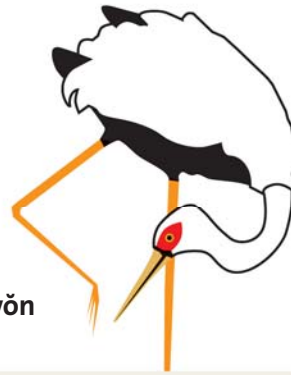


Part 3: Analyze the Literature

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 Sunwŏn

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

1. **Sŏngsam** (səngˈsämˈ).

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
15 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 Söngsam went up for a closer look. He was stunned: this young man was none other than his boyhood playmate, Tökchae.³

20 Söngsam asked the police officer who had come with him from Ch'önt'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, Söngsam learned.

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

25 Tökchae was to be escorted to Ch'öngdan⁶ by one of the peace police. After a time, Söngsam lit a new cigaret from the first and stood up. "I'll take him with me."

Tökchae averted his face and refused to look at Söngsam. The two left the village.

30 Söngsam 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 Tökchae, 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?

35 **O**nce, when they were small, he went with Tökchae to steal some chestnuts from the old man with the wen. It was Söngsam's turn to climb the tree. Suddenly the old man began shouting. Söngsam 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
40 did Söngsam turn his bottom to Tökchae. The burrs hurt so much as they were plucked out that Söngsam 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 cigaret he had just lit, and then made up his mind not to light another while he was escorting Tökchae.

3. **Tökchae** (tək'jä').

4. **Ch'önt'ae** (chən'tä').

5. **flushed**: driven from hiding.

6. **Ch'öngdan** (chəng'dän').

Close Read

3. What do you think motivates Söngsam to take Tökchae with him? Explain your answer.

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

45 They reached the pass at the hill where he and Tökchae had cut fodder⁷ for cows until Söngsam had to move to a spot 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?"

50 For the first time, Tökchae cast a quick glance at him and then looked away. "You! How many have you killed?" he asked again.

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

"So you managed to kill quite a few, eh?" Söngsam 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."

Tökchae did not reply.

"Speak up. What was your mission?"

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

Fingering the revolver at his side, Söngsam 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?"

65 "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,⁸ 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." Tökchae'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," Tökchae replied after a time.

"To whom?"

75 "Shorty."

"To 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 Tökchae had teased her and made her cry. And Tökchae had married her!

"How many kids?"

80 "The first is arriving this fall, she says."

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

7. **fodder**: coarsely chopped hay or straw used as food for farm animals.

8. **capital offense**: a crime calling for the death penalty.

Close Read

5. Reread lines 45–64. How has the war affected Söngsam's opinion of his former friend? Cite details that helped you to understand Söngsam's view of Tökchae.

6. What details in lines 65–80 remind Söngsam that Tökchae has a human side? One detail has been boxed.

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.

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“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?”

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Söngsam 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 Söngsam had 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, who had been left with all the chores. Fortunately, his family had been safe then, as it was now.

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They had crossed over 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.

When they reached the foot of the hill, Söngsam 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 zone⁹ along the Thirty-eighth Parallel. The cranes were still living here, as before, though the people were all gone.

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Once, when Söngsam and Tökchae were about twelve, they had set a trap here, unbeknown to the adults, and caught a crane, a Tanjöng crane.¹⁰ 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 Seoul¹¹ with a permit from the governor-general’s office to catch cranes as some kind of specimens. Then and there

9. **demilitarized zone:** an area—generally one separating two hostile nations or armies—from which military forces are prohibited.

10. **Tanjöng** (tän’jöng) **crane:** a type of crane found in Asia.

11. **Seoul** (söl): the capital and largest city of South Korea.

Close Read

7. Line 101 marks a change in Söngsam’s behavior. What does this change reveal about what’s going on inside him? Reread lines 95–100 and explain what motivates the change.

115 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.

120 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
125 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?" Söngsam said suddenly. Tökchae was dumbfounded.

"I'll make a trap with this rope; you flush a crane over here."

130 Söngsam had untied Tökchae's hands and was already crawling through the weeds.

Tökchae's face whitened. "You're sure to be shot anyway"—these words flashed through his mind. Any instant a bullet would come flying from Söngsam's direction, Tökchae thought.

135 Some paces away, Söngsam quickly turned toward him.

"Hey, how come you're standing there like a dummy? Go flush a crane!"

Only then did Tökchae understand. He began crawling through the weeds.

A pair of Tanjöng 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 Tökchae like the crane? Cite specific descriptions of the crane that could also apply to Tökchae.

9. Why does Söngsam push Tökchae 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.