

GENDER IN KOREAN LITERATURE

GRADE LEVEL: High School

SUBJECT: Literature

TIME REQUIRED: One period

OBJECTIVE:

Students will examine the role of women in Korea through the use of contemporary literature.

MATERIALS REQUIRED:

- "The Potato" by Kim Tongin. This short story can be found in: *Modern Korean Literature: An Anthology*, compiled and edited by Peter H. Lee. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990.
- "My Neighbor, Mrs. Ku Jamyoun" by Ko Jonghui (attached)

BACKGROUND:

Despite the industrialization and globalization of modern Korea, the ancient attitudes of traditional Confucianism remain in Korean society. One of the more evident examples of this is the roles and relationships between men and women. Women are still relegated to subservient positions and have little power outside the home environment

PROCEDURE:

1. Begin class by discussing the idea that old attitudes die hard. Why do people tend to cling to traditional attitudes even when these attitudes conflict with rational thought or modern circumstances? Why do students think that this is particularly true in attitudes concerning male-female roles?
2. Discuss the fact that Korea is a society with an ancient tradition of Confucianism. What do students know about Confucianism? What are the attitudes found in traditional Confucian thinking concerning the roles of men and women? Why do students think such attitudes might die hard in a rapidly changing society like that of Korea?
3. Begin discussion of "The Potato" (students should have read this prior to class).
4. Direct discussion based on analysis of what students know of Korean history and the words and emotions of the short story. Questions one might consider are:
 - a. In this short story the author expresses an attitude toward women and the position of females in traditional Korean society. How would you characterize this attitude? Have students support their answers.
 - b. Contrast the personalities and characteristics of Pongnyo and her husband. Do you think that her husband would have accepted her if she had similar characteristics to his, and why?
 - c. How would you characterize the author's attitude toward his subject matter? Does it surprise you that the author is male, and why?
5. Shift focus to the poem "My Neighbor, Mrs. Ku Jamyoun," which paints a portrait of contemporary Korean women. This poem could either be read in class or assigned

previously as homework.

6. Direct discussion based on analysis of what students know of Korean history and the words and emotions of the poem. Questions one might consider are:
 - a. What do you learn about the circumstances of Mrs. Ku?
 - b. Contrast Mrs. Ku as she rides on the bus and the environment outside her window. Why do you think the author makes this comparison?
 - c. What is the effect of comparing Mrs. Ku to a "sleeping Buddha"?
 - d. Explain the meaning of the final six lines. Do you feel that the author is encouraged about the future for Mrs. Ku and all of the other "Mrs. Kus" of the world, and why?

EVALUATION:

Have students write a short essay on the following:

The poem is a more recent expression of attitudes toward women in Korea than the short story. Given the contents of these two works, would you say that circumstances have improved for Korean women, and why? Back up what you say with direct reference to the short story and poem. Do you think that the attitudes expressed in these two works are exclusively Korean or are these attitudes found in contemporary America? Support your answer.

NOTE: This lesson can be taught in conjunction with the lesson: Kim Tongni's "The Rock," which also addresses issues of literature and gender.

ENRICHMENT:

- Read K. Connie Kang's *Home was the Land of Morning Calm* (Addison-Wesley, 1995). Write a report on the ways Ms. Kang broke with the traditional role of the Korean female.
- Read the 16th Century poem (kasa) entitled "A Woman's Sorrow" (Lee, Peter H. *Anthology of Korean Literature From Early Times to the Nineteenth Century*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1981, pp. 116-118). Compare and contrast the plight of the main character of this poem and the main characters of the two works discussed in class. Based on these works of literature, have the concerns and the position of females in Korean society changed over the centuries? Explain.

MY NEIGHBOR, MRS. KU JAMYOUNG

by Ko Jonghui

Mrs. Ku Jamyoun, a working mother and wife,
Who has a seven-month-old baby,
Begins to doze as soon as she boards the bus in the morning.
Warmed by the morning sun,
She dozes all the way from Ansan to Yoido,
Nodding to the front and nodding to the sides.
Horn blasts cannot wake her,
The seasons flit past the window,
And azaleas and chestnut blossoms smile;
But Mrs. Ku Jamyoun dozes away, like a sleeping Buddha.
Yes, the first ten minutes
Are the ten minutes she suckled her baby last night.
And the next ten minutes
Are the ten minutes she served medicine to her mother-in-law.
That's right, and the next ten minutes
Are the time she spent putting her drunken husband to bed.
At the beginning and end of each working day
She dozes and shakes like a pansy.
The flowers on the dining table bind women fast to their duties.
But from every roof over every kitchen
A family's welfare sustained by a woman
Is shooting an arrow of refusal
Towards the sleep of death
Unnoticed by anyone.

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