

STUDENT ACTIVITY 2: Motif of Binoculars and Sight

In this story, the motif of sight is strongly connected to the theme and experience of memory. Recall our pre-reading discussion about the fragmented nature of memory and how it is often triggered by our associations with objects.

By paying close attention to how the writer describes the reasons for buying the binoculars, as well as their differing views when using it, we can observe how it reveals the thoughts and feelings of each character.

From Chapter 1:

Near the end of Chapter 1, the narrator explains why Mr Li bought the binoculars for his mother:

“The binoculars had been for her cataracts, he remembered, a feeble attempt to persuade both himself and her doctors that an operation could be forestalled.”

Question 1: Re-read Chapter 1. What does the reason for buying the binoculars for his mother reveal about Mr Li’s thoughts and feelings about his mother’s declining eyesight?

From Chapter 2:

Initially, Mr Li's mother was not interested in using the binoculars that Mr Li had bought for her, thinking that it was not important as she already has everything she needs. However, she begins to have a change of mind when Mr Li explains that the binoculars can "help [her] see things faraway". She eventually takes up the offer after considering how she can see where Mr Li's father used to work at Tanjong Rhu. Even then, she says to Mr Li:

"Not that I really need those glasses of yours anyway," she said. "I can see Tanjong Rhu well enough," she paused for emphasis. "Behind my eyes."

Question 2: Re-read Chapter 2.

- a) Identify one use of figurative language by the mother.**
- b) What does the mother's use of figurative language here reveal about her character?**

Motif of Sight

By paying close attention to how the writer describes Mr Li's mother's eyes and their differing views from the binoculars, we can observe a consistent use of irony to highlight the missed connection between mother and son.

From Chapter 4:

At the office, Mr Li's mother appears to be unable to see through the binoculars at what is presently out on the harbour. This is when Mr Li responds by "press[ing] her head back down towards the binoculars, making her hold on to them more steadily" and asking her to look out again. His mother responds by looking back at him. Eventually, she begins to claim to see what are fragments of their past in Tanjong Rhu. This annoys Mr Li who pleads with her to stop it and finally takes back the binoculars from her.

Question 3: Re-read Chapter 4.

a) What is ironic about this moment between Mr Li and his mother? Why is it ironic?

b) How does the writer use diction and dialogue to highlight this irony?

Give one example with reference to the mother, and one example with reference to Mr Li, and explain why it is ironic in each instance.