

Poetry/Shi (2010)

Major Credits:

Direction: Lee Chang-dong

Screenplay: Lee Chang-dong

Cast: Yun Jung-hie (Mija), Lee Da-wit (Wook), Kim Hira (Mr. Kang), Ahn Nae-sang (Kibum's father), Park Myeong-shin (Heejin's mother)

Production Context:

Like Lee's previous film, *Secret Sunshine* (2007), *Poetry* involves the death of a child and centers on the gradual transformation of its female protagonist, or rather, the audience's shifting perception of her character. Thus, the first lesson of the poetry class—"you must see well"—applies equally to *Poetry*. Despite the absence of many visually striking images or cinematic effects until the closing half hour, the film demands both sensory and moral attentiveness. At the center of both narratives (the true crime story and the aging woman's dilemma) is Yun Jung-hie, Korea's greatest actress, who had appeared in more than a hundred films, but none in the fifteen years preceding *Poetry*. Her real name is "Mija." *Poetry* was nominated for the Palme d'Or and won for Best Screenplay at Cannes along with many other international awards.

Cinematic Aspects:

1. Casting: Yun Jung-hie's return to the screen after long absence profoundly informs the Asian audience's perception of her character, much as European audiences were affected by the casting of Emmanuelle Riva and Jean-Louis Trintignant in Michael Haneke's *Amour* (2012). Yun's natural beauty and dignity deepen her performance as a character Lee Chang-dong calls "unexpectedly deep" and created with the actress in mind. Although this dimension may be lost on American audiences, our ignorance of Yun's star persona might contribute to our astonishment at her character's heroic struggle for expression and transcendence.
2. Costuming: Much of Mija's character is suggested by her clothing: her "chic" printed blouses, stylish hats, and delicate shawls. She is not without a certain vanity that comes with having had male admirers: "I do like to dress up a bit," she acknowledges. Thus, she stands out, even among the younger women of the poetry class.
3. Shallow Focus: Lee's camera also allows Mija to stand out in several scenes—within the crowded apartment, during the poetry reading, on the crowded street—by shooting the background figures in soft focus.
4. Lyrical Interludes: While the general ordinariness of the settings (the cluttered apartment, the nondescript cultural center, the various meeting sites) reflects Mija's constrained circumstances and the tawdry plot—note the absence of non-diegetic music, Lee incorporates several "poetic" scenes, mostly towards the end—the karaoke booth, the walk through the apricot orchard, the badminton game—to suggest Mija's search for poetry in the midst of the prosaic.

Questions for Discussion:

1. *Poetry* is a *self-reflexive* work of art, that is, a film that contemplates its own nature as art. What does the film suggest about the affinities between cinema and poetry, about the fundamental qualities of art, and about the duties of the artist? Consider why Mija is the only student to complete the assignment of writing a poem.
2. The film is structured in part by five separate poetry classes, two of which involve a montage of three students describing “The Most Beautiful Moment in My Life.” Notice where the camera is positioned and how these recitations are shot. How does Lee distinguish Mija from her classmates in these moments?
3. The climax to the film’s two plot strands (the crime story and Mija’s need to write a poem) comes in a particularly subdued form: the evening badminton game. In this virtually dialogue free sequence, much is revealed and mutely expressed. What are we surprised to learn during this scene? How does Lee manage to transform badminton into a form of poetry?
4. The denouement contains two striking cinematic techniques: the sound bridge and the “look back.” How do these technical choices serve to convey the film’s most significant ideas? Consider, too, the framing images of the river, a note the nearly imperceptible movement of the camera before the final fade.
5. Lee’s previous films (as well as his novels) have all reflected social concerns. What is the social/political commentary about contemporary South Korea expressed here, and how is that ideological critique related to the concerns of poetry?