



Beacon Press Teachers' Guide

The Moon Pearl
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INTRODUCTION

Inspired by actual events, *The Moon Pearl* tells the story of three young women in nineteenth-century China who challenge the accepted beliefs of their community and emerge victorious.

Even as little girls, Mei Ju, Shadow, and Rooster know their paths in life are pre-determined. Women in China only have three options open to them—marry, join a nunnery, or commit suicide. But when these three girls are sent to a girls' house by their parents to learn how to be good brides and daughters-in-law, their hidden desires for independence and education bring them together.

Practicing songs of wedded sorrow when in the company of others and secretly learning to read when alone at night, Shadow, Mei Ju, and Rooster dream of one day standing on their own. They whisper of self-rule and freedom, ignoring the conviction that such dreams will never come true. But then Shadow, fearful of their looming betrothals, suggests a solution—make vows of spinsterhood. By vowing to remain single before

Heaven, they cannot be forced into marriage; nobody would dare break a promise to the gods.

Fearing their parents' reactions but determined to seek their goal, they steal away in the middle of the night to make their vows and replace their girlish pigtails with womanly buns. But when they reveal themselves, their courage is neither praised nor accepted. Instead, censured for disgracing their families, they are mocked and attacked by their neighbors and friends and shunned by their own families.

With no money for rent, they live in a decaying rainshack and sell their beautiful embroidery for money. Their clothes are worn, their house is falling apart, and they eat barely enough food to keep them alive. But through the adversity, Shadow, Mei Ju, and Rooster stay strong. They rise above the mockery and contempt of the people to not only survive their adversity but also excel despite it. They follow their hearts and pursue what they know is right, forcing the community to open their eyes until they, too, accept and, in the end, praise their dedication and their abilities. Clearing the way for thousands of women after them, they dare to question the age-old customs of their country and secure their right for independence.

BACKGROUND/ HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although *The Moon Pearl* is a work of fiction, its story and characters are inspired by actual events. The customs and traditions of the region that are described in the book accurately portray life in nineteenth-century Sun Duk, China.

As the novel reveals, women in the 1800s were not allowed to govern themselves. Not only in China, but in all parts of the world, a female was placed under subordination from the moment of her birth. As a daughter, she served her family; as a wife, she served her husband, and as a mother, she served her son. She was considered the property of the man, and therefore had no rights to claim as her own. She certainly could not own property or earn her own money. In reality, she did not even have enough rights to protect herself.

In China, if her husband brought other wives and/or concubines home, it was not in a wife's power to object. If her husband or her mother-in-law abused her (a common case), she could not leave or divorce him. Thus, a woman's only chance at happiness was to be matched with a kind husband and family. Similarly, a woman in nineteenth-century America also lacked the power to obtain a divorce. Even if she was treated badly, not much could be done.

Now, several decades later, both America and contemporary China promote equality of the sexes. Women attend colleges, work outside the home, and even join the army. But old beliefs linger long. Women still are not afforded the kind of power and opportunities as men, and the journey to equality is slow. While they are better off than women in most other parts of the world (some countries have yet to grant their women even basic human rights), they still have a long way to go before achieving their goals. Despite the battles and triumphs of women everywhere, residual sexism still remains.

CRITICAL THINKING

1. What is the significance of the prologue and the title? How do they relate to the rest of the book?
2. Foreshadowing is a common literary tool used to suggest to readers what will happen later in the novel. What are some examples of foreshadowing in *The Moon Pearl*?
3. How does McCunn portray marriage in the book? Is it like the image you have of marriage? How are they similar and/or different?
4. Secrets run rampant among the community in *The Moon Pearl*. Point out some examples of secrecy in the book. When is secrecy used for good purposes? For bad?
5. The Empress and the seniors of the girls' house pick on Rooster because she is poor. Why do you think Rooster's social status matters to them? Does social standing still affect how a person is treated today?
6. Shadow, Mei Ju, and Rooster must resort to secrecy to learn to read and are later forced to hide their education. How did illiteracy help keep women and the lower classes in subordination? Compare and contrast with the illegality of educating slaves in the United States.
7. What are the similarities among Shadow's, Mei Ju's, and Rooster's families? What are the differences? Which of their family values (if any) do you agree with and why?
8. How do Mei Ju, Shadow, and Rooster help each other through their community's mockery and abuse? Do you think that they would have been able to succeed on their own? Why or why not?
9. When Yun Yun escapes the rain in Shadow's house, she overhears the grandfathers discussing the social hierarchy: "Big fish eat little fish. Little fish eat shrimp. And shrimps eat mud" (143). Describe the social hierarchy in nineteenth-century Sun Duk. Is there a hierarchy in America today? Explain.
10. Why does Rooster join a nunnery after all the trouble she has gone through to avoid it? Does she do it for her family or herself?
11. On p. 180, Shadow's mother reveals, "I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that after twenty-three years, my heart still aches for my mother. And it won't be long before I have to part with Shadow. Fact is, a woman's life is filled with loss." Shadow's mother knows the pain of being a woman. Why does she get angry at

