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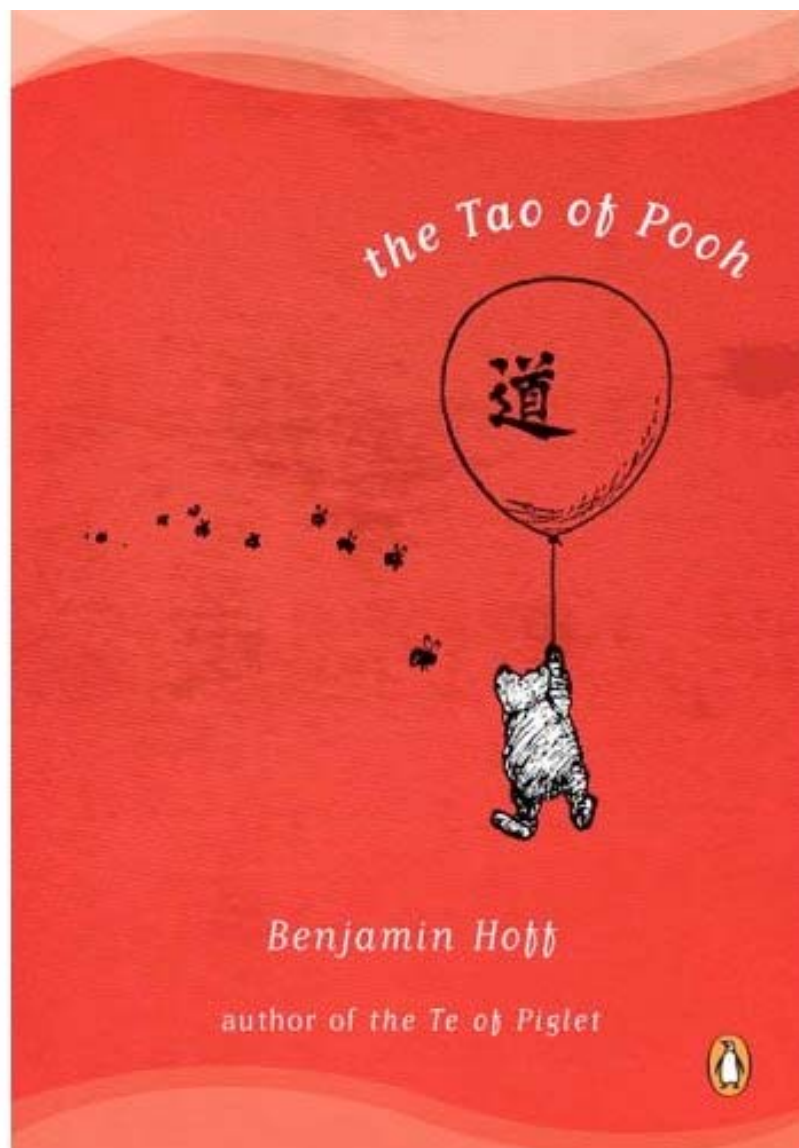
# The Tao of Pooh

Written by Benjamin Hoff

Christie Cochrane

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## Plot Summary

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In The Tao of Pooh, Benjamin Hoff takes on the task of "writing a book that explain[s] the principles of Taoism through Winnie-the-Pooh, and explain[s] Winnie-the-Pooh through the principles of Taoism" (Hoff xii). When Winnie-the-Pooh asks him what the book is about, Hoff tells him that it is about "how to stay happy and calm under all circumstances" (Hoff x). In a way, it is both: how to use the principles of Tao to be happy under all circumstances. The novel is broken into chapters, which are all based on different aspects of Taoism, such as the Uncarved Block, The Inner Self, and The Great Nothing. Hoff is able to take something seemingly complicated to understand and makes it simple in just 158 pages--making Taoism as simple as the beloved Winnie-the-Pooh.

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## The Central Issue

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### Requiring Knowledge to Take a Backseat by Letting Your Heart Guide You

In the last chapter of the novel, Hoff gives a warning to the reader and, ultimately, the world. He condemns relying solely on knowledge and allowing the heart to be taken out of life. While the Tao centralizes its beliefs on just "being", the world teaches us to complicate life. He states that peace in this world is not reached because of "too many who think too much and care too little" and "that mistake cannot continue for much longer if everything is going to survive" (154). The Tao is about simplicity in life; Hoff makes an important distinction between knowledge and wisdom. On the same page as the above quote, he continues to say: "The masters of life know the Way, for they listen to the voice within them, the voice of wisdom and simplicity, the voice that reasons beyond Cleverness and knows beyond Knowledge. That voice is not just the power and

property of a few, but has been given to everyone." In simple terms, Hoff is asking us to listen to what our hearts say, to go beyond worldly knowledge and allow our inner-selves to lead and guide us to happiness. To just be.

