

“Almaden” by Kim Chi-won

(Note: While it would be a joy to teach Asian literature as such, that is impossible within the current curriculum at this high school. So, I chose a selection that I could use to further develop our overall approach to the course I teach, U. S. Literature, viewing it as a diversity that unifies. Our curriculum begins with origin stories and songs from the time before the initial meeting of cultures following the arrival of Europeans, and continues to examine the strength and flavor distinguishing our literature as a result of the contributions of people from many cultures. Thus, Kim Chi-won’s “Almaden” fits neatly into the unit on modern contributions to the literature of our multi-cultural society.

Also, as an aid to teachers in Indiana, to assist with compliance with Public Law 221, I have listed the number of the state standard addressed, following each part of the lesson plan. Thus, this lesson plan can be applied to standard 11.5.2, as a response to literature.

SUMMARY:

In “Almaden,” a Korean woman living in New York City wrestles with her dissatisfaction with her marriage and her life. She begins to fantasize about a regular customer in the liquor store she and her husband run. As her discontent with her husband and her marriage increases, her imaginary relationship becomes more real to her. Finally, the man “of her dreams” disappears and the woman is left to nurture the hope that someone else will “rescue” her from her dreary life.

ACTIVITIES:

Pre-reading:

1. Give brief background on Korean history and culture, and their affect on modern Korean literature. See attached.
2. Discuss the affect of *point of view* on a story. Ask students to recall how point of view has influenced their understanding of selections we have read previously. (E.g. How would Cather's "A Wagner Matinee" be altered, if Aunt Georgiana were the narrator, rather than Clark; or, what would be the affect on "Winter Dreams" by F. Scott Fitzgerald, if it were told in the first person, rather than the third?)
3. Also, ask students to consider the importance of social context. Read the description of the man's clothing, which could easily be misleading (4), and point out that his clothes reflect the "disco" phase in American dress, popular in the 1970s. Ask students what the clothing might have suggested about the man, had they not been told that men did dress that way in the '70s. Ask for details from other selections we have read that might have been misleading without information about social context. (E.g. Mrs. Mallard's reaction to her husband's "death", in "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin, is only understood when readers consider the lack of freedom pampered women had in the nineteenth century; or, the proud tone in "Harlem; The Culture Capital" by James Weldon Johnson becomes logical when the uniqueness and success of the situation are understood; or, the illogic of farmers being paid by the government *not* to plant, during The Great Depression, must be appreciated before Faulkner's "The Tall Men" really makes sense to the reader.)
4. Distribute analysis template (attached).

Post-reading:

1. Use discussion questions, below, *OR* begin with the reading quiz, attached.

Discussion questions: (these can also be used as essay questions, or writing prompts) Have the following questions ready to hand out - one per group. Have the class get into their teams, or form groups. Each group should answer one of the following questions, which will then be used for class discussion. (Using the analysis template as a guide to reading should have helped prepare students for this activity.)

2. The following are questions for discussion. Students should be reminded to cite the text in all of their answers:

A. What is the relationship between the woman and her husband? Between the woman and the man? Show the development of the “relationship” between the woman and the man. (11.3.3)

The woman and her husband seem to have almost no relationship at all. From the information included in the story, they seem to be unable to have even the simplest conversation. One may infer that the husband has an old-fashioned view, even an old-fashioned Korean view, of a woman’s role in a marriage, for the readers are told that his response to her attempts at interesting conversation is to scold, “Go on home and get the stew going, will you?”(5). He seems to expect a woman to work, and cook, and not to have ideas.

However, the story is told from a *limited* third-person point of view. The readers’ understanding of events is biased because they know only what the woman knows. Without knowing how her husband feels, readers have only the woman’s perspective of their marriage.

Also, from the woman's perspective, it seems that she and her husband do not even have a satisfying sexual relationship. We are told that "In Korea, where the woman had been wooed and married, lovers didn't embrace in parks, subways, or other public places"(6). Although her sexual reactions to the man are described, "...when she saw his protruding nipples, she felt a warm prickle in her bosom" (6), the only reference to her married life is a vague one: "When she couldn't fall sleep at night she drank a glass of wine, went back to bed,..."(9). Where is her husband? Because of the author's choice of point of view, the reader does not know.