- Shadow for taking charge of her life?
12. What role(s) do reeling and embroidery play in the lives of Strongworm women? How do they help Shadow and Mei Ju to attain their goals?
 13. On p. 246, Elder Brother says, "You can't change what is." What are some of the "unchangeable truths" of Strongworm? What "unchangeable truths" do Americans believe today?
 14. Yun Yun regularly meets Lucky in her dreams, helping her to endure the abuse of the Chows, but when Yun Yun calls for her on p. 247, Lucky does not come. What has changed?
 15. Upper class girls in nineteenth-century Sun Duk were allowed an education, but peasant girls like Mei Ju, Shadow, and Rooster, were not. Are the upper classes still given priority in today's world? Do you think the lower classes are still discouraged from acquiring an education? Explain.
 16. How do the rules of society trap Yun Yun and others in miserable lives? What are the social rules that we observe now?
 17. "Nor did Mei Ju hear Bak Ju cry out. Or perhaps the water pounding against the hull, the rain beating against the awning and deck, and the screech and wail of the wind muffled her cries" (160). How are the cries of unhappy women in Strongworm similarly silenced? How does society muffle the voices and the dreams of women today?
 18. Why does Shadow's family give up Woon Choi? Have their opinions about girls changed at all?
 19. Why does Strongworm change their minds about Shadow and Mei Ju? Is peer pressure part of the reason?
 20. Mei Ju likens her grandmother to the high gentry who "never setting foot in the village, ... dominated the two councils on which [her grandfather] sat" (19). Why do you think the gentry had so much power over the village when they were not directly involved in it? How is this similar to and/or different from the United States government?
 21. Compare and contrast the status of women in nineteenth-century China with their status today. Compare and contrast the status of women in nineteenth-century America with their status today.

ACTIVITIES

1. The girls in *The Moon Pearl* ease their pain by singing weeping songs. Think about a problem that is plaguing you and write your own weeping song about it. Share with the class.
2. Take the viewpoint of either Mei Ju or Shadow and write a journal entry for each of the four sections of the book, describing her feelings and her thoughts. Be sure to adopt the voice and style of the character you choose.
3. Write a story about Rooster's life after she leaves Strongworm.
4. Pretend you are a young woman in Strongworm who has just been betrothed by her parents. Write a journal entry about how you feel.
5. When they need a break from their hard lives, Mei Ju seeks solace in her reeling, Shadow in her embroidery, and Rooster in her books. Write an essay about your special activity and explain how it makes you feel. Why do you like it?
6. The characters in *The Moon Pearl* often allow their actions to be swayed by peer pressure. Write about a time when you experienced or witnessed peer pressure. How did it make you feel? How did you or the person undergoing it handle it?
7. Get into groups of four or five and write two short stories-the first detailing the life of a peasant in the nineteenth-century and the second detailing the life of a member of the gentry. Share with the class.
8. Shadow enjoys a good relationship with her family until she goes against their wishes. Write about a time when you conflicted with your parents' idea of the best path for you. How did it affect your relationship? How did you work things out?
9. Imagine the characters' lives after the ending of *The Moon Pearl*. Write an outline for a sequel, noting events and characters (old and new).
10. Write a letter to a character in the book. Ask questions or just comment on their actions. Switch with a classmate and answer their letter while s/he answers yours. Discuss in groups.
11. Produce a creative project inspired by the book. It can be a poster, a collage, a puppet show, etc. Be creative! Briefly explain your work to the class.
12. Split up into groups. Have one person play a talk show host and have the others represent a character from the book. Have each character defend his or her beliefs/positions on the talk show. Allow the class to ask questions.

MAJOR PROJECTS

1. Go to the library and research a country during the nineteenth-century. Based on your research, write a report on the social conditions of the time. Focus especially on the status of women.
2. Research and detail the differences among the ruling class, the middle class, and the peasantry during the nineteenth-century.
3. Construct a timeline of major successes in the women's movement (both in China and the rest of the world). Be sure to note surrounding events so that one can get a sense of the time period.
4. Find articles regarding events that involve sexism. Write a report on how prejudice based on gender still plays a role in America and the rest of the world.
5. Mei Ju and Shadow find an escape from their lives and later gain their independence through their reeling and embroidery. Research the significance of handicrafts to women in the past. Explain what role(s), if any, handicrafts play in women's lives today both in the United States and other parts of the world.