symbols of water are ever present. This water is a symbol of a life force that flows freely and unhalting, through the observations of the poet. The bell rings in "waves," and "springs of grace flow." She freely plays with the images of water and uses them to help the reader think about nature, creation, and life.

The original text of this poem was written in Nom, a native Vietnamese language that was not often used. In this version, her choices of word placement and rhyme add new dimension to her poems. In addition, she demonstrates a keen skill with the *lu-shih* tradition and creates poems with definite rhyme and meter. A *lu-shih* is a classical Chinese poem that follows a strict form of eight lines of seven syllables with end rhymes at the first, second, fourth, sixth, and eighth lines. In the Chinese tradition, there are also strict rules of the ways tones will fall in the lines. Though much of this is lost in translating Ho's poem to English, other subtleties remain.

One such example is the use of the word "spring" in this poem. In the title, "Spring-Watching" could mean a pavilion that faces a natural spring, or it could define the season in time when the poet is making her observations. *"Xuan"* is the Vietnamese word for spring. It is also part of the poet's name. In the entire collection of poems edited and translated by Balaban, this is the only poem with the poet's own name in the title. By including her name in the title, Ho has given herself a direct place in her poem. In Balaban's poetic translation, the word spring returns in both the first and sixth lines. In the first line, "spring" appears to describe the season in time, while in the sixth line, the word is used like a natural spring or wellspring. Because this word is also the name of the poet, each time it is used, it carries the additional weight of the presence of the poet

in the poem. The line "springs of grace" could suddenly also refer to Ho's personality. The continual repetition of the word "spring" adds to the authoritative and confident voice of the poet and the poem.

To help the reader understand other devices that Ho used in the poem, "Spring-Watching Pavilion," Balaban provides an endnote to the poem that examines some of the Nom words in a different manner. Instead of reading the words from left to right, he reads them from top to bottom. Suddenly, two words in line five and two words in line six form two new words: "*ál-ân*," which means love and "*nghìn* and *muôn*" which means vast. In the endnote to *Spring Essence*, John Balaban interprets these new words to show that "compassion is spreading throughout the poem." This all encompassing compassion helps support the ideas of nirvana being present in poem and in the current world.

Throughout the poem, Ho includes images and ideas that stem from Mahayana Buddhism such as "worldly dust" and the images of the vast sea of love and grace. Though Ho followed Buddhist precepts she was not inclined to support organized religion. According to the introduction to *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*, Balaban reveals that Ho "saw corruption in the religious institutions of her time and cast some of her wickedest slurs on venal, lazy or decadent clergy." This poem is clearly filled with Buddhist ideas and beliefs but intentionally absent from the piece is a traditional clerical guide.

In Mahayana Buddhism, there are members of the community called bodhisattvas who have already achieved nirvana, but remain on earth to guide other followers. As Balaban explains in the endnotes of his translation of Ho's work, "the bodhisattvas vow to save all sentient beings and [strive] for *karuna*□kindness or compassion□one of the Buddhist 'perfections.'" When reading words from lines five and six vertically, the reader learns that compassion is one of the main ideas Ho wants to include in the poem. In addition, if the reader follows the second interpretation of the fourth line, the interpretation that says that heaven is being reflected for the poet, then Ho herself can be seen as someone acting in the manner of a bodhisattva in this poem. She has seen nirvana and now cannot remain passive while others are unaware of the beauty already around them on earth. She is actively making others aware of the heaven and compassion that surround them on earth.

Like a bodhisattva, as the author of the poem she knows where she wants to take her reader. She is the guide for the type of understanding and nirvana the reader will get from her work. Because of her own mixed and critical feelings for organized religion, Ho has taken her own claim to spiritual enlightenment and brought the reader along for the journey. It is a journey absent of organized religion, but not revelation. Ho is a master of word play. One of the greatest strengths of her poems is her use of double entendre to bring multiple meanings to her poems. All the confusion about the fourth line may have been part of an intended ambiguity. The contradiction allows for reflection and possibility. The ability to expand the meaning of her poem through the creation of vertical reading also helps provide the poem with depth and greater understanding. She is intentional about her words, from "dust" to "spring." She demonstrates enlightenment,

both as a poet and as a spiritual guide. All of these various pieces to her poem and poetics only increase the intensity of the epiphany at the end of the poem so that "Nirvana is here nine times out of ten."

Source: Kate Covintree, Critical Essay on "Spring-Watching Pavilion," in *Poetry for Students*, Gale, 2003.

Topics for Further Study

Although Ho did not agree with many of the practices of organized Buddhism in her time, she did hold to its main precepts. Create a twocolumn chart comparing the main beliefs and practices of Buddhism with any other religion of your choice. Choose a famous Buddhist from any point in history and write a short biography about this person.

Find another poet, from any point in history, who is known for his or her use of double entendres in poetry. Read a representative poem from this person and compare the hidden meaning in it to "Spring-Watching Pavilion." Compare the cultural circumstances that encouraged each poet to place hidden meanings in their poetry.