The woman's relationship with the man really exists only in her mind. Again, the reader must infer this, because almost no information is given about the man. The reader does not know what he thinks or feels, except that the woman is pretty, for the man tells her husband, "Nice sister you got there"(7).

The narrator does state that "the unspoken tension between the man who bought it (the wine) and the woman who sold it also rose" (7), but the reader has little evidence of that. The reader sees the man's apparent relief when he realizes the child in the shop is not hers (7). And when he sees her on the street, on her way to do laundry, the man stopped his car, and "...leaned out the window to look at her" (8). But he doesn't speak.

What the reader does know is that the woman begins to think about the man more and more. Her vague fantasy of "...walking in the woods with an affectionate man..."(5) evolves into one in which the woman is "...sitting across from Almaden at this table lit with a red candle..."(8). She imagines what his life is like from the little information she has, that he cooks for himself, and from the cheap wine he buys.

They never speak except for what is necessary to buy and sell a bottle of wine. Most of what she does know, she has learned, ironically, from his conversation with her husband.

Although they have almost no *real* relationship, the one they have develops over the course of one year, from spring to winter. It begins when the woman recognizes him as a regular customer in the liquor store that she and her husband have recently bought or begun to manage. This is followed by her discomfort when “he stood stock-still looking at her, eyes intent”(4) which prompts her to remember the price of the wine he buys. Summer arrives, and the woman seems jealous of couples shopping together in the shop, the women with flowers in the hands. The man appears shirtless, and the woman is surprised to find herself attracted to him physically.

After this, the woman begins to feel “the unspoken tension...”(7) between them. However, she still does not think of the man when he isn’t in the store. When the man seems relieved that the child in the store is not the woman’s, their attachment moves up a notch. The woman finally learns more about him, from the man’s conversation with her husband. With this, she is able to flesh out her daydreams, replacing “the affectionate man”(5) with “Almaden” and incorporating the few details of his life into her fantasy.

The man remarks on her looks to her husband; he stops and leans toward her on the street. But, as the holidays approach, he arrives one evening without enough money for his bottle of Almaden, and asks her for credit. He never returns.

The woman must abandon any hope that her vague daydreams of a happier life with Almaden; however, she continues to hope for some man, someone other than her husband, to walk into her shop and change her life.

B. How does the author reveal the woman's sense of separateness, of being different from those around her, which is a common theme in modern Korean literature? How does this affect the story? (11.3.2)

The first indication that the woman feels isolated is revealed in her relationship with her husband. "She felt he had the soul of a beggar; he was a hungry man who could never be satisfied" (5). She notices he does not speak to others the way he speaks to her, "...in a scratchy tone of voice, in half-sentences? The layers of irritation that clouded his brow, the discontent that framed his lips – did he reveal them only to her?" She catches herself observing him "as if ...observing a stranger" and feels "disgusted almost to the point of nausea" (5).

Besides this, the narrator describes her fantasies, suggesting that she is alone in her life, or dissatisfied with it.

Finally, the narrator describes her envy of the happy women who wait in her shop while their dates buy a bottle of wine. "...she envied them their enjoyment, their night out, their bottle of wine. She felt these were the chosen people, people whose eyes didn't have to be dark, whose hair didn't have to be black, people who weren't afraid to express their affection"(6). Clearly she is separated from, isolated from these people, not only because they are happy and she is not, or because they have dates and she is unhappily married. She is ultimately separate from them because she is Korean, and they are not.

The effect of this is to demonstrate two similar yet different concepts to the reader. The first is that most people are lonely sometimes, most people are envious sometimes, and most people are unhappy sometime, whether New Yorkers, Koreans, or anyone else.

Conversely, because she is Korean, because her appearance is different from that of most of the New Yorkers around her, she feels different. The woman seems to foster the familiar lament: “I didn’t ask to be me,” or, “Why did I have to be born this way.” She appears different, but she is like everyone. Perhaps, her isolation is her own fault. After all, she takes no control over her life. She doesn’t leave her husband, or even talk about her difficulties, as far as the reader knows. When Almaden disappears, she only hopes that some else will appear.

