

Before You Read

Cranes

Literary Focus

Theme and Character: Life Lessons

Reading a story is often like following characters on a journey. Sometimes the characters travel to a new place; other times they stay where they are. Either way, they take a journey of the heart or mind.

In the course of their journey, characters may face overwhelming obstacles or heart-rending decisions, and they learn something in the process—about themselves or others or life in general.

Through what their **characters** learn, writers communicate their **theme**, or central idea.

In “Cranes,” the main character travels only a short distance on foot, but the journey he takes in his heart and mind is much greater. As you read the story, think about what the main character learns and remembers during his walk. What theme does the writer convey?

Reading Skills

Making Inferences About Motivation

To understand characters fully, you need to determine their **motivation**, or the reasons for their behavior.

Usually writers don't make direct statements about motivation. Instead, you need to make **inferences**, or educated guesses, based on clues in the story.

As you read “Cranes,” think about why the main character makes certain decisions and why he behaves as he does. The questions at the open-book signs will help you make inferences.

Make the Connection

Quickwrite

Which is worse: betraying one's duty or betraying one's friend? Imagine a situation in which you were forced to make such a choice. What issues would you weigh as you tried to make a decision? Freewrite for a few minutes about this dilemma.

Vocabulary Development

averted (ə·vɜrt'ɪd) v. used as *adj.*: turned away.

obstruction (əb·strʊk'shən) n.: obstacle; barrier.

constitutes (kən'stə·tōōts') v.: makes up; forms.

mainstay (mān'stā') n.: principal support.

refuge (ref'yōōj) n.: shelter; protection from danger or difficulty.



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**Grade 8
Review
Reading
Standard 3.3**

Compare and contrast motivations and reactions of literary characters from different historical eras confronting similar situations or conflicts.

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**Reading
Standard 3.5**

Compare works that express a universal theme and provide evidence to support the ideas expressed in each work.



NORTH AND SOUTH KOREA

Background

The conflict in this story is shaped by the civil war that took place in the early 1950s in Korea, a nation west of Japan bordering on China and Russia.

At the end of World War II, the country was divided in half, at the thirty-eighth parallel of latitude, with Soviet troops occupying the north and U.S. troops occupying the south. There had been plans to reunite the country eventually, but instead, in 1948, a Communist government was established in the north and a pro-Western government was established in the south.

In 1950, Communist troops from North Korea invaded the south. They were opposed by soldiers from South Korea, supported by United Nations (mostly U.S.) forces. Ultimately the conflict centered around the thirty-eighth parallel. During the war many villages along the thirty-eighth parallel changed hands several times between North and South Korea. "Cranes" is set in one such village.

A large number of Korean civilians and military personnel died during the war, and both North and South Korea suffered great devastation. A truce agreement was signed in 1953, the year "Cranes" was published, and the final military front line of battle became the boundary between North and South Korea. The two countries have still not achieved reunification.



Cranes

Hwang Sunwŏn

translated by Peter H. Lee

A young man stood, tied up.

The northern village at the border of the thirty-eighth parallel¹ was snugly settled under the high, bright autumn sky.

One white gourd lay against another on the dirt floor of an empty farmhouse. The occasional village elders first put out their bamboo pipes before passing by, and the children too turned aside some distance off. Their faces were ridden with fear.

The village as a whole showed few traces of destruction from the war, but it did not seem like the same village Sŏngsam² had known as a boy.

At the foot of a chestnut grove on the hill behind the village he stopped and climbed a chestnut tree. Somewhere far back in his mind he heard the old man with a wen³ shout, "You bad boy, you're climbing up my chestnut tree again!"

The old man must have passed away, for among the few village elders Sŏngsam had met, the old man was not to be found. Holding the trunk of the tree, Sŏngsam gazed at the blue sky for a while. Some chestnuts fell to the ground as the dry clusters opened of their own accord.

1. northern village . . . thirty-eighth parallel: village close to the northern border of South Korea.

2. Sŏngsam (səŋ'säm').

3. wen *n.*: harmless skin tumor.

In front of the farmhouse that had been turned into a public peace-police office, a young man stood, tied up. He seemed to be a stranger, so Sŏngsam approached him to have a close look. He was taken aback; it was none other than his boyhood playmate, Tökchae.⁴

Sŏngsam asked the police officer who had come with him from Ch'önt'ae⁵ what it was all about. The prisoner was vice-chairman of the Farmers Communist League and had just been flushed out⁶ of his hideout in his own house, Sŏngsam learned.

Sŏngsam sat down on the dirt floor and lit a cigarette.

Tökchae was to be escorted to Ch'ongdan⁷ by one of the peace policemen.

After a time, Sŏngsam lit a new cigarette from the first and stood up.

"I'll take the fellow with me."

Tökchae, his face averted, refused to look at Sŏngsam. They left the village.

