



THE TWO PEARLS *of* WISDOM

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Teaching Notes prepared by Dr. Pam Macintyre

The Eternal Questions according to Natalie Babbitt are: Who am I? How did I get here? What is the meaning of life? Can I make my way through it alone? Must death be the final end?

(Babbitt, 1987, p.29)

These questions make a rich starting point to explore this fascinating, complex and intriguing story set in a mythical world; a patriarchal, hierarchical world that has been intricately built by the author in a rich assembly of architecture, lore, colour, etiquette and most of all characters. It is also a world of intrigue, machinations, dissembling and above all, the getting and exercising of power. Goodman plunges the reader into this universe, trusting that the compelling combination of the familiarity provided by resonances with China and Japan, and the intriguing strangeness of a universe not our own will carry the reader into the story. And the trust is well placed.

The novel is an adventure rich in incident and action as we follow the fortunes of crippled Eon, a girl disguised as a boy by her ambitious Master, in his attempt to have her become a Dragoneye, a human handler of one of the twelve elemental, mythical beasts whose control of Hua, the life force can be harnessed to change the course of nature. During the selection ceremony, Eon awakens the Mirror Dragon, not seen for hundreds of years. This dragon selects her as Dragoneye precipitating her into the Imperial Court and direct conflict with the ruthless and powerful, Lord Ido.

To add to the complications, Eon is seen as the saviour of the Imperial Court by a group called The Resistance, which is working to keep the kingdom in the hands of the current royal family and out of a potential, cruel usurper, Lord Sethon. What Eon hasn't revealed to any of them is that she has no dragon power: she did not 'meld' properly with her dragon during the ceremony. So the reader, with Eon, wonders how long she can juggle the various masquerades, and the expectations on her – a poor girl thrust into a Court of high etiquette and clever manipulators, particularly powerful ones who want to see her fail.

- Such **world building** feeds the reader's fascination with the imagined world, which is like ours but not. It provides a valuable way of thinking and talking about the narrative. This is a rich, involving fantasy of the Dragoneyes, full of lore and a rich palette of culture and geography, ritual and society – a tantalising mixture of Chinese and Japanese geography and custom and original creations of the author's. Goodman has given the reader a plan to follow to locate events, but also to understand the structure of the society. The following are a few elements to examine, but readers can find what fascinates them.
 - The positions at the ceremony (pp74-82)
 - *Dragon lore*: It is forbidden to use Dragons in warfare; they are agents of nurture and protection (p74).
 - A Pearl of Dragons – the complete circle (p177), the first time in 500 years that there has been the twelve of them.
 - If a Dragoneye kills all of the other Dragoneyes and their apprentices then the energy of all twelve will channel through him (p189).
 - Dragons have elemental power – Dragoneyes use up their Hua to control it.
 - String of Pearls joins the energy of all the dragons into one devastating force (p 237).
 - The Dragoneyes – why do we so readily accept their power? What are their functions – (p 44) manipulating earth energies for the good of the Empire.
 - Staminata: control of Hua through meditation and controlled movement. Lin Hua, (good) Gan Hua (bad).
 - The Council.
 - The story robe.
 - The grieving rituals and funeral customs. What does this respect for the dead suggest about this society? (pp244-5)
 - The food.
 - The plan (preliminary pages) could be enlarged and used to map events and to fill in the detail for the visually adept, or be scanned into a computer as the basis for a three dimensional representation of the court buildings.
 - The diagram of the Twelve Dragons could be expanded to include what you imagine their positions to be from the descriptions of the ceremony. Also what their colours and tastes are. This is a very sensual world.
 - This is complex society that on the one hand is hierarchical, patriarchal, violent, oppressive and racist (pp12-13, 16, 63) for

example, yet is also one that values learning and scholarship. For example, the library, which contains 'every subject known to man', and the librarian, Prahm, who is devoted to the scholarly life (p161). Are these contradictions unique to this world, or are there contemporary resonances as you read?

- Food: consider how much food could be contemporary, such as sweet buns, shark fin, (p126) tea and moon cakes, cinnamon pastries, (pp139) – the banquet. And the description of Eon drinking chocolate for the first time. This is a wonderful description that could be used as a model for writing (p107).
 - The harem (pp154) is part of the Imperial Court, but the Emperor loves Lady Jila. What does this suggest about him – that he is a modern man? A weak man?
 - In the harem, the women practise musical instruments and are educated. Is this an enlightened society? For example, Eona says she did not know ladies could be educated (pp162-163).
 - **Imperial Court:** Hierarchy, etiquette.
 - Pavilion of Earthly Enlightenment – (p162) 'all who enter are equal in the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. Eon thinks it is unnatural – even slaves have ranks. Is Goodman suggesting a hierarchical society is inevitable? For example, the irony of Prahm being ordered out of 'the room of equality'(p166).
 - **Politics** There is much gamesmanship in the Imperial Court: (p127) such as Eon being given Lord Ido's family's gift to the Emperor.
 - Consider the views of isolationism versus opening up the country (p163). Will it dilute the culture, or enrich it? What are Eona's beliefs – search throughout the novel. Is this similar to Australia's policy of multiculturalism? What sort of country would we be without immigration?
 - P174 Ido's plot to overthrow the emperor and replace him with Sethon.
- Another approach would be looking at the novel in terms of the **hero**, especially as Eon/Eona is such an intriguing hero: she is a girl masquerading as a boy, as Lord Eon, and as someone with power she does not have. Many trials are put in front of Eon/Eona that would daunt lesser, fully complete heroes.

