

# Korean War Short Story Mini Lesson

**Rationale:** This lesson will use the short story “Cranes” by Hwang Sun-won to help students consider literary elements (theme, anecdote, symbolism, characterization) while also delving into the history of the Korean War. The literary analysis will keep the lesson firmly anchored in Common Core English standards, while the history lesson before reading the short story will help students better understand the theme/author’s purpose of this historically-rooted story.

## Common Core Standards:

- RL.9-10.1** Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.
- RL.9-10.2** Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- RL.9-10.3** Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme.
- W.9-10.2** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- W.9-10.9** Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

## Plan:

### Day 1: Korean War Context

1. Watch video(s) about Korean War
2. Complete quickwrite to make students begin considering their experience with a key issue in the story
3. Opportunity for students to share & discuss what they already know about Korean War, Cold War, and tension between North and South Korea
4. Begin reading short story

### Day 2: Read “Cranes” and Respond to Analysis Questions

1. Continue having students popcorn read the story aloud
2. Pause and give students to discuss questions and then record their answers in the packet

### Day 3: Write CERER Paragraph About Theme

1. Discuss the prompt as a class & brainstorm ideas
2. Students independently write paragraph
3. If extra time remains, students get feedback and then revise their paragraphs

## Korea: At War and in Literature

As you watch one or both of the videos below, jot down the **5 most important things** you learned about the Korean War:

- Long video: [The Cold War in Asia: Crash Course US History](#) (from John Green's Crash Course)
- Short video: [The Korean War: 5 Things to Know](#) (from History)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

**Quickwrite:** Tell the story of a time when you were told to do something you thought was wrong and why you either decided to follow or decided to break the rule/command you were expected to obey.

**Context:** After Japan was defeated by the United States in World War II, Korea was liberated from Japanese occupation by Russia in the north and America in the south. These two groups helped establish the governments with two very diverse ways: North Korea is communist and South Korea is a Republic.

The dividing line between North and South Korea is the 38th Parallel. In 1950, Communist forces crossed the parallel in an invasion that started the Korean War. The Korean War, like all civil wars, sometimes pitted relative against relative, neighbor against neighbor, and friend against friend. This story focuses on one of these relationships.



### “Cranes” by Hwang Sun-won

Translated by Peter H. Lee & Published in 1953

The northern village at the border of the **Thirty-eighth Parallel**<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> **38th parallel:** The boundary between North Korea and South Korea. The line was chosen by U.S. military planners near the end of World War II as a temporary division of Korea, but the Cold War resulted in the formalization of a separate U.S.-oriented regime in South Korea and a Communist regime in North Korea.

The village as a whole showed few traces of destruction from **the war**,<sup>2</sup> but it did not seem like the same village Song-sam 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 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 Song-sam had met, the old man was not to be found. Holding the trunk of the tree, Song-sam 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 Song-sam approached him to have a close look. He was taken aback; it was none other than his boyhood playmate, Tok-chae.

Song-sam sat down on the dirt floor and lit a cigarette. Tok-chae was to be escorted to Chongdan by one of the peace policemen.

After a time, Song-sam lit a new cigarette from the first and stood up.

“I’ll take the fellow with me.”

Tok-chae, his face averted, refused to look at Song-sam. They left the village.

Song-sam 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 Tok-chae, 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 Tok-chae to steal some chestnuts from the grandpa with wen. It was Song-sam’s turn to go up the tree. Suddenly there came shouts from the old man. He slipped and fell to the ground. Song-sam 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 Tok-chae. Plucking out those needles hurt so much that he could not keep tears from welling up in his eyes. Tok-chae produced a fistful of chestnuts from his pocket and thrust them into Song-sam’s... Song-sam threw away the cigarette he had just lit. Then he made up his mind not to light another while he was escorting Tok-chae.

**1. Based on what you’ve read so far (make sure to pay attention to the footnotes), why are these two former friends now enemies?** \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>2</sup> **The war:** This refers to the Korean War, a war between North Korea (with the support of Communist China and the Soviet Union) and South Korea (with the support of the United Nations, principally from the Capitalist United States). The war began on 25 June 1950 when North Korea invaded South Korea following a series of clashes along the border. The fighting ended on 27 July 1953, when an armistice agreement was signed. The agreement created the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) to separate North and South Korea, and allowed the return of prisoners. However, no peace treaty was ever signed, and the two Koreas are technically still at war, engaged in a frozen conflict.

**2. What is the author, Hwang Sun-won trying to communicate with the rhetorical question, “But today, how could he offer a cigarette to a fellow like this?”** \_\_\_\_\_

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**3. Why does Song-sam “[throw] away the cigarette he had just lit. Then [make] up his mind not to light another?” How does the childhood memory that comes right before this impact his decision?** \_\_\_\_\_

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They reached the hill pass, the hill where he and Tok-chaе used to cut fodder for the cows until Songsam had had to move near Chontae, south of the Thirty-eighth Parallel, two years before the liberation.

