

SYMBOLS IN KOREAN POETRY

GRADE LEVEL: High School

SUBJECT: Literature

TIME REQUIRED: One period

OBJECTIVES:

As a result of this lesson, students will understand two Korean symbols and poetic expressions of attitudes toward those symbols.

MATERIALS:

- "Were I To Die A Hundred Times" by Chong Mong-ju (attached)
- "Flag" by Yu Ch'ihwan (attached)

BACKGROUND:

Chong Mong-ju was a 14th century sage, scholar, and politician who got involved in political intrigue against the late Chosŏn dynasty founder Yi Song-gye. Prior to being assassinated, he is reputed to have sung this poem. His poem is honored by Koreans and has been set to music.

Yu Ch'ihwan was a contemporary poet who died at the age of fifty-nine in 1967. He was an award-winning poet whose works reflect the attitudes and concerns of modern Korea.

PROCEDURE:

1. Every nation has symbols and places which are important to its people. Sometimes these places and symbols are immortalized in poetry and song. Ask the class if they can name important places and symbols in this nation for which poems and/or songs have been written.
2. Inform the class that today, we are going to examine two works which deal with significant symbols for the Korean people.
3. Read the poem, "Were I To Die A Hundred Times".
4. Direct discussion based on analysis of what they know of Korean history and the words and emotions of the poem. Questions one might consider are:
 - 1) What are your feelings as you hear the poem?
 - 2) What is the effect of the repetition of the term "die"?
 - 3) What does the author mean when he says that his "red blood ... shall witness that (his) heart was true"?

- 4) What is the connection between blood and the heart? What symbolic significance do both blood and heart take on in this poem?
 - 5) The author of this poem was assassinated shortly after writing this work. The bridge upon which he was murdered (Sonjuk Bridge in Kaesong) is still dyed red supposedly from the author's blood or in honor of his blood shed on that spot. Therefore, the poet can be considered both a hero and a martyr to the Korean nation. (Interestingly, the word *martyr* is Greek for *witness*, and the poet's martyrdom acted as a witness to his loyalty.) How can you account for the popularity of this poem with the Korean people? Can you think of the times and circumstances when this poem might have a greater appeal?
 - 6) Could this poem be used by people other than Koreans or is there something uniquely Korean in either its content or method of expression? Explain.
5. Read the poem, "Flag."
- a. Direct discussion based on analysis of what they know of Korean history and the words and emotions of the poem. Questions one might consider are:
 - 1) What are your feelings as you hear this poem?
 - 2) What does the author mean by the term "soundless clamor"? What effect does this phrase have on you as the reader?
 - 3) What does the term "Nostalgia's handkerchief" mean? What effect does calling a flag a handkerchief have on the reader?
 - 4) What does the author mean when he says, "Sorrow spreads its wings like a heron on that pure and straight pole of Ideal."? In what way is a flag like a bird? Why does the author see sorrow when he sees his flag on the "straight pole of the Ideal"?
 - 5) Why is the flag a "sad mind"? Are all flags a "sad mind" or just the Korean flag?
 - 6) Overall, what seems to be the author's attitude toward his flag? Do you see your flag in the same way, and why?

EVALUATION:

Contrast the two poets' attitudes toward the symbols they discuss. What can be learned about the Korean nation and its people through an examination of these two poems?

WERE I TO DIE A HUNDRED TIMES

Though this frame should die and die,
though I die a hundred times,
My bleached bones all turn to dust,
my very soul exist or not-
What can change the undivided heart
that glows with faith toward my lord?

Chong, Mongju (1337-1392)

FLAG

A voiceless shouting.
A handkerchief of eternal nostalgic drive
Waving into the distant blue of ocean.

Lofty ideal flutters, wave-like, in the wind.
Sorrow spreads its wings like a heron
On the staff of thought, pure and upright.

I wonder who first hoisted this aching heart
Of ours into the air.

Yu, Ch'ihwan (1908-1967)