Joseph Campbell in *A Hero with a Thousand Faces* outlines the stages of the mythological hero's journey, and identifying these in *The Two Pearls of Wisdom* would provide a rich way of examining the narrative, the way the author is inviting the reader to share the journey, and highlighting the careful construction of the world and the story. The pattern according to Campbell is separation, adventure, return:

- *The call to adventure:* 'destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown'. Accepting the call means the rite of separation.

- *The herald*: summons the hero to cross a threshold – from the real world into mystery, life to death, waking state to dream.
- *Protective figures or charms or talismans*: ‘symbols of the benign, protective power of destiny’ without whom or which the hero could not survive the trials of adventure.
- *Trials*: facing the confusions, terrors, dangers and pains that stand between the hero and achievement of spiritual growth; or lessons to be learned, before. The central quest is to find the name of the mirror dragon
- *The hero’s return*: having survived the trials the hero is free to return to the real world, to re-cross the threshold bringing new knowledge.
- *Refusal to return*: suggests that for the hero reality is not worth returning to.
- This frame could be put around the narrative structure of, and sequence of events in, the story. For instance, identify all the tests that Eon/Eona has to undergo and survive. Consider the significance of Eon and what is attached to her seeing all the dragons and the return of the Mirror Dragon. Is this too much of a burden? (p135, p136) – the ‘fevered belief’ in her. Are they naïve, or do they know something she doesn’t?

A third approach is through the richly created characters, especially the atypical hero/heroine who is in disguise and maimed.

Eon/Eona

Stages in her life:

Before and during the ceremony:

- What do we make of Eon as a character? Perhaps not what we expect? We know from the beginning that she is special in that she can see all the dragons. What do we predict from this? (p4) She is disliked, even feared. Why?
- She has a double disguise as a boy and then as a ‘Moon shadow’.
- P7: she is sixteen but disguised as twelve. She makes enormous sacrifices to her training. She suppresses her femininity. Are there parallels to elite sportspeople now?
- P11: her special powers. Alert readers might pick up the hints as to what is to come. Or a subsequent read could identify the clues the author has placed in the text.
- Why is having a deformity important? What does the author want us to consider? How does her deformity operate symbolically in the novel?
- P13 and page 19 give us glimpses of her past through memories. Perhaps put these together like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle to see what the whole reveals.
- P31: the Master doesn’t understand why he tested a girl. Is there some higher power operating?
- P42-3: her friendship with Chart and the painting she does for him. Is it just that she identifies with his disability or does it suggest something about her character?

- P51: the Master says that being a cripple has proved useful – what might he mean?
- P55: Eon has drawn four, an unlucky number; everything seems to be against her.
- P56: the armsman says the swords are ‘powerful luck bringers’ another hint – the swords have a silver moon crescent on them, moon being the seat of female power, and Eon tastes rage and fear when she handles them – ‘They must have very old energy’ says the armsman.
- P78: who or what is giving her instructions in her mind?
- Pp84 - she has enormous courage and inner strength to make the bow. Is this her first test?

After the ceremony, at the court: does power change her?

- She is precipitated to the highest order in the land below the Imperial family. It seems she is in the hands of destiny. How active is Eon in shaping her fate?
- Eon says (p 115)– ‘perhaps I just can’t remember how to act like a girl’. Is that her most important task in the scheme of the novel?
- P116 she talks of the ‘accident’ and recollects the man with the tattooed face looming over her.
- P146 she realizes she cannot call her dragon, and on p152 whispers her true name but still it doesn’t come. Why not?
- Importance of the verse – why does Ido’s head ‘snap up’?
- P157 – her friendship with Kygo at the behest of Lady Jila. Do you predict what might eventuate?
- P197 dresses herself in Lady Dela’s bracelets etc and feels energy booming in her.
- P198 ‘a female Dragoneye was a travesty for everything that was natural in the world’. Is this true? Ironic?
- P203 Eon becomes hopes of the Resistance, while living at the Court.

Prince Kygo

- P158 Kygo says he values friendship and love. Is this ‘too womanly’ as he thinks? Does that then position the reader as favourable to him, as female things are being valued?

The Master

- What do you make of him? What are his motivations for Eon? Are they purely selfish? Has he come to love her?
- P110 Is he driven by power alone? Or by a desire to ‘hobble Ido’s ambitions’? Is that about altruism or revenge?
- p110 when he touches Eon’s breast he is ‘burned’. Does she have a protective female power?
- P112 what does he mean ‘that is how it must be’?
- P178 ‘He had waited years for this return to wealth and power. I could almost feel the triumph humming through his body’. What does this tell us about him?