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## Issues Related to this Study of Literature

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### Themes

#### *Identity*

A large part of this novels centers on identity. According to the Tao, there is an Inner Nature within each of us, which is "pretty much beyond the power of intellect to measure or understand" (Hoff 38). Something we can understand, however, and something that especially high school students understand, is the struggle to find who we are as people and to be in control of our own lives. Many in the world are easily influenced by others. Hoff confronts this weakness head on: "Inner Nature, when relied on, cannot be fooled. But many people do not look at it or listen to it, and consequently do not understand themselves very much. Having little understanding of themselves, they have little respect for themselves, and are therefore easily influenced by others" (57). His solution to being in control of our own lives is following the dictations of our Inner Self.

#### *Attitude*

"Sourness and bitterness come from the interfering and unappreciative mind. Life itself, when understood and utilized for what it is, is sweet" (Hoff 6). Sometimes we get so caught up in life that we lost sight of what is really important. We start to see life as Hoff states: sour and bitter. However, we can look at the example of Pooh Bear. He is perfectly content with life. He never gets down

or negative. His friends, on the other hand, are far from it. Take Rabbit, for example. He runs through life worried, rushed, and frustrated, never content with the present. He never stops to enjoy the present either, for that matter. And Eeyore is even worse. He is constantly negative and seeing life as bitter. As Hoff puts it, "Attitude gets in the way of things like wisdom and happiness, and pretty much prevents any sort of real Accomplishment in life" (16). In the Tao's view of the world, life is not there to be an obstacle, it is showing us the way (Hoff 99).

### *Knowledge vs. Wisdom*

This novel makes it a point to acknowledge that there are many people that learn solely to be lifted up in their pride--so that others with think that they are wise. The difference between a Confucianist scholar (symbolized by the character Owl) and the Taoist view of a truly wise person is that rather than "writing pretentious papers that no one else can understand," the Taoist uses his knowledge for the enlightenment of others, and is therefore wise (26).

Tao Te Ching, a book on the Tao, suggests that we "return to the beginning; becoming a child again" (151). Only then can we experience things and allow the world to teach us rather than allow books alone to do so. Accepting things for what they are is also an important difference between knowledge and wisdom.

The author uses the example of putting a round peg in the round hole and the square peg in the square hole. "Knowledge tries to figure out why round pegs fit round holes but not square holes" while for the wise Wu Wei, the Tao way of just accepting things as they are, it just is. "No stress, no struggle" (75).

### *Humility*

Pooh is the epitome of humility. Hoff illustrates this by retelling a story from Winnie-the-Pooh when Rabbit,

Piglet, and Rabbit are lost. Rabbit, considering himself to be much smarter than his companions, takes control of the situation and leads them aimlessly in circles for hours. When it is just Pooh and Piglet, Pooh leads them home by listening to the honey calling to him. When Piglet asks why he did not listen to them sooner, Pooh replies that Rabbit was talking too much and that he couldn't hear them. Rather than tell Rabbit to be quiet or leave, he waited patiently until it was his turn to give it a try.

On page 28, it talks about how many people have difficulty accepting their weaknesses and admitting when they are wrong, which stops them from progressing as people and becoming better. As Hoff states, "Once you face and understand your limitations, you can work with them, instead of having them work against you and get in your way, which is what they do when you ignore them, whether you realize it or not. And then you will find that, in many cases, your limitations can be your strengths" (48-9).

*Other themes-* Simplicity in life, Happiness, Charity, Tranquility.

### **Setting**

The primary setting for The Tao of Pooh is the den of Benjamin Hoff. There, he is conversing with Winnie-the-Pooh and others from the Hundred Acre Woods about the Tao. At times, Hoff takes you in to the Hundred Acre Woods and other times in to parables from Taoism. The parables are well explained and clear. It may be a good idea to make that the readers are all familiar with the story of Winnie-the-Pooh; not necessarily in great detail, but rather, the main traits and personalities of the characters involved. Most students will at least have this knowledge, but perhaps a bit of reading, explaining, or a video of the story will give them greater insight in to the parallels that Hoff makes to Taoism.

## Point of View, Narrative Voice

Hoff, the author, narrates the novel. who, in the opening page of the book, is described as "an Oregon writer, photographer, musician, and composer with a fondness for Forests and Bears...[who] practices Taoist yoga, T'ai Chi Ch'üan, stunt kite-flying, boomerang shaping and (ouch!) throwing, and Taoist tennis, whatever that is. He also enjoys sleeping and lying about on the floor." Through his examples from the storyline of Winnie-the-Pooh and Taoist ideals, he helps walk us through what he finds to be important in life, and how Tao helps us to achieve happiness.

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## List of Literary Terms

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### *Analogy*

Hoff uses a lot of fun analogies in this novel. A few of my favorites are: "quiet laughter seems to bubble up like water from a fountain" (6), "P'u, by the way, is pronounced sort of like Pooh, but without so much oo-- like the sound you make when blowing a bug off your arm on a hot summer day" (10), and "[Taoists] tended to see Confucianist scholars as busy ants spoiling the picnic of life" (24).