4. Tökchae (tək'chə').

5. Ch'önt'ae (chən'tə').


6. flushed out: forced from a hiding place.

7. Ch'ongdan (chəŋ'dän').

Vocabulary

averted (ə·vurt'id) *v.* used as *adj.*: turned away.

Söngsam kept on smoking, but the tobacco had no taste. He just kept drawing in the smoke and blowing it out. Then suddenly he thought that Tökchae too must want a puff. He thought of the days when they used to share dried gourd leaves behind walls, hidden from the adults. But today, how could he offer a cigarette to a fellow like this?


Once, when they were small, he went with Tökchae to steal some chestnuts from the grandpa with the wen. It was Söngsam's turn to go up the tree. Suddenly there came shouts from the old man. He slipped and fell to the ground. Söngsam got chestnut needles all over his bottom, but he kept on running. It was only when they reached a safe place where the old man could not overtake them that he turned his bottom to Tökchae. Plucking out those needles hurt so much that he could not keep tears from welling up in his eyes. Tökchae produced a fistful of chestnuts from his pocket and thrust them into Söngsam's. . . . Söngsam threw away the cigarette he had just lit. Then he made up his mind not to light another while he was escorting Tökchae. 



CHARACTER MOTIVATION

1. How is Söngsam's decision related to his memory of the time Tökchae gave him chestnuts?

They reached the hill pass, the hill where he and Tökchae used to cut fodder for the cows until Söngsam had had to move near Ch'önt'ae, south of the thirty-eighth parallel, two years before the liberation.

Söngsam felt a sudden surge of anger in spite of himself and shouted, "So how many have you killed?" 

For the first time, Tökchae cast a quick glance at him and then turned away.

"How many did you kill, you?" he asked again.

Tökchae turned toward him once again and



CHARACTER MOTIVATION

2. What do you think motivates Söngsam to ask this question?

glared. The glare grew intense and his mouth twitched.

"So you managed to kill many, eh?" Söngsam felt his heart becoming clear from within, as if an obstruction had been removed. "If you were vice-chairman of the Communist League, why didn't you run? You must have been lying low with a secret mission."

Tökchae did not answer.

"Speak up, what was your mission?"

Tökchae kept walking. Tökchae is hiding something, Söngsam thought. He wanted to take a good look at him, but Tökchae would not turn his averted face.

Fingering the revolver at his side, Söngsam went on: "No excuse is necessary. You are sure to be shot anyway. Why don't you tell the truth, here and now?"

"I'm not going to make any excuses. They made me vice-chairman of the league because I was one of the poorest and I was a hardworking farmer. If that constitutes a crime worthy of death, so be it. I am still what I used to be—the only thing I'm good at is digging in the soil." After a short pause, he added, "My old man is bedridden at home. He's been ill almost half a year." Tökchae's father was a widower, a hardworking, poor farmer who lived only for his son. Seven years ago his back had given out and his skin had become diseased.

"You married?"

"Yes," replied Tökchae after a while.

"To whom?"

"Shorty."

"To Shorty?" How interesting! A woman so small and plump that she knew the earth's vastness but not the sky's altitude. Such a cold fish! He and Tökchae used to tease her and make her cry. And Tökchae had married that girl.

"How many kids?"

Vocabulary

obstruction (əb·struk'shən) *n.*: obstacle; barrier.

constitutes (kən'stə·tūts') *v.*: makes up; forms.



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Spring Landscape by Yi Sang-Bom (1897–1972). Ink and watercolor on paper.

“The first is arriving this fall, she says.”


Söngsam had difficulty swallowing a laugh about to explode in spite of himself. Although he had asked how many kids Tökchae had, he could not help wanting to burst into laughter at the image of her sitting down, with a large stomach, one span around. But he realized this was no time to laugh or joke over such matters.

“Anyway, it’s strange you did not run away.”

“I tried to escape. They said that once the South invaded, no man would be spared. So men between seventeen and forty were forcibly taken to the North. I thought of evacuating, even if I had to carry my father on my back. But father said no. How could the farmers leave the land behind when the crops were ready for harvest? He grew old on that farm depending on me as the prop and mainstay of the family. I wanted to be with him in his last moments so that I could close his eyes with my own hand. Besides, where can farmers like us go, who know only living on the land?”

Last June Söngsam had had to take refuge. At night he had broken the news privately to his

father. But his father had said the same thing! Where can a farmer go, leaving all the chores behind? So Söngsam left alone. Roaming about the strange streets and villages in the South, Söngsam had been haunted by thoughts of his old parents and the young children, left with all the chores. Fortunately, his family was safe then, as now.

They crossed the ridge of a hill. This time Söngsam walked with his face averted. The autumn sun was hot on his forehead. This was an ideal day for the harvest, he thought. 



