Part 3: Analyze the Literature

As you read the following story, use the questions provided to help you identify the theme and understand the symbolism of the cranes.

**Cranes**

Short story by Hwang Sunwon

*BACKGROUND* This story takes place at the end of the Korean War (1950–1953), a civil war that pitted the Communist government of North Korea against the more democratic government of South Korea. At the end of World War II, the Korean peninsula had been divided along the line of 38° north latitude, commonly called the 38th parallel. During the Korean War, intense fighting along this border shifted control of nearby villages back and forth between the North Koreans and South Koreans. One of these villages is the setting of “Cranes.”

The northern village lay snug beneath the high, bright autumn sky, near the border at the Thirty-eighth Parallel.

White gourds lay one against the other on the dirt floor of an empty farmhouse. Any village elders who passed by extinguished their bamboo pipes first, and the children, too, turned back some distance off. Their faces were marked with fear.

As a whole, the village showed little damage from the war, but it still did not seem like the same village Sŏngsam¹ 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 wen² shout, “You bad boy, climbing up my chestnut tree again!”

The old man must have passed away, for he was not among the few village elders Sŏngsam had met. Holding on to the trunk of the tree, Sŏngsam gazed

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1. *Sŏngsam* (sŏng’sām’).
2. *wen*: a harmless skin tumor.

**Close Read**

1. The title of this story is one clue to the theme. As you read, look for details that explain the significance of birds known as cranes.

2. The boxed details describe a peaceful setting—not one you might expect in a story about war. Which details in lines 1–8 suggest that the residents are unsettled by their seemingly calm surroundings?
up at the blue sky for a time. Some chestnuts fell to the ground as the dry clusters opened of their own accord.

A young man stood, his hands bound, before a farmhouse that had been converted into a Public Peace Police office. He seemed to be a stranger, so Sŏngsam went up for a closer look. He was stunned: this young man was none other than his boyhood playmate, Tŏkchae.³

Sŏngsam asked the police officer who had come with him from Ch'ŏnt'ae⁴ for an explanation. The prisoner was the vice-chairman of the Farmers' Communist League and had just been flushed⁵ out of hiding in his own house, Sŏngsam learned.

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

Tŏkchae was to be escorted to Ch'ŏngdan⁶ by one of the peace police. After a time, Sŏngsam lit a new cigaret from the first and stood up.

“I’ll take him with me.”

Tŏkchae averted his face and refused to look at Sŏngsam. The two left the village.

Sŏngsam went on smoking, but the tobacco had no flavor. He just kept drawing the smoke in and blowing it out. Then suddenly he thought that Tŏkchae, too, must want a puff. He thought of the days when they had shared dried gourd leaves behind sheltering walls, hidden from the adults' view. But today, how could he offer a cigaret to a fellow like this?

Once, when they were small, he went with Tŏkchae to steal some chestnuts from the old man with the wen. It was Sŏngsam’s turn to climb the tree. Suddenly the old man began shouting. Sŏngsam slipped and fell to the ground. He got chestnut burrs all over his bottom, but he kept on running. Only when the two had reached a safe place where the old man could not overtake them did Sŏngsam turn his bottom to Tŏkchae. The burrs hurt so much as they were plucked out that Sŏngsam 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 cigaret he had just lit, and then made up his mind not to light another while he was escorting Tŏkchae.

### Close Read

3. What do you think motivates Sŏngsam to take Tŏkchae with him? Explain your answer.

4. What does Sŏngsam's flashback to his childhood in lines 35–43 tell you about Tŏkchae’s character and their friendship?

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³. Tŏkchae (tŏk’ja’).  
⁴. Ch’ŏnt’ae (chan’tă’).  
⁵. flushed: driven from hiding.  
⁶. Ch’ŏngdan (chang’dăn’).
They reached the pass at the hill where he and Tŏkchae had cut fodder for cows until Sŏngsam had to move to a spot near Chŏnt’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 looked away. “You! How many have you killed?” he asked again.

Tŏkchae looked at him again and glared. The glare grew intense, and his mouth twitched.

“So you managed to kill quite a few, eh?” Sŏngsam felt his mind becoming clear of itself, as if some 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 reply.

“Speak up. What was your mission?”

Tŏkchae kept walking. Tŏkchae was hiding something, Sŏngsam thought. He wanted to take a good look at him, but Tŏkchae kept his face averted.