C. How does the author depict the woman’s sense of being a victim, a prevalent theme in modern Korean literature? Apply this to a broader world view. (11.3.4, 11.3.3)

Whether the woman in “Almaden” is a victim or not is unclear, but she certainly feels that she is one. She is the victim of her marriage; her husband doesn’t respect her, seems not to love her, only gives her orders and ignores her.

Further, she is a victim of her tradition, because she comes from culture in which lovers do not express their feelings. Thus, she cannot be expected to resolve her problems with her husband. Neither of them would know where to begin; neither has any cultural experience with talking about his/her emotions.

This also leaves her incapable of developing a relationship with Almaden. When he “stood stock-still looking at her, eyes intent”(4) she felt uncomfortable. She

doesn't speak or even smile. When he realizes she is not a child's mother, she doesn't take advantage of his interest to start a conversation. And when he stopped his car on the street and "leaned out the window" she still doesn't speak, even though he stays and watches her when the light changes and she crosses the street in front of him.

Chi-won implies that the woman is incapable of initiating a conversation, or of advancing the "relationship" in any way, because she was raised in Korea, where people were more reserved about their feelings. An American might argue with her husband, even divorce him, might flirt with Almaden, might even get a different job. She might, but she might not. The woman may be intimidated by custom, but others may act the same way; shy or insecure American women might behave like the woman in the story. "Almaden" seems to demonstrate both that Koreans tend to feel victimized by circumstances, and that people have similar problems around the world, and across cultures.

D. None of the people in the story are given names. Why do you think that is? What is the affect of this?

The main characters in "Almaden" are: the woman, her husband, and the man; names are not given for any of them. Eventually, in her fantasies, the woman names the man after the wine he buys. In fact, the name of that wine is the *only* proper name in the story. This affects the story is several ways.

First, the lack of names makes the situation more universal; the woman and her husband could be any woman and husband. Paradoxically, this in some ways diminishes the idea of the woman's isolation. Chi-won depicts her as someone who

feels alone: as a Korean in a Western city, and as a woman in a loveless marriage.

But the effect of her namelessness is to show that she could be any woman alone in a large city, or stuck in a marriage where communication has failed. Her husband could be any husband, more involved in his life than his wife.

Second, the man's namelessness makes him more generic. He is "everyman" and could be any man. This enhances the element of fantasy about him. Although he is described in great detail and more than once, the narrator tells us that, "In the past, the woman had disdained this type of man, who seemed to use physical beauty as his main weapon"(6). So, she is not attracted to him on the basis of his looks, nor that of his charm, as he doesn't immediately demonstrate anything except the desire to buy wine. This emphasizes the fact that the woman's fantasies begin because of her need to fill an emptiness in her life, not because of anything "Almaden" does. In fact, the man's name is never known. He only gets a name of sorts, a fantasy name, because the woman gives it to him. Almaden the man exists only in her mind. Because of this, when the story ends with the woman's "trying to reassure herself: The world was an endless expanse, its people an infinite multitude"(10) this is not a note of optimism. Endless nameless people can supply endless fantasies. While fantasies provide escape from an unhappy reality, they provide no solution to it. Fantasies are passive, not active.

Further, even the name of the wine is relatively generic. "Almaden" is not an expensive brand of wine, nor is it particularly cheap. It is a fair quality, inoffensive, useful brand of wine designed for people without a lot of money or a sophisticated palate. In other words, the name given to the man also suggests an everyman, or

“anyman.” Almaden the man is just as generic as Almaden the wine, serviceable but not note-worthy, useful but not extraordinary.

Third, the characters’ namelessness also has the effect of exaggerating their isolation. While, on the one hand, this makes the woman’s loneliness seem less tragic because it is usual, on the other, it makes loneliness itself more tragic, because it is portrayed as usual. Kim Chi-won depicts a world where people are separate from each other, not necessarily because of their own natures or their personal circumstances, but because of the nature of modern society. This is a realism bordering on naturalism, where people are victims of circumstances, with little control of their lives. Nameless people come and go, but in the end, everyone is alone. In “Almaden,” Kim Chi-won shows readers that the woman, who feels victimized, is not the only victim. We are all victims of the coldness of modern society.

