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?

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·vərt′id) v. used as adj.: turned away.
obstruction (əb·struk′shan) n.: obstacle; barrier.
constitutes (kən′stə-təts′) v.: makes up; forms.
mainstay (mān′stä′) n.: principal support.
refuge (ref′yooj) n.: shelter; protection from danger or difficulty.

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.
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 Sunwon
translated by Peter H. Lee
A young man stood, tied up.

The northern village at the border of the thirty-eighth parallel\(^1\) 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 Sŏngsam\(^2\) 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 wen\(^3\) 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.

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, Tŏkchae.\(^4\)

Sŏngsam asked the police officer who had come with him from Ch’ŏnt’ae\(^5\) what it was all about. The prisoner was vice-chairman of the Farmers Communist League and had just been flushed out\(^6\) of his hideout in his own house, Sŏngsam learned.

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

Tŏkchae was to be escorted to Ch’ŏngdan\(^7\) 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.”

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

4. Tŏkchae (tŏk’cha’).
5. Ch’ŏnt’ae (chan’ta’).
6. flushed out: forced from a hiding place.
7. Ch’ŏngdan (chan’dan’).
Sŏngsam 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 Tŏkchae 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 Tŏkchae to steal some chestnuts from the grandpa with the wen. It was Sŏngsam's turn to go up the tree. Suddenly there came shouts from the old man. He slipped and fell to the ground. Sŏngsam 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 Tŏkchae. Plucking out those needles hurt so much that he could not keep tears from welling up in his eyes. Tŏkchae produced a fistful of chestnuts from his pocket and thrust them into Sŏngsam's... Sŏngsam threw away the cigarette he had just lit. Then he made up his mind not to light another while he was escorting Tŏkchae.

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

Sŏngsam felt a sudden surge of anger in spite of himself and shouted, “So how many have you killed?”

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

“How many did you kill, you?” he asked again. Tŏkchae turned toward him once again and glared. The glare grew intense and his mouth twitched.

“So you managed to kill many, eh?” Sŏngsam 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.”

Tŏkchae did not answer.

“Speak up, what was your mission?”

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

Fingering the revolver at his side, Sŏngsam 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.” Tŏkchae’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 Tŏkchae after a while.

“To whom?”

“Shorty.”

“Do 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 Tŏkchae used to tease her and make her cry. And Tŏkchae had married that girl.

“How many kids?”

Vocabulary

obstruction (ob·strukshən) n.: obstacle; barrier.
constitutes (kənˈsta·tōts) v.: makes up; forms.
“The first is arriving this fall, she says.”
Sŏngsam had difficulty swallowing a laugh about to explode in spite of himself. Although he had asked how many kids Tŏkchae 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 Sŏngsam 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 Sŏngsam left alone. Roaming about the strange streets and villages in the South, Sŏngsam 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 Sŏngsam walked with his face averted. The autumn sun was hot on his forehead. This was an ideal day for the harvest, he thought.

When they reached the foot of the hill, Sŏngsam 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 (mənˈstā) n.: principal support.

refuge (rɛfˈjʊɡ) n.: shelter; protection from danger or difficulty.
Two Cranes by Chang Woo-Soung (1912-). Ink and watercolor on paper.

This used to be the neutralized zone along the thirty-eighth parallel. The cranes were still living here, as before, while the people were all gone.

Once, when Sŏngsam and Tŏkchae were about twelve, they had set a trap here, without the knowledge of the adults, and had caught a crane, a Tanjŏng crane. They had roped the crane, even its wings, and had paid daily visits, patting its neck and riding on its back. Then one day they overheard the neighbors whispering. Someone had come from Seoul\(^8\) with a permit from the governor-general’s office to catch cranes as specimens or something. Then and there the two boys dashed off to the field. That they would be found out and punished was no longer a weighty concern; all they worried about was the fate of their crane. Without a moment’s delay, still out of breath from running, they untied the crane’s feet and wings. But the bird could hardly walk. It must have been worn out from being bound.

The two held it up in the air. Then, all of a sudden, a shot was fired. The crane fluttered its wings a couple of times and came down again. It was shot, they thought. But the next

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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.

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

Tōkchae was puzzled, struck dumb.

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

Having untied Tōkchae’s hands, Sōngsam had already started crawling among the weeds.

Tōkchae’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 Sōngsam has gone, he thought.

Some paces away, Sōngsam quickly turned toward him.

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

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

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

Meet the Writer

Hwang Sunwon

The Voice of His Divided Nation

Throughout his lifetime, Hwang Sunwŏn (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.
Reading Check

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

Interpretations

5. Although Sôngsam and Tôkchae represent opposite sides of the war, they share similarities. Compare their characters and their situations.
6. What is Sôngsam's internal conflict regarding Tôkchae? How is the conflict resolved at the end of the story?
7. What does Sôngsam recall in the two flashbacks to his childhood? Explain how these memories motivate Sôngsam's actions in the present.
8. What does Sôngsam learn about Tôkchae during their walk? How does this information affect Sôngsam'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.

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 Sôngsam and Tôkchae shared their thoughts with each other? Give reasons for your answer.

Writing

The Right Choice?
Sôngsam 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 Tôkchae escape. Write a speech in which Sôngsam defends his actions. Alternatively, compose a speech in which a prosecutor condemns Sôngsam 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 Sôngsam'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.