Lady Dela

- P 114 She is a Contraire – a man who lives as a woman: the body of man with a woman's spirit. A Contraire has two souls: male and female. She has both Sun and Moon energy and is thought to bring luck to the Eastern tribes only. She is barely tolerated at court, and is attacked.
- Is she only a supporter of Eon because her existence at court depends on the Emperor being in power? Are there any genuine friendships at the Court, or only alliances?
- P199 she explains her impulses as a child
- P200 she thinks women have power but that it is different from men's. Eon can only see suffering in womanhood. Who is right do you think?

Rilla Chart's mother

- Is she loyal to the Master only because he tolerates Chart? And why does he?
- Is she loyal to Eon only because she fears the consequences (p105)?
- There is a calm dignity about her isn't there?
- The author says she acts a mother figure to Eona. Do you agree?

Emperor

- P18 He appears to be a good man but not an especially wise one to allow Lord Sethon to gain power. Why do you think he allowed Sethon to live? Is there wisdom in the old practices that he ignores at his peril?

Lord Ido

- He is threatening when we first meet him, and according to the Master he is 'treacherous and unpredictable' (p 49).
- P63-4 He tramples on protocol, is physically powerful, ruthless arrogant. The picture of him is as very masculine – violent, self-seeking – all the negative masculine traits. Is this a fair reading of him?
- p64 Eon sees his shrivelled compassion – but it is still there. How significant is this?
- P176 Eona says of him 'Lord Ido was one of those who took his pleasure in the fear and pain of others.' And yet she is susceptible to his charm isn't she?
- P180- He is out of control. Is he a thug? A megalomaniac? A drug-taker whose judgment and sense of reality is vastly skewed?
- P183 Dillon says he thinks Ido is insane. Is he?
- What do you make of his transformation at the end. Do you trust it?

Ryko – Shadow Man

- p201 Ryko was a thief, got knifed and was saved by a fisherman. He then joined the resistance to Sethon's controlling of the islands.
- Lady Dela clearly loves him but his emotional attachments are enigmatic. How do you read him?

Chart

- p -7 born to one of the unmarried maids. Could The Master be his father? Consider his transformation in the novel from a pitiable being always on his mat near the stoves, to a property owner. His physical state allows him to mask a shrewd intelligence – to his advantage.
- Eon sees this person beyond the disability. What does this suggest about her?

A fourth approach can be the exploration of central ideas:

- Male and female power, identity and behaviour is a large part of the novel. For example (p115) Eona feels a male spirit in her: 'A fierceness that whittled me down to a sharpened spear of ambition. And as a boy, I was applauded, not punished for such raw energy. It was not beaten out of me for my own good, or worn away by women's chores'. Is it any different in the contemporary world?
- The position of women in the society: 'women did not have power. Or, if they did it was from the shapeliness of their body. Not from their spirit. And certainly not from their mind' (p 31) Is this real or default power? Also (p50) I knew by intuition – the irrational knowledge only claimed by women'. Is the author being ironic?
- Differences between male and female – (p116) what she had to learn to be a boy. What do you think? Is there more freedom for boys still, in our society?
- The male gaze (p116) and the idea of 'temporary possession'. The way that women can learn to use it (p117) Is it apparent still – consider advertising.
- Woman Script (p141). It is very old. Why is female power ancient? And why has it been stolen or subdued?
- Although Eon has her glimpses of her past (p141) and being taught by her mother, she suppresses anything female.
- Question: 'How can we know a man's heart? How can we know if he means us ill or good?' (p164). Discuss.
- Discuss what is meant by: 'fear made misers of us all' (p 58); 'a man's true character is revealed in defeat. I thought it was also revealed in victory' (p 266)
- **The Ceremony**
- P72 the arena and thousands of men – no mention of women
- P78 the power in the swords – what is it telling Eon?
- P80 Eon is defeated by a ruthless Ranne who breaks the rules. Why do they hate her so?
- P85 Eon can see all the dragons. How do you feel when Eon fails. Had you predicted that she would? Why/Why not?
- P95 What is happening with the mirror Dragon? Why won't Eon reveal her name and what does it mean that the Dragon knows she is female?

Research: For some readers, reading such a text prompts a desire to know more, and they might like to find out about feng shui, the Chinese zodiac and the ancient Chinese and Japanese societies that have inspired the author.

Related reading

Women in disguise

The Song of the Lioness series by Tamora Pierce.

Here Lies Arthur by Philip Reeve

Damaged hero

Garth Nix's *Keys to the Kingdom* series.

Michael Pryor's *Laws of Magic* series

Dragons

Anne McCaffrey *Dragonsong* series

Ursula Le Guin *A Wizard of Earthsea*; *The Tombs of Atuan*; *The Farthest Shore*;

Tehanu: The Other Wind

Carole Wilkinson's *Dragonkeeper*; *Garden of the Purple Dragon*; *Dragon Moon*

View

Callan (BBC) and *Blake's 7* (BBC) as mentioned by the author to see if you can see the links.