Almaden''

Reading Check Quiz

DIRECTIONS: Place the letter of the best response on your answer sheet.

1. Almaden is
 - a. a brand of wine.
 - b. a candy made from almonds.
 - c. a city in France.
 - d. a New York neighborhood.

2. The man is wearing
 - a. a diamond earring.
 - b. a jogging suit.
 - c. three gold chains.
 - d. two different shoes.

3. What does the woman realize will happen if she forgets to renew her license?
 - a. She'll be arrested.
 - b. She'll be deported and sent back to Korea.
 - c. She'll be reported to the N.Y. State Liquor Authority.
 - d. She'll go to jail.

4. What shows the woman's husband that she hasn't already paid a particular bill?
 - a. The company calls and explains.
 - b. He notices that the invoice number is different.
 - c. He remembers paying it himself.
 - d. He finds it in the checkbook.

5. What did the woman daydream?
 - a. that her life with her husband was like a beautiful photograph.
 - b. that she returned to her home in Korea.
 - c. that she was walking in the woods with an affectionate man.
 - d. that she worked in a shop arranging cut flowers.
6. Why does the woman envy the enjoyment of the couples who buy wine in her shop?
 - a. They are not married.
 - b. They are going to the theater.
 - c. They are not working, and she is.
 - d. They are not Korean.
7. The man explains that his wine doesn't have to be chilled because
 - a. he cooks with it.
 - b. he likes to add ice.
 - c. his girlfriend prefers it warm.
 - d. it is for a sick friend.
8. How does the man show that he finds the woman attractive?
 - a. He asks her, "Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?"
 - b. He says to her husband, "Nice sister you got there."
 - c. He sends her flowers with a romantic note.
 - d. He smiles and winks at her.
9. What name does the woman begin to call the man, in her mind?
 - a. Mr. Yellow Convertible
 - b. Gold Chains

c. Curly Locks

d. Almadin

10. How does the relationship between the man and the woman end?

a. He disappears.

b. Her husband sends her back to Korea.

c. They argue.

d. They marry.

Other Activities:

In groups, students will play “the language game.” In this, each group is asked to find examples imagery and figurative language in the story. They should write these, with page citations, on a piece of paper. They will then be collected, and combined into lists. The lists are divided up, and redistributed to the groups.

In each groups, the students must *write* different passages or a paragraph, incorporating the examples of imagery or figurative language from “Almaden.” They should be encouraged to be imaginative and to create passages that are very different from those in the selection. The students then read the passages they have written aloud, and the class discusses how the effect of the language from “Almaden” differs, (or doesn’t) in the passage created by the students.

A variation of this activity is to take the language from the first story, “Almaden,” and insert it into a different story, any of several other selections we have read, either simply adding it, or using it to replace other language. The class again discusses the effect.

Students are led to be creative and use their imaginations, to examine the effects of imagery and figurative language, and to consider the writing process from an author’s point of view. (11.3.4)

Writing Assignments: (11.4.1, 2, 4, 10, 11, 12; 11.5.2, 6; 11.6.1, 2, 3)

- A. Compare and contrast the woman's sense of isolation and/or victimization, in "Almaden" with that of one of the following:
1. the speaker in "We Wear the Mask" by Paul Dunbar and/or the speaker in "A Man Said to the Universe," by Stephen Crane.
 2. Zora Neale Hurston, in "How It Feels to Be Colored Me."
 3. the narrator in Hemingway's "In Another Country."
 4. Granny, in "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" by Katherine Anne Porter.
- B. How does the author use symbolism to communicate mood and theme, in "Almaden"?
- C. How does the author use realism to communicate the theme, in "Almaden"?

Korea – historical and cultural background:

The area we know as Korea has existed as an organized state since the early 4th century. However, as this period precedes the use of a written language, we have little knowledge of their language or customs.

Between the 7th and 10th centuries, the Silla dynasty ruled in the southeast, as a Buddhist state. Between the 10th and 14th centuries, the center of government moved to Seoul, where Buddhist monks were at the center of politics and in control of the dynasty. This society was more centralized and less feudal than the Silla. During this period, the government adopted the Chinese system of examinations for the sake of government advancement. Korean society was influenced by Confucian ideology. The country expanded its boundaries to those of present day Korea.