### *Dialogue*

A lot of this novel is dialogue between either the characters of Winnie-the-Pooh or Hoff and the characters. He uses this skillfully, and interjects with stories or explanations. He does this effectively to show rather than tell what it is that he is trying to help us understand.

### *Voice*

This may be a good opportunity to show students about voice. When Hoff is writing, it is often light and fun, and

at other times it is thought-provoking. He is personably and makes us want to keep reading. There are various other sections which were written by others, however, which may be a good opportunity to show how even though it is one novel, there are different voices in the novel itself ; there are sections written by Taoists, the author of Winnie-the-Pooh, and many others. One can note the difference. For example, the Taoists come off as very serious, which is a sharp contrast to the voice in the Winnie-the-Pooh story, which is intended for children.

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## Affective Issues Related to the Work

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There are many aspects that the students will be able to relate to. To start off with, how many of us know Tiggers, Eeyores, or Rabbits in our lives and can laugh and relate to their adventures? However, the most important thing that will touch the students and better their lives are the themes presented and the counsel given by Hoff. For example, when I was reading the novel, one of the parts made me stop and literally write in the margin, "That's so true! I hate that!" The section is on page 28, and it is where Hoff is talking about how some people use big words just to sound smart when they really have no idea what they are talking about. Especially in a school setting, I think that this is something that students can relate to. They must feel at a loss at times because they do not understand Faulkner or scholarly articles. Hoff's emphasis that simplicity is better and that their lack of understanding is not necessarily lack of intelligence may be a breath of fresh air for some.

One of the major themes of this novel is identity: one of the key frustrations and struggles of youth. Hoff asks many great questions and relates various ideas of the Tao to help them in their quest of finding their identity. There are many instances when a simple passage may incite hours of

discussion, such as the idea of the "uncarved block", which is to say, "natural, simple, honest." It is about being who you are. As simple as that. So when Hoff tells us to be true to that, we can search for what it is that makes us us. Is it our beliefs? Our heritage? Our innate character traits? And how do you remain true to those, but still allowing for progression and growth? Where is the balance?

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## Vocabulary Issues/Background Knowledge

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This is definitely a more advanced novel, I would say upper high school or AP. There are sections of it that are simple, but most of the meaning would be lost if the student did not have good reading skills such as re-reading and summarizing. The Tao is complicated at times, and although he explains it clearly through analogies and examples, many of the phrases and allusions that he uses will fly past a struggling reader's head. He defines much of the terms for the reader from the Tao, but perhaps a basic study of the Tao before reading would be helpful, and then the book can be used for clarification and cementing the ideas with concrete examples. Examples of terms used from Tao are the Uncarved Block, P'u, The Nothing, The Inner Self, and Wu Wei. It also references Confucianist frequently, so that would be a good area of study as well. A couple of picture books that you could consider using to introduce the concepts are Zen Shorts by Jon J. Muth and Wabi Sabi by Mark Reibstein.

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## Implications for Students of Diversity

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This book is applicable to everyone. However, I feel that it will ring a bell with those that feel that they are not as smart as others. There is a culture in education to be stressed and busy all the time. Intellect takes



precedence over street smarts in much of our culture. This book celebrates the lessons that life has to teach us, and because students will come from all types of families, pasts, and backgrounds, I feel that many will be able to learn much from what Hoff is trying to tell them about using life as their greatest teacher--and that there is more to life than intelligence...which may be perfect for a senior year reading as they prepare for their various futures and adventures.

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## Gender Issues

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The Tao of Pooh does not address gender issues, but rather, issues of society as a whole. I think that the best way to address these are with class discussion and projects to start a change to the things about the world we disagree with, and to start with ourselves.

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## Research Issues/Project Ideas

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### Research Project

Ideas for things to research include: stress management, identity, any of the above themes, the psychology of Winnie-the-Pooh, The Tao, etc.

### Project Ideas

- Have the students plan and prepare a stress management class based on the suggestions of the Tao and the Bisy Backson chapter of the novel to give to other students in the class or other classes.
- Create a self-esteem workshop based on the chapter That Sort of Bear.
- Create a warning poster for the room based on the The Now of Pooh chapter.
- Build an "Uncarved Block" for the classroom with characteristics written on it.

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## Enrichment Resources

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- [disney.go.com/pooh/index.html](http://disney.go.com/pooh/index.html)
- [www.lavasurfer.com/pooh-guide.html](http://www.lavasurfer.com/pooh-guide.html) (*character guide to Winnie-the-Pooh*)
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91uPid7ufCA>
- [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao)
- [Tao Te Ching: Tao Te Ching](#) - by Lao Tzu, Laozi, Dim Cheuk Lau - 196 pages (alluded to in the novel)
- [The Tao Te Ching: 81 Verses by Lao Tzu with ...](#) - by Lao Tzu, Laozi, Ralph Alan Dale - 232 pages