Not many concrete details are known about Ho's life. Taking the few details that are known, create your own version of Ho's life story. Imagine that you are Ho in the eighteenth century and write a journal entry about what your daily life is like.

Find a work or art from any medium that you think expresses the main themes of "Spring- Watching Pavilion," and which could serve as a companion art piece in a gallery. Discuss your reasons for choosing this piece of art, referring to techniques specific to your particular art medium, where possible.

Compare and Contrast

Late 1700s-Early 1800s: Western nations, most notably France, escalate their efforts to colonize Vietnam. During the Tay-Son Rebellion, Nguyen Anh (Gia Long) enlists the help of French soldiers to reclaim his family's throne. However, when his successor, Minh Mang, expels the French from Vietnam, the relation between the two countries changes.

Today: In 2000, President Clinton makes a historic visit to the southeast Asian country of Vietnam, where he advocates stronger relations between the two countries. Clinton is the first American president to visit Vietnam since the end of the Vietnam War.

Late 1700s-Early 1800s: Vietnamese citizens subscribe to many different religions, including Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. However, Confucianist leaders often regulate the other religious groups to prevent them from undermining or opposing the Confucian government.

Today: Although Vietnam is often identified with Buddhism and Confucianism, it still maintains an impressive diversity of religions. Communist leaders, essentially atheist and secular as a group, often regulate the country's religious groups to prevent them from undermining or opposing the Communist government.

Late 1700s-Early 1800s: In Vietnam, flooding, particularly during the summer monsoon season, can be destructive to the agriculture and thus the livelihood of villagers.

Today: Although Vietnam has embraced technology in many ways, the country is still highly dependent upon its agriculture for survival. In 1999, Vietnam experiences some of its worst floods in years.

What Do I Read Next?

Vietnam's landscape and culture have inspired many of the country's current writers. In *Vietnam: A Traveler's Literary Companion* (1996), John Balaban and Nguyen Qui Duc compile more than fifteen stories by Vietnam's best writers. Most of the stories are organized by five geographical sections: Hanoi, Rivers, Ho Chi Minh City, Dalat, and Villages.

Much can be learned about a culture by examining its classic stories. *Children of the Dragon: Selected Tales from Vietnam* (2001), by Sherry Garland, is a children's book that collects six of these classic stories, including one that examines the legend of the monsoon rains. Garland discusses each tale in its specific historical and cultural context.

Today's Vietnam has a rich and diverse culture. *Culture and Customs of Vietnam* (2001), by Mark W. McLeod and Nguyen Thi Dieu, offers a detailed overview of Vietnamese geography, history, religion, literature, art and architecture, cuisine, and other cultural aspects. The book also includes a chronology of important historical events, a glossary of Vietnamese terms, and a bibliography.

Poetry has always occupied a place of honor in Vietnam. In *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems: From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries* (2001), Huynh Sanh Thong and Sanh Thong Huynh include poems from both wellknown and obscure poets and address many topics relevant to Vietnamese culture and history, including religion, art, politics, and war.

Further Study

Barnes, Thomas J., *Tay Son: Rebellion in 18th Century Vietnam*, Xlibris Corporation, 2000.

This book examines the Tay-Son rebellion, which took place in Vietnam from 1771 to 1802. Many scholars believe that Ho was born during this conflict, which dominated Vietnamese life and politics. The book is written in the style of a historical novel and examines the effect of the rebellion on Vietnamese people.

Smolan, Rick, ed., *Passage to Vietnam: Through the Eyes of Seventy Photographers*, Against All Odds Productions, 2000.

In this book, seventy photographers from fourteen different countries provide glimpses into modern Vietnamese life. Since many of the photos depict the Vietnamese people against the country's ancient landscapes, the book can help readers envision the scenery that Ho's nature poems were based upon.

Steinberg, David Joel, ed., *In Search of Southeast Asia*, Praeger Publishers, 1971.

This book examines the development of the countries in modern Southeast Asia, including Vietnam. It includes a detailed section on the religious and political life of Vietnam in the eighteenth century. The book also includes several maps, in-depth notes for each chapter, and a comprehensive bibliography.

Williams, Paul, *Mahayana Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices series, Routledge, 1989.

This book offers a good introduction to the beliefs and practices of Mahayana Buddhists. Williams examines the history of Mahayana Buddhism (a form of Buddhism practiced in Vietnam), discusses current trends, and includes several references for further study.

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Buttinger, Joseph, *A Dragon Defiant: A Short History of Vietnam*, Praeger Publishers, 1972, p. 9.

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Seaman, Donna, Review of *Spring Essence: The Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 97, No. 3, October 1, 2000, p. 313.

Verhovek, Sam Howe, "From Woodcuts to Bytes for a Vietnamese Poet,"in the *New York Times*, March 15, 2001.

Wiegers, Michael, "Nine Times out of Ten: John Balaban and the Poetry of Ho Xuan Huong," in the *American Poetry Review*, Vol. 29, No. 5, September 2000, p. 6.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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