From the 14th to early 20th centuries, the Choson dynasty flourished. In this period, the dynasty established a system that joined Korean politics and culture; while this union created what seemed to be the ideal Korean society, it was a society that resisted change. This is the period that dominated Korean tradition. Unfortunately, its longevity actually made it impossible to adapt to the 20th century. In fact, the country's first treaty with the outside world was forced on them by the Japanese.

The Colonial Period, from 1910 to 1945, led to the rise of nationalism, and to Japanese colonialism. Use of the Chinese language and its exam system ended. This period fostered, among Koreans, an intense disillusionment at the failure of tradition.

The liberation of Korea, at the end of W.W. II lasted only a few days; the U.S. and the Soviet Union quickly divided the country. Communism became the form of government and culture of the North. The South, as a result of American neo-

colonialism, began to develop its own economy. However, a primary result of these events is that the issue of independence remains dominant in Korea.

Modern Korean literature is the product of this complex history. It is influenced by many outside influences, especially that of China. Because the Korean script was considered inferior to Chinese for so long, the very system with which the people wrote reflected the failure of their tradition and their traditional lack of independence. This struggle with their writing system is intertwined with the struggle for a national voice. It is partly responsible for the feeling of victimization that is so prevalent in modern Korean literature.

However, while it is true that Chinese influence had a powerful, if discordant, influence on Korea, it would be untrue to suggest that the modernization of the 20th century was actually Westernization. Korean modernity began in the 18th century after the invasions from Japan, and thirty years later, from Manchuria. It was at this time that political awareness and a sense of nationalism began to emerge. During this period, the bourgeois and market classes developed, and the Korean alphabet began to replace the Chinese.

Thus, modernization in literature led to an interest in western thematic concerns, and a dramatic transformation in style as a result of the influence of realism in western literature. Coupled with the predominant feeling of victimization, these qualities contributed to the nature of modern Korean literature.

Sources:

Robinson, Mike, PhD, "Modern Korean History and Culture." *Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School*. East Asian Center Summer Workshop. Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. July 13, 2001.

Park, Chan E., Ph.D. "Transitions to Modern Korean Literature." *Teaching East Asian Literature in the High School*. East Asian Center Summer Workshop. Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. July 13, 2001.

Point of View:

Point of view is the vantage point from which an author presents the actions and characters of a story. The story may be related by a character, using the pronoun “I” (the *first-person* point of view), as in Hemingway’s “In Another Country;” the story may also be related by a character using the pronoun “you” (the *second-person* point of view). This is somewhat rare, but can be found in some modern novels, such as *Bright Lights, Big City*, by Jay McInerney; or the story may be told by a narrator who does not participate in the action (the *third-person* point of view).

Further, the third-person narrator may be *omniscient* – able to see into the minds of all the characters. Or, a third-person narrator may be *limited* – confined to a single character’s perceptions, as in Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path.”

An author who describes only what can be seen, like a newspaper reporter, is said to use an *objective* or *dramatic* point of view.*

*Alan C. Purvis, ed. *Literature and Integrated Studies: American Literature*. (Glenview, IL: ScottForesman, 1977.) 972-73.

Directions:

An author chooses a specific point of view in order to best communicate elements of fiction such as character, tone, plot, theme, etc. Working in groups, consider the affect of Kim Chi-won’s choice of point of view, in “Almaden.” What is its overall effect on the story? How would the effect of the story be different if told from a different point of view? Consider what the reader would know: if the story were told from the man’s point of view, or the husband’s, or if the story had an omniscient third-person narrator. (11.3.2)

Prepare an oral presentation (11.7.18) which includes:

- a. an explanation of the effects of different points of view,

b. a portion of the story *rewritten* in a different point of view.

You may use visual aids. You may *perform* portions of the story to demonstrate your conclusion.

ENGLISH 11: Analysis of literature Name: _____

Date: _____

Title: _____

Author: _____ **Pages:** _____

Form: _____

Sub genre