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

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

“You! How many did you kill, you?” he asked again.

Tok-chaе turned toward him once again and glared. The glare grew intense and his mouth twitched.

“So you managed to kill many, eh?” Song-sam 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.” Tok-chaе did not answer. “Speak up, what is your mission?”

Tok-chaе did not reply. Tok-chaе was hiding something, Song-sam thought. He wanted to take a good look at him, but Tok-chaе kept his face averted.

Fingering the revolver at his side, Song-sam went on: “No excuse is necessary. You are sure to be shot anyway. Why don’t you tell the truth here and now?”

**4. Which of the men is part of American-influenced South Korea?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Which of the men is part of Soviet Union-influenced North Korea?** \_\_\_\_\_

**How do you know?** \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Why does Song-sam get suddenly angry? What memory or visual reminder makes him change some somewhat empathetic towards his friend to accusatory and angry? \_\_\_\_\_

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“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 hard-working 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 has been ill almost half a year.” Tok-chae’s father was a widower, a hard-working poor farmer who lived only for his son. Seven years ago his back had given out and his skin had become diseased.

“Are you married?”

“Yes,” replied Tok-chae after a time.

“To whom?”

“Shorty.”

“To Shorty?” How interesting! A woman so small and plump that **she knew the earth’s vastness but not the sky’s altitude**<sup>3</sup>. Such a cold fish! He and Tok-chae used to tease her and make her cry. And Tok-chae had married her!

“How many kids?”

“The first is arriving in the fall, she says.”

Song-sam had difficulty swallowing a laugh that he was about to let burst forth in spite of himself. Although he had asked how many kids Tok-chae 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 for joking.

“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?”

6. How do Tok-chae’s revelations about his life affect how you feel about him as a person? Do they make you more or less sympathetic towards him? Why? \_\_\_\_\_

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<sup>3</sup> **Vastness** = of very great size / expansiveness    **Altitude** = Height / tallness → So with this comment, Song-sam is implying what about the other man’s wife? \_\_\_\_\_

**7. How do you expect that Tok-chaë's revelations about his life will affect how Song-sam treats him? Why?** \_\_\_\_\_

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Song-sam 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 can a farmer go, leaving all the chores behind? So Song-sam left alone. Roaming about the strange streets and villages in the South. Song-sam 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.

**8. Of the two men, who seems to be more ethical (morally good)? Why?** \_\_\_\_\_

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They crossed the ridge of a hill. This time Song-sam 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, Song-sam hesitatingly stopped. In the middle of the field he spied a group of cranes that looked like men in white clothes bending over. This used to be the neutralized zone along the Thirty-eighth Parallel. The **cranes**<sup>4</sup> were still living here, as before, while the people were all gone.

Once, when Song-sam and Tok-chaë were about twelve, they had set a trap here, without the knowledge of the adults, and had caught a crane, a Tanjong 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 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 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 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?" Song-sam said suddenly.

Tok-chaë was dumbfounded.

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

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<sup>4</sup> **Cranes:** In Korea, the red-crowned crane is called durumi and it is considered a symbol of longevity, purity, and peace. Korean seonbis regarded the bird as an icon of their constancy.

Song-sam had untied Tok-chae's hands and was already crawling through the weeds.

Tok-chae's face whitened. "You are sure to be shot anyway"—these words flashed through his mind. Pretty soon a bullet would fly from where Song-sam had gone, he thought.

Some paces away, Song-sam quickly turned toward him. "Hey, how come you are standing there like you're dumb? Go flush a crane!"

Only then did Tok-chae catch on. He started crawling among the weeds.

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

**9. Why does Song-sam suddenly suggest that he and his friend/prisoner have a crane hunt? \_\_\_\_\_**

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**10. How does the anecdote (mini story) from his and Tok-chae's childhood crane hunt influence the decision he makes at the end of the story? \_\_\_\_\_**

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**11. What is the major turning point in the story where Song-sam's feelings about Tok-chae change? \_\_\_\_\_**

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**Why does this moment cause his feelings about his old friend/prisoner to change? \_\_\_\_\_**

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**12. Based on the events of the story and Song-sam's changing feelings about Tok-chae, what does the author, Hwang Sun-won, seem to be saying about the Korean War? \_\_\_\_\_**

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### **Culminating Task**

Write a one-paragraph CERER (claim-evidence-reasoning-evidence-reasoning) paragraph answering the following question:

**What is the theme of the short story "Cranes" by Hwang Sun-won?**

Analyze two quotes to support your answer. Make sure to explain how the lesson/message of the story is (or isn't) relevant to people today.