

Struggling with Assimilation: Li-Young Lee's "Persimmons"

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Writer's comment: Dr. Alvarez assigned the final paper for English 42 (Approaches to Reading) with very few restrictions. He told the students to analyze any literary work read outside of class through one school of literary criticism. Once I decided to write about Li-Young Lee's poem "Persimmons," applying postcolonial theory seemed most logical. This assignment allowed me the opportunity to focus on a literary work that I admire, while exploring where and how knowledge drawn from my Asian American Studies and English courses intersects.

– *Diana K. Chan*

Instructors' comment: In English 42 students are trained in the practice of close reading through an introduction to literary theory. For our second assignment, students could choose any short work of literature and write about it in the light of one of the schools of literary theory we surveyed. Diana's essay on "Persimmons" and postcolonial theory builds upon our class discussion of this theoretical school. Daniel Thomas-Glass, the TA who worked with Diana on this paper, captures the many strengths of her work: "Diana's piece was the best student essay I read this year. We did a close reading of the poem together in my office hours, unearthing some of the ways in which persimmons function in the poem. It is a pleasure to work with a student writer who takes her craft as seriously as Diana does. I was particularly impressed by the way that she understood that taking a postcolonial position on a subject does not mean writing a paper on postcolonialism—I felt she treated the critical school with as light a touch as she did the poem itself. Her point regarding the significance of italicization also displays a subtlety of mind that is hard to find in writing at any level. The best essays allow the texts they approach to speak for themselves; I think she manages that beautifully here, as artfully as a poem like 'Persimmons' deserves."

– *David Alvarez and Daniel Thomas-Glass, English Department*

In his poem "Persimmons," Li-Yong Lee considers the social

placement of Chinese Americans. The narrator, a Chinese American man, pieces together remembrances to form a complex self-portrait. He draws memories from his childhood and adulthood, ending with an experience from the past year. While seemingly scattered, his memories connect in several ways. As one cohesive device, each recollection (excluding the one from the poem's third stanza) involves the Chinese fruit persimmons. More importantly, all of the narrator's varied experiences reveal complications of living as an ethnically Chinese person in America: assimilation into American culture, Orientalist exoticization, and white mainstream appropriation of Chinese culture. With the interrelated quality of the memories, "Persimmons" constructs a narrative for the painful process of cultural assimilation—as white, mainstream, American society strips away and appropriates Chinese culture.

Lee immediately approaches the issue of assimilation in the poem's first stanza. The narrator remembers the cruelty of forced assimilation from his childhood:

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker slapped the
back of my head and made me stand in
the corner for not knowing the difference
between *persimmon* and *precision*. (1-5)

Mrs. Walker, presumably a white teacher, enforced the rules for speaking standard English. To reprimand the narrator's deviance from fluent or standard English, Mrs. Walker used physical violence and shame when she "slapped the back of [his] head" and forced him to "stand in the corner" (2-3). As the classroom's authority figure representing the educational system, the teacher chose punishments that conveyed a cruel message: speaking imperfect English demonstrates stupidity and results in shame. The narrator is either a Chinese immigrant or a second-generation Chinese American who learned English as a second language (his speech possibly reflecting his parents' difficulties in English). In either case, he reveals a level of unfamiliarity with the language by confusing the words "*persimmon* and *precision*" (5). He still struggles through the socially normalizing process of cultural assimilation. As demonstrated in the first stanza, the educational system enforces the dominant white society's rules for speaking standard English and consequently promotes linguistic assimilation.

Lee's choice of enjambment at the word "choose" (6) breaks the first stanza and calls attention to the act of selection, or the very idea of having choices. In the traumatizing classroom incident, the narrator apparently does not feel the power to choose; as a child and as a student, he lacks agency in this process of assimilation. But through the poem,

retrospectively considering the past, the narrator justifies his linguistic conflations of “persimmon and precision” (5) and re-claims agency in the process. He connects the words through their similar sounds and by symbolic association: “How to choose/ persimmons. This *is* precision” (6-7, emphasis mine). So, although persimmons do not equate to precision, the selection of persimmons is precise. Later in the poem he also cleverly validates his conflations of “*fight* and *fright*, *wren* and *yarn*” (31). For instance, the narrator explains that he fought when frightened and felt frightened when fighting (32-33). While justifying his word conflations, he also re-claims agency by demonstrating his present command of the English language.

Writing with a notably gentler tone, in the second stanza Lee elaborates on the correct process of carefully selecting and eating persimmons—correct from a Chinese cultural perspective. So in the narrator’s Chinese culture of origins, persimmons represent something tender or gentle, ripe, and sweet—and not strictly in the physical sense. Indeed, Lee’s diction supports this idea, as desirable persimmons are “ripe,” “soft,” and “fragrant” (8-10) and “so sweet,/ all of it, to the heart” (16-17). In addition to the precision mentioned above, the proper Chinese method of “How to eat” (11) persimmons also involves gentleness: “put the knife away, lay down the newspaper./ Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat” (12-13). The fruit’s literal tenderness, and the delicate process of choosing and eating persimmons translate into emotional tenderness.

