Yeh-Shen

Make the Connection
Talk It Over
What popular story features these characters, object, and theme?
- a hardworking girl
- a wicked stepmother
- a special slipper
- Good is rewarded eventually, and evil is punished.

You probably know those characters and the theme from the fairy tale "Cinderella." "Cinderella" and "Yeh-Shen" are two versions of the same story, about a girl whose dream comes true.

Discussion. People around the world have been telling the Cinderella story for ages. In a small group, talk about why you think the story of "Cinderella" is such a favorite. What do people like about the story? What deep human wishes do you think it expresses? As you read this Chinese folk tale, keep a sheet of paper handy so that you can jot down your reactions.

Literary Focus
Omniscient Point of View
The omniscient (o·mn·is-chənt) point of view is probably very familiar to you.

You've heard it in fairy tales since you were young. A narrator who tells a story from the omniscient point of view knows everything about the characters and their problems. This omniscient narrator isn't in the story. This narrator can't even be seen. In fact, an omniscient, or all-knowing, narrator stands above the action, like a god.

Fish, from an album of twelve studies of flowers, birds, and fish by Tsubaki Chinzan (1801-1854). Watercolor on silk with patterned border.

Background
Literature and Literary History
There are more than nine hundred versions of "Cinderella." Scholars have traced the oldest version back more than a thousand years, to China. The version that you probably know best was collected in 1697 by a French writer named Charles Perrault. His is the first version to include a fairy godmother and a midnight curfew. "Yeh-Shen" is a Chinese version of the Cinderella story.
In the dim past, even before the Ch'in and the Han dynasties, there lived a cave chief of southern China by the name of Wu. As was the custom in those days, Chief Wu had taken two wives. Each wife in her turn had presented Wu with a baby daughter. But one of the wives sickened and died, and not too many days after that Chief Wu took to his bed and died too.

Yeh-Shen, the little orphan, grew to girlhood in her stepmother's home. She was a
bright child and lovely too, with skin as smooth as ivory and dark pools for eyes. Her stepmother was jealous of all this beauty and goodness, for her own daughter was not pretty at all. So in her displeasure, she gave poor Yeh-Shen the heaviest and most unpleasant chores.

The only friend that Yeh-Shen had to her name was a fish she had caught and raised. It was a beautiful fish with golden eyes, and every day it would come out of the water and rest its head on the bank of the pond, waiting for Yeh-Shen to feed it. Stepmother gave Yeh-Shen little enough food for herself, but the orphan child always found something to share with her fish, which grew to enormous size.

Somehow the stepmother heard of this. She was terribly angry to discover that Yeh-Shen had kept a secret from her. She hurried down to the pond, but she was unable to see the fish, for Yeh-Shen's pet wisely hid itself. The stepmother, however, was a crafty woman, and she soon thought of a plan. She walked home and called out, "Yeh-Shen, go and collect some firewood. But wait! The neighbors might see you. Leave your filthy coat here!" The minute the girl was out of sight, her stepmother slipped on the coat herself and went down again to the pond. This time the big fish saw Yeh-Shen's familiar jacket and heaved itself onto the bank, expecting to be fed. But the stepmother, having hidden a dagger in her sleeve, stabbed the fish, wrapped it in her garments, and took it home to cook for dinner.

When Yeh-Shen came to the pond that evening, she found her pet had disappeared. Overcome with grief, the girl collapsed on the ground and dropped her tears into the still waters of the pond.

"Ah, poor child!" a voice said.

Yeh-Shen sat up to find a very old man looking down at her. He wore the coarsest of clothes, and his hair flowed down over his shoulders.

"Kind uncle, who may you be?" Yeh-Shen asked.

"That is not important, my child. All you must know is that I have been sent to tell you of the wondrous powers of your fish."

"My fish, but sir..." The girl's eyes filled with tears, and she could not go on.

The old man sighed and said, "Yes, my
child, your fish is no longer alive, and I 
must tell you that your stepmother is once 
more the cause of your sorrow." Yeh-Shen 
gasped in horror, but the old man went on. 
"Let us not dwell on things that are past," 
he said, "for I have come bringing you a gift. 
Now you must listen carefully to this: The 
bones of your fish are filled with a powerful 
spirit. Whenever you are in serious need, 
you must kneel before them and let them 
know your heart’s desire. But do not waste 
their gifts."

Yeh-Shen wanted to ask the old sage 
many more questions, but he rose to the sky 
before she could utter another word. With 
heavy heart, Yeh-Shen made her way to the 
dung heap to gather the remains of her 
friend.

