*Butterfly Sleep* Reader’s Companion

These questions are intended to be used in classrooms, book clubs, or discussion groups as ways of sparking critical conversation about the text.

* The hybrid-genre of *Butterfly Sleep* is what Kim Kyung Ju calls “poetic-drama.” Kim imagines his poetic dramas to be ways for audiences to access his poetics and poetic thought through the more popular and accessible medium of drama. What do you think it means when someone says a play is poetic? In what ways do you think Kim incorporates poetry in this work? Is there anything formally unique that distinguishes this play from other plays you have encountered?
* Consider the environmental significance of the drought in the play. Both religion (the High Priest) and science (the Astronomer) fail to provide solutions for the drought. What role do you think ecological disaster plays in driving the narrative? What does this say about humanity’s relationship to its natural environment? What parallels can you draw from the human-environment relationship in the play and our current ecological moment?
* The dysfunctional nuclear family plays a major role in many of Kim’s plays. Consider the following: The Musician is the protector of Dallae, but is also the lost brother of The Chief Carpenter, who is trying to kill Dallae. The Chief Carpenter and Musician were separated as children. The Chief Carpenter is raised by the High Priest and the Musician is raised by the Chief Bandit. Dallae, abandoned as a baby, is raised by the Old Woman. The watchtower soldiers are brothers whose parents have also abandoned them. Mothers are unable to feed their children because their breast milk has gone dry. How does the feeling of abandonment relate to each character’s relationship to reality? Conversely, how do familial relationships help create a sense of individual and shared identity? A sense of safety? In what ways does mistrust created in broken families reinforce the sense of abandonment subjects have in relation to their rulers and the king? Do characters find kinship and camaraderie outside the family unit? And if so, where?
* The idea of asynchronicity in is when multiple events happen simultaneously. Instead of the action following characters in time, because multiple actions happen simultaneously, it is as if time gets squeezed and stretched out. Narratives don’t move forward so much as expand. There are interludes where a scene with a crowd is introduced and characters enter and exit from the crowd. Certain scenes appear which don’t advance the plot. The well scene, in particular, in which a mother and her child get stuck and die in a well comes to mind. Why are these scenes important? What do they do in terms of world building?
* In a review for *Boston Review* Kim said that “When I write there are three emotional states that I am interested in representing: shame, vanity, and guilt. Because these are states people usually keep secret, I want to use them to make the world more vulnerable through the hidden language of these secrets.” How are shame, vanity, and guilt conveyed in this text?
* Kim Kyung Ju lists Samuel Beckett and the theatre of the absurd as primary influences for his work. The theatre of the absurd often presents characters trapped in hopeless situations, where neither science nor religion can explain their predicament. In what ways is this an absurdist text?
* Dallae (달래) in Korean means to soothe, comfort, or pacify. In what way is the meaning of Dallae’s name significant in this text?
* Lullabies recur in the play. Dream-imagery, ghosts, and mythical animals also appear throughout. What significance does dreaming and the dreamscape play in the text?
* Although the story itself is bleak, how does the text incorporate dramatic irony and dark humor?
* A tragedy is when a character follows a path that the audience knows will doom the character. Think of Romeo discovering Juliet, who he thinks dead, and then committing suicide. And then Juliet waking up to find Romeo dying beside her. The audience knows she will wake up to find Romeo dead before she wakes up. We anticipate her reaction, and empathize with the tragedy of her situation. We share her shock and pain. Comedy is when we watch characters from above and laugh, either at their stupidity, ignorance, or at the absurdity or ridiculousness of their situation. A busy waiter holding a cream pie walks toward a banana peel left on the floor. Sisyphus pushes the boulder up the hill. Estragon and Vladimir wait for Godot. Do you think *Butterfly Sleep* is more of a tragedy or a comedy?