

## Questions

**(a) What do you understand of the characters and the situation in the passage?**

**(b) How does the writer effectively convey the context and feelings of the narrative voice?**

This excerpt from “The Jade Peony” by Wayson Choi conveys the mystery and insightful fear of the unknown of a young boy who has just lost his mother. Although the passage refrains from giving sufficient details, the reader is still able to understand the essentials of the situation: A young boy is lying in a bed with his dying mother and is then taken into the care of a family friend.

The reader confirms the death of the mother with the narrator’s description of the “rigid arms” (line 8), which implies the limpness of the mother’s lifeless arms, and the boy’s realization that “my mommy’s voice...would never say again...” (lines 23-24). Also, from the apparent urgency and, perhaps, panic of the first paragraph, the reader may infer that something – most likely an emergency – has gone terribly wrong.

The development of the Chin family characters then expands on this confirmation (of the mother’s death) to help develop the reader’s understanding. Mrs. Chin is shown as a very nurturing and maternal woman – a foil to her husband’s practical leadership in giving instructions (line 3) – who comforts the boy as the mother dies. She pulls the boy “up, up, up, from the dark...” and carries him away to her family’s cabin, a safe place. These actions indicate the switching of maternal roles between the boy’s mother and Mrs. Chin as the biological mother passes on.

Also, the other Chin characters help to convey the situation. For example, in line 13, the expressions of the Chin children reflect back the “vacant stare” of the young boy to indicate his scared yet insightful awareness of the situation. Once they are in the Chin family’s cabin, Mr. Chin dynamically changes from practical leader to nurturing father, mirroring the comfort given by Mrs. Chin. His actions to return to normality – telling old stories, singing songs, etc. (lines 17-21) – further indicate the absence of the boy’s mother, showing how the Chin family is so kindly taking in the now motherless boy.

Considering that the reader is left void of a complete description of the situation, the mysteriousness of this lack of detail also effectively helps to convey the similar mysteriousness felt by the boy, the narrating voice. It seems that the boy is aware of his mother’s death, at least to some degree. For example, he has a “vacant stare” (line 13) and he does not say anything as he eats his jook (line 16). Still, he does not fully grasp the concept, or the repercussions rather, of his mother’s death. For example, he remembers the “joy and excitement” of the storytelling night just before realizing his “mommy’s voice...would never say again...” (line 24).

Aside from a paralleled mysteriousness experienced by both the reader and the boy, Choi also cleverly uses tone and sensory descriptions to convey the context and feeling of the narrating voice (of the boy). Especially in the first paragraph, Choi appeals to the auditory senses; he narrates and sets the scene by describing what the boy hears. First there is the voice of Herby Chin calling for help, then the boy hears the back door open and the sound of voices coming from the kitchen. In lines 1-3, the boy describes the scene by telling everything he hears from the other bedroom. This conveys the uneasiness of the unknown, since the boy is only hearing what is going on; he cannot see anything in the other room. Surely the boy is scared, but his observant mind conveys his insight and awareness of the situation.

Choi also uses an appeal to the tactile senses, developing a tone of urgency, which helps to convey the uneasiness felt by the boy. For example, in line 17, Mrs. Chin scrubs her hands furiously simultaneously as the boy hears the siren to indicate her urgent and almost unsatiable desire to clean the blood from her hands. This may also demonstrate (figuratively) the feelings of the boy and the Chin family to move past the mother’s death – they hope to get ride of the stains of the pain in an attempt to return to normality.

Aside from his sensory appeal, Choi also uses an effective word choice to convey the sense of urgency. Most noticeably, he uses the word “rush” twice (line 1 & line 5) as well as other phrases with a connotation of quickness (which indicates the level of panic felt in the emergency). For example, a chair falls over (due to the rushing of people in the kitchen), the curtains are “whipped” back, the blinds “whirled” and “snapped” up. Mrs. Chin “shoves” aside the pillows on the bed to comfort the boy.

As the passage progresses, the sense of urgency slows as Choi picks up another more reflective and observant tone. The diction, especially of lines 25-30, is much less urgent and has a sense of calmness to it (conveyed by the sensory description of the freshly baked pie, the epitome of comfort). Ultimately this helps to demonstrate the probable acceptance and understanding of the boy. This gives the reader a final peace of mind, as the mysteriousness and urgency that are conveyed at the beginning finally come to a close, and the reader solidifies his or her understanding of the characters and the situation.