CHARACTER MOTIVATION


3. Why do you think Söngsam turns his face away from Tökchae?


When they reached the foot of the hill, Söngsam hesitatingly stopped. In the middle of a field he spied a group of cranes that looked like men in white clothes bending over.

Vocabulary

mainstay (mān'stā') *n.*: principal support.

refuge (ref'yōōj) *n.*: shelter; protection from danger or difficulty.

moment, as another crane from a nearby bush fluttered its wings, the boys' crane stretched its long neck with a whoop and disappeared into the sky. For a long time the two boys could not take their eyes away from the blue sky into which their crane had soared. 


**CHARACTER
MOTIVATION**

4. Why did the boys set the bird free? Why might Söngsam be remembering this incident?

“Hey, why don’t we stop here for a crane hunt?” Söngsam spoke up suddenly.


Tökchae was puzzled, struck dumb.

“I’ll make a trap with this rope; you flush a crane over here.”

Having untied Tökchae’s hands, Söngsam had already started crawling among the weeds.


Tökchae’s face turned white. “You are sure to be shot anyway”—these words flashed through his mind. Pretty soon a bullet would fly from where Söngsam has gone, he thought.

Some paces away, Söngsam quickly turned toward him.

“Hey, how come you’re standing there like you’re dumb? Go flush the crane!” 

Only then did Tökchae catch on. He started crawling among the weeds.

A couple of Tanjöng cranes soared high into the clear blue autumn sky, fluttering their huge wings. ■


**CHARACTER
MOTIVATION**

5. What is Söngsam’s real motivation for urging Tökchae to flush the crane?

Meet the Writer

Hwang Sunwön

The Voice of His Divided Nation

Throughout his lifetime, Hwang Sunwön (1915–2000) saw his beloved homeland, Korea, torn by political turmoil. That turmoil touched him deeply and greatly affected his writing.

As a small boy, Hwang saw his father imprisoned for political activities. Korea was struggling against its powerful neighbor, Japan, which had made Korea part of its empire in 1910. By the early 1940s, the Japanese had banned all writing in the Korean language, and Hwang was forced to work in secret. After World War II, when Korea was no longer under Japan’s control, communism spread through the northern

part of the country. Hwang and his family fled to the south, but they became refugees again when North Korea invaded South Korea at the beginning of the Korean War.


A poet in his youth, Hwang later turned his attention to writing prose, producing seven novels and gaining a reputation as a master writer of the modern Korean short story. His country’s complex history is the frequent subject of his fiction, which (like “Cranes”) is set in modern times as well as in the distant past. Although his work is rooted in the history and culture of his country, Hwang also explores universal themes, such as the loneliness of the individual. He is highly regarded for his insight into the hearts and minds of his characters.

Literary Response and Analysis

Reading Check

1. What is the **setting** of the story—when and where do the events take place?
2. What was Söngsam's relationship with Tökchae when they were children?
3. For which side in the war is Söngsam fighting?
4. Why is Tökchae a prisoner? What reasons does he give for not leaving his home with his father?

Interpretations

5. Although Söngsam and Tökchae represent opposite sides of the war, they share similarities. Compare their **characters** and their situations.
6. What is Söngsam's **internal conflict** regarding Tökchae? How is the conflict resolved at the end of the story?
7. What does Söngsam recall in the two **flashbacks** to his childhood? Explain how these memories **motivate** Söngsam's actions in the present. 
8. What does Söngsam learn about Tökchae during their walk? How does this information affect Söngsam's actions?
9. What is the story's **theme**—that is, what is it saying about civil war and friendships?
10. In many Asian cultures the crane **symbolizes**, or represents, long life. Birds in flight often symbolize freedom. Re-read the last sentence of the story, and explain how the cranes might symbolize both characters.



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Grade 8 Review Reading

Standard 3.3

Compare and contrast motivations and reactions of literary characters from different historical eras confronting similar situations or conflicts.

Pages 210–230
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Reading

Standard 3.5


Compare works that express a universal theme and provide evidence to support the ideas expressed in each work.

Evaluation

11. Do you think the ending of the story is effective? Would it be more effective if the writer directly stated what was happening or if Söngsam and Tökchae shared their thoughts with each other? Give reasons for your answer.

Writing

The Right Choice?

Söngsam wrestles with divided loyalties in this story. Do you think he makes the right decision in the end? Imagine that he is on trial for letting Tökchae escape. Write a **speech** in which Söngsam defends his actions. Alternatively, compose a speech in which a prosecutor condemns Söngsam for his decision. Refer to your Quickwrite notes as you plan your speech. 

Decisive Moments

Think up your own fictional character who faces an important decision, perhaps one that involves a moral choice, as Söngsam's does. Write one page in which you present the character's thoughts at the moment the decision is made. What motivates the character to make this decision?

Comparing Themes

For a writing assignment comparing the themes in "The Sniper" and "Cranes," see page 230.