In the third stanza, Lee addresses issues of acculturation and exoticization. The narrator recalls having sexual intercourse with Donna, a white woman (18). Through this experience, he displays the effects of assimilating into American culture. As they “lie naked” (20), he tries to “teach her Chinese” (22). However, by this point in his life, the narrator has forgotten simple Chinese words:

Crickets: *chiu chiu*. Dew: I’ve forgotten.
Naked: I’ve forgotten.
Ni, wo: you and me. (23-25)

His loss of the Chinese language indicates a greater cultural loss. Now as a Chinese American adult, he has assimilated into American culture (fulfilling the teacher’s goal expressed in the opening stanza) at the expense of retaining Chinese cultural knowledge. Although now Americanized, the narrator consciously works against his assimilation by using self-exoticization towards his own sexual gain. When he (unsuccessfully) tries to teach Donna a few words of Chinese, for

example, they “lie naked/ face-up, face-down” (20–21). By placing this ‘lesson’ of speaking Chinese in an overtly sexual situation, the narrator indirectly sexualizes the Chinese language. Furthermore, when “part[ing] her legs” he “remembers to tell [Donna]/ she is beautiful as the moon” (26– 28, emphasis mine). Here, the narrator intentionally plays into the stereotype of a mysterious Chinese man using “fortune cookie” speech. His deliberate act of self-exoticization swims in irony. The concept of “being ‘exotic’” stems from detrimentally racist ideology, in which the larger society distances and objectifies “foreign” or non-white people as “exotic others” – yet the narrator surprisingly exoticizes *himself* to his own sexual advantage. Perhaps most ironic, the narrator—a Chinese male—sexualizes himself through one aspect of Orientalist exoticization, while Orientalism as a whole traditionally renders Asian males desexualized or feminine (while hyper-sexualizing Asian females). His self-exoticization can be read as self-degradation, but an alternative interpretation is also valid: the narrator manages to reclaim the sexuality denied to Asian men, at least for himself.

The narrator returns to a memory from his boyhood, when he focuses on his teacher’s appropriation of persimmons. “Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class/ and cut it up/ so everyone could taste/ a *Chinese apple*” (40–43). Attempting to force the persimmon into an American context, the teacher erroneously calls the Chinese fruit “a *Chinese apple*” (43), although persimmons actually look and taste quite different from apples. Mrs. Walker also incorrectly prepares the persimmon for the class’s consumption, as she uses a knife to “cut it up” (41). This violates the proper Chinese method for eating the fruit, a method that requires “put[ting] the knife away” and “Peel[ing] the skin tenderly” (11–12). Her use of a knife also illustrates the violence of “cutting up” a culture in the process of appropriation. In appropriating the fruit for white consumption—represented by the white students eating the persimmon, while the Chinese narrator does not eat any—Mrs. Walker not only presents the persimmon as an “exotic” version of an apple, but she does not realize that “it wasn’t ripe or sweet” (44). In other words, she lacks the proper knowledge for sharing the persimmon with the class, just as she lacks the license or right to appropriate a piece of Chinese culture (represented by the persimmon) for white consumption.

In contrast to the teacher’s context-distorting appropriation of culture, Lee concludes the poem by focusing on the father’s intimate and more culturally appropriate connection with persimmons. The narrator reflects on a particularly recent experience at his parents’ house: he finds his father’s painting of “persimmons, so full they want to drop from the

cloth" (76). He presents his now blind and old father the painting and tells him, "*This is persimmons, Father*" (79). The narrator's awkward grammar contrasts to his father's linguistically careful response:

Oh, the feel of the wolftail on the silk,
the strength, the tense
precision in the wrist.
I painted them hundreds of times
eyes closed. These I painted blind. (80-84).

In describing his meticulous painting process, the father speaks with eloquence and correct grammar. Lee's decision to italicize the dialogue between the narrator and his father draws attention to the language in which they speak; here, the italicized words suggest speech in Chinese rather than English, while other possibilities fit as well. If they speak to one another in Chinese, the narrator demonstrates his lack of fluency in Chinese – a damaging result of assimilating into American culture. On the other hand, if speaking in English, the narrator makes a surprising grammatical mistake, considering his many years of growing up and living in the United States. The idea of the immigrant father speaking grammatically correct and expressive English (when his acculturated son does not) presents an intriguing role reversal; Lee subverts usual expectations and stereotypes of how ethnically Chinese people speak English.

The father mentions persimmons in his last lines:

Some things never leave a person: scent
of the hair of one you love, the texture of
persimmons in your palm, the ripe
weight. (85-88)

The father thinks of persimmons as an unbreakable memory, like a remembrance "*of one you love*" (86). In the context of the father speaking to the son, persimmons connect to the sentiment of familial love. Indeed, Lee frequently mentions persimmons in relation to words directly and indirectly associated with love: sweet, tenderly, and ripe. Also, by extension of family, and keeping in mind that a cultural art form (Chinese painting) prompts the father's dialogue, the persimmon represents a kind of cultural love. Persimmons represent a love that people need to wait for – to grow older and to emotionally mature first – before fully understanding and cherishing. The father appears to offer his son precisely this kind of love in the last stanza. The father describes his unforgettable impressions of persimmons as having a "*ripe weight*" (88). Here, Lee allows a play on words: "*weight*" (88) sounds like *wait*,

which corresponds to the idea that people need to wait before recognizing this “ripe” (88) or mature kind of love. The narrator, at his older age, has perhaps finally developed the required maturity to comprehend and accept his father’s offering of familial and culturally-tied love.

In “Persimmons,” the Chinese American narrator reflects on difficult experiences relating to his cultural assimilation into American society. But in the second half of the poem, he contemplates later memories that involve his father; these memories are “heavy with sadness,/ and sweet with love” (59–60) like persimmons. The quietly somber memory that closes the poem actually contains a hidden hopefulness, revealed in the metaphor of persimmons. After focusing on painful memories of the narrator’s acculturation, Lee ends the poem with a culturally-tied, loving, and ultimately hopeful memory; this optimism may indicate the narrator receiving his father’s love, along with the possibility of recovering stolen Chinese culture.

Work Cited

Lee, Li-Young. “Persimmons.” *Rose*. New York: BOA Editions, 1986. 17–19.

Persimmons

Li-Young Lee

In sixth grade Mrs. Walker
slapped the back of my head
and made me stand in the corner
for not knowing the difference
between *persimmon* and *precision*.
How to choose

persimmons. This is precision.
Ripe ones are soft and brown-spotted.
Sniff the bottoms. The sweet one
will be fragrant. How to eat:
put the knife away, lay down newspaper.
Peel the skin tenderly, not to tear the meat.
Chew the skin, suck it,
and swallow. Now, eat
the meat of the fruit,
so sweet,
all of it, to the heart.

Donna undresses, her stomach is white.
In the yard, dewy and shivering
with crickets, we lie naked,
face-up, face-down.
I teach her Chinese.
Crickets: *chui chui*. Dew: I've forgotten.
Naked: I've forgotten.
Ni, wo: you and me.
I part her legs,
remember to tell her
she is beautiful as the moon.

Other words
that got me into trouble were
fight and *fright*, *wren* and *yarn*.
Fight was what I did when I was frightened,
fright was what I felt when I was fighting.

Wren are small, plain birds,
yarn is what one knits with.
Wrens are soft as yarn.

My mother made birds out of yarn.
I loved to watch her tie the stuff;
a bird, a rabbit, a wee man.

Mrs. Walker brought a persimmon to class
and cut it up
so everyone could taste
a *Chinese apple*. Knowing
it wasn't ripe or sweet, I didn't eat
but watched the other faces.

My mother said every persimmon has a sun
inside, something golden, glowing,
warm as my face.

Once, in the cellar, I found two wrapped in newspaper,
forgotten and not yet ripe.
I took them and set both on my bedroom windowsill,
where each morning a cardinal
sang, *The sun, the sun*.

Finally understanding
he was going blind,
my father sat up all one night
waiting for a song, a ghost.
I gave him the persimmons,
swelled, heavy as sadness,
and sweet as love.

This year, in the muddy lighting
of my parents' cellar, I rummage, looking
for something I lost.
My father sits on the tired, wooden stairs,
black cane between his knees,
hand over hand, gripping the handle.
He's so happy that I've come home.
I ask how his eyes are, a stupid question.
All gone, he answers.

Under some blankets, I find a box.
Inside the box I find three scrolls.
I sit beside him and untie
three paintings by my father:
Hibiscus leaf and white flower.

Two cats preening.
Two persimmons, so full they want to drop from the cloth.

He raises both hands to touch the cloth,
asks, *Which is this?*

This is persimmons, Father.

*O, the feel of the wolftail on the silk,
the strength, the tense
precision in the wrist.
I painted them hundreds of times
eyes closed. These I painted blind.
Some things never leave a person:
scent of the hair of one you love,
the texture of persimmons,*

in your palm, the ripe weight.

From *Rose*. BOA Editions, 1986.
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