Time went by, and Yeh-Shen, who was 
often left alone, took comfort in speaking to 
the bones of her fish. When she was hungry, 
which happened quite often, Yeh-Shen 
asked the bones for food. In this way, 
Yeh-Shen managed to live from day to day, 
but she lived in dread that her stepmother 
would discover her secret and take even that 
away from her.

So the time passed and spring came. 
Festival time was approaching: It was the 
buzziest time of the year. Such cooking and 
cleaning and sewing there was to be done! 
Yeh-Shen had hardly a moment’s rest. At 
the spring festival young men and young 
women from the village hoped to meet and 
to choose whom they would marry. How 
Yeh-Shen longed to go! But her stepmother 
had other plans. She hoped to find a 
husband for her own daughter and did 
not want any man to see the beauteous 
Yeh-Shen first. When finally the holiday 
arrived, the stepmother and her daughter 
dressed themselves in their finery and filled 
their baskets with sweetmeats. "You must 
remain at home now and watch to see that 
no one steals fruit from our trees," her 
stepmother told Yeh-Shen, and then she 
derparted for the banquet with her own 
daughter.

As soon as she was alone, Yeh-Shen went 
to speak to the bones of her fish. "Oh, dear 
friend," she said, kneeling before the pre-
cious bones, "I long to go to the festival, but 
I cannot show myself in these rags. Is there 
somewhere I could borrow clothes fit to 
wear to the feast?" At once she found herself 
dressed in a gown of azure\(^1\) blue, with a 
cloak of kingfisher feathers draped around 
her shoulders. Best of all, on her tiny feet 
were the most beautiful slippers she had 
ever seen. They were woven of golden 
threads, in a pattern like the scales of a fish, 
and the glistening soles were made of solid 
gold. There was magic in the shoes, for they 
should have been quite heavy, yet when 
Yeh-Shen walked, her feet felt as light as air. 
"Be sure you do not lose your golden 
shoes," said the spirit of the bones.

Yeh-Shen promised to be careful. Delighted 
with her transformation, she bid a fond 
farewell to the bones of her fish as she 
slipped off to join in the merrymaking.

That day Yeh-Shen turned many a head 
as she appeared at the feast. All around her 
people whispered, "Look at that beautiful 
girl! Who can she be?"

But above this, Stepsister was heard to 
say, "Mother, does she not resemble our 
Yeh-Shen?"

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1. azure (\textit{azər}) \textit{adj.}: like the color of the sky.
Upon hearing this, Yeh-Shen jumped up and ran off before her stepsister could look closely at her. She raced down the mountainside, and in doing so, she lost one of her golden slippers. No sooner had the shoe fallen from her foot than all her fine clothes turned back to rags. Only one thing remained—a tiny golden shoe. Yeh-Shen hurried to the bones of her fish and returned the slipper, promising to find its mate. But now the bones were silent. Sadly Yeh-Shen realized that she had lost her only friend. She hid the little shoe in her bedstraw and went outside to cry. Leaning against a fruit tree, she sobbed and sobbed until she fell asleep.

The stepmother left the gathering to check on Yeh-Shen, but when she returned home, she found the girl sound asleep, with her arms wrapped around a fruit tree. So, thinking no more of her, the stepmother rejoined the party. Meantime, a villager had found the shoe. Recognizing its worth, he sold it to a merchant, who presented it in turn to the king of the island kingdom of T’o Han.

The king was more than happy to accept the slipper as a gift. He was entranced by the tiny thing, which was shaped of the most precious of metals, yet which made no sound when touched to stone. The more he marveled at its beauty, the more determined he became to find the woman to whom the shoe belonged. A search was begun among the ladies of his own kingdom, but all who tried on the sandal found it impossibly small. Undaunted, the king ordered the search widened to include the cave women from the countryside where the slipper had been found. Since he realized it would take many years for every woman to come to his island and test her foot in the slipper, the king thought of a way to get the right woman to come forward. He ordered the sandal placed in a pavilion² by the side of the road near where it had been found, and his herald³ announced that the shoe was to be returned to its original owner. Then, from a nearby hiding place, the king and his men settled down to watch and wait for a woman with tiny feet to come and claim her slipper.

All that day the pavilion was crowded with cave women who had come to test a foot in the shoe. Yeh-Shen’s stepmother and stepsister were among them, but not Yeh-Shen—they had told her to stay home. By day’s end, although many women had eagerly tried to put on the slipper, it still had not been worn. Wearily, the king continued his vigil into the night.