Fingering the revolver at his side, Sŏngsam went on: “There’s no need to make excuses. You’re going 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 a hardworking farmer and one of the poorest. If that’s a capital offense,

so be it. I’m still what I used to be—the only thing I’m good at is tilling 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 poor, hardworking farmer who lived only for his son. Seven years before his back had given out, and he had contracted a skin disease.

“Are you married?”

“Yes,” Tŏkchae replied after a time.

“To whom?”

“Shorty.”

“How interesting! A woman so small and plump that she knew the earth’s vastness, but not the sky’s height. Such a cold fish! He and Tŏkchae had teased her and made her cry. And Tŏkchae had married her!

“How many kids?”

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

Sŏngsam had difficulty swallowing a laugh that he was about to let burst forth in spite of himself. Although he had asked how many children Tŏkchae

4. fodder: coarsely chopped hay or straw used as food for farm animals.
5. capital offense: a crime calling for the death penalty.
had, he could not help wanting to break out laughing at the thought of the wife sitting there with her huge stomach, one span around. But he realized that this was no time for joking.

“Anyway, it’s strange you didn’t run away.”

“I tried to escape. They said that once the South invaded, not a man would be spared. So all of us between seventeen and forty were 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 we farmers leave the land behind when the crops were ready for harvesting? He grew old on that farm depending on me as the prop and the mainstay of the family. I wanted to be with him in his last moments so I could close his eyes with my own hand. Besides, where can farmers like us go, when all we know how to do is live on the land?”

Sŏngsam had had to flee the previous June. At night he had broken the news privately to his father. But his father had said the same thing: Where could a farmer go, leaving all the chores behind? So Sŏngsam had 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, who had been left with all the chores. Fortunately, his family had been safe then, as it was now.

They had crossed over 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 gradually came to a halt. In the middle of a field he espied a group of cranes that resembled men in white, all bent over. This had been the demilitarized zone along the Thirty-eighth Parallel. The cranes were still living here, as before, though the people were all gone.

Once, when Sŏngsam and Tŏkchae were about twelve, they had set a trap here, unbeknown to the adults, and caught a crane, a Tănjŏng crane. They had tied the crane up, even binding its wings, and paid it daily visits, patting its neck and riding on its back. Then one day they overheard the neighbors whispering: someone had come from Seoul with a permit from the governor-general’s office to catch cranes as some kind of specimens. Then and there

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9. **demilitarized zone**: an area—generally one separating two hostile nations or armies—from which military forces are prohibited.
10. **Tănjŏng** (tăn*jŏng*) **crane**: a type of crane found in Asia.
11. **Seoul** (sŏl): the capital and largest city of South Korea.
the two boys had dashed off to the field. That they would be found out and punished had no longer mattered; all they cared 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 weak from having been bound.

The two helped the crane up. Then, suddenly, they heard a gunshot. The crane fluttered its wings once or twice and then sank back to the ground.

The boys thought their crane had been shot. But the next moment, as another crane from a nearby bush fluttered its wings, the boys’ crane stretched its long neck, gave out a whoop, and disappeared into the sky. For a long while the two boys could not tear their eyes away from the blue sky up into which their crane had soared.

“Hey, why don’t we stop here for a crane hunt?” Sŏngsam said suddenly.

Tŏkchae was dumbfounded.

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

Sŏngsam had untied Tŏkchae’s hands and was already crawling through the weeds.

Tŏkchae’s face whitened. “You’re sure to be shot anyway”—these words flashed through his mind. Any instant a bullet would come flying from Sŏngsam’s direction, Tŏkchae thought.

Some paces away, Sŏngsam quickly turned toward him.

“Hey, how come you’re standing there like a dummy? Go flush a crane!” Only then did Tŏkchae understand. He began crawling through the weeds.

A pair of Tŏnjŏng cranes soared high into the clear blue autumn sky, flapping their huge wings.

Translated by Peter H. Lee

Close Read

8. In what ways is Tŏkchae like the crane? Cite specific descriptions of the crane that could also apply to Tŏkchae.

9. Why does Sŏngsam push Tŏkchae to flush a crane?

10. What might the two cranes symbolize? Use details from the text to support your answer.

11. Considering the clues in the story, what do you think the writer is saying about friendship? State the story’s theme and cite details that helped you arrive at your conclusion.