

### Key Essay Assignment:

Give out this assignment two weeks in advance of the essay's due date to allow for study of the readings and artwork. The study or discussion questions that follow the essay assignment are "pre-writing exercises" designed to help students sort through the material. The instructor should be careful not to discuss the material too extensively in class so that students can form their own insights.

*Based on the readings in Owen's anthology, the first chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, and the visual texts given in sections A, B, and C of the Readings section above, take a stand as to whether you agree with the Emperor Xuanzong's court officials who executed Yang Guifei in 756, blaming her for the An Lushan Rebellion. In a well-constructed essay, argue your stand persuasively using close analysis of the written and visual texts.*

*Consider the following as you would witnesses at a jury trial. How reliable are they? Why might they have conflicting views? What insights do they offer? What are their biases?*

*Bai Juyi*

*Chen Hong*

*Murasaki Shikibu*

*Creators of visual Tang dynasty representations of Yang Guifei*

*Study or discussion questions for "Song of Lasting Pain"*

- What is the impression of Yang Guifei created in the first seven stanzas? What words and phrases create this impression?
- What is the poem saying about parents' attitudes about having daughters? How much can a poem written about sixty years after the fact be used to gauge social attitudes?

Study or discussion questions for Chen Hong's "An Account to Go with the "Song of Lasting Pain."

- The first sentence reads, "During the Kaiyuan Reign, the omens of the Stair Stars showed a world at peace and there were no problems throughout all the land within the four circling seas" (Owen p. 448)
- Questions: Is it possible that the "world" was at peace and there were no problems? What is the effect of Chen's rhetoric? Why does he begin this way?
- After saying that the Emperor's Empress and previous first consort have died, Chen calls the Emperor "fretful and displeased."
- Questions: What are the denotation and connotation of "fretful"? What other word could Chen have used instead of "displeased"? What opinion of the Emperor are you forming from these words?
- Yang Guifei is called "coy." What are the denotation and connotation of "coy"? What opinion of Yang Guifei does Chen seem to have of Yang Guifei? What other words back up your thoughts about Chen?

- Compare/contrast Bai Juyi's and Chen's attitudes. Note that the two are contemporaries.

*Study or discussion questions for Bai Juyi's "The Girl Who Danced the Whirl"*

- How are the actions and motivations of Yang Guifei and An Lushan associated by parallel phrases in the poem?
- Both Yang Guifei and An Lushan are described dancing "the whirl" in front of the Emperor. The whirl is a Central Asian dance said here to have come from Sogdiana, the area immediately west of China. Why might this dance be significant to the legend of Yang Guifei?

*Study or discussion questions for Chapter One of The Tale of Genji.*

- What is the effect of beginning the chapter with characters referring to the "example" of Yukihi (Yang Guifei) (Tyler, p. 3)? What is the effect of Murasaki's allusions to Bai Juyi's "Song of Lasting Pain" in forming the readers' impressions of Genji's mother and her relationship to the Japanese emperor? What details from Bai Juyi does Murasaki use and what type of details does she exclude?
- What motivations does Murasaki give to the court ladies surrounding Genji's mother for disliking her? How might these motivations show Murasaki's perspective as a woman with knowledge of court life?
- How is the character of Genji's mother different from Yang Guifei? How is Genji himself similar to Yang Guifei?