It wasn’t until the blackest part of night, while the moon hid behind a cloud, that Yeh-Shen dared to show her face at the pavilion, and even then she tiptoed timidly across the wide floor. Sinking down to her knees, the girl in rags examined the tiny shoe. Only when she was sure that this was the missing mate to her own golden slipper did she dare pick it up. At last she could return both little shoes to the fish bones. Surely then her beloved spirit would speak to her again.

Now the king’s first thought, on seeing Yeh-Shen take the precious slipper, was to throw the girl into prison as a thief. But when she turned to leave, he caught a glimpse of her face. At once the king was struck by the sweet harmony of her

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2. pavilion n.: large tent or shelter, often highly decorated.
3. herald n.: the person in a king’s court who makes official announcements.
All this time, Yeh-Shen was unaware of the excitement she had caused. She had made her way home and was about to hide both sandals in her bedding when there was a pounding at the door. Yeh-Shen went to see who it was—and found a king at her doorstep. She was very frightened at first, but the king spoke to her in a kind voice and asked her to try the golden slippers on her feet. The maiden did as she was told, and as she stood in her golden shoes, her rags were transformed once more into the feathered cloak and beautiful azure gown.

Her loveliness made her seem a heavenly being, and the king suddenly knew in his heart that he had found his true love.

Not long after this, Yeh-Shen was married to the king. But fate was not so gentle with her stepmother and stepsister. Since they had been unkind to his beloved, the king would not permit Yeh-Shen to bring them to his palace. They remained in their cave home, where one day, it is said, they were crushed to death in a shower of flying stones.

Meet the Writer

Ai-Ling Louie

It Runs in the Family

Ai-Ling Louie (1949– ) remembers hearing the story “Yeh-Shen,” the Chinese version of “Cinderella,” from her grandmother. Louie became curious about the origins of this story, which had been told in her family for three generations, so she did some research. She learned that the tale was first written down by Tuan Cheng-shi in an ancient Chinese manuscript during the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618–907) and had probably been handed down orally for centuries before that.
First Thoughts
1. Think about the discussion you had before you read this story. Which of our deepest wishes do you think this story expresses? Is it also about some of our fears? Explain.

Thinking Critically
2. Which of the following statements best sums up the theme “Yeh-Shen” reveals?
   - Goodness is rewarded in the end.
   - Bad people are always punished.
   - Love comes to those who deserve it.
   - Jealousy can lead to tragedy.

Do you think this is a good theme for today? Explain.

3. Check the story to see what you learn about Yeh-Shen’s stepmother. How would the story change if the stepmother, instead of the omniscient narrator, were telling it?

Extending Interpretations
4. Suppose a reviewer of this textbook said, “I don’t think the publisher should include this story because it’s outdated. Girls don’t sit around and wait to be rescued any longer.” Do you agree or disagree with the decision to include this story in the textbook? Explain.

WRITING
Writing a Modern Cinderella Story
Imagine a Cinderella/Yeh-Shen story set today in your own community. Who would the underdog be? Who or what would hold the underdog back? Who would rescue the underdog, and how would this happen? With a group of classmates, brainstorm ideas to come up with some ideas. Then, plot out your story. You could act out your modern Cinderella story or videotape the production for your class.
Tracing an Author’s Argument

Reading Focus
Presenting an Argument: Agree with Me

Argument can mean “angry disagreement.” Yeh-Shen may have wanted to argue with her nasty stepmother on many occasions. You argue with your friends about all kinds of things, from who should be class president to what music should be played at a dance.

Here the word argument is used to mean “debate or discussion.” Writers who present an argument are trying to persuade you to think or act in a certain way. They may want you to agree with their opinions, vote for their candidates, buy their products, or support their causes.

Skillful persuaders use solid evidence to back up their arguments. They cite facts (statements that can be proved true) and statistics (number facts).

Skillful persuaders often quote experts to convince you that an argument is sound.

When you finish reading a text that presents an argument, ask yourself

What is the topic or subject of this text?
What is the writer’s point of view, or perspective, on the subject?
What evidence (facts, statistics, expert opinions) supports the writer’s opinion?

When you read a persuasive essay, you must trace the writer’s use of evidence. You want to be certain that the evidence is valid and that it is strong. After all, if you are going to accept someone’s argument, you want to be sure it is a good one.

■ The notes beside the selection that follows will help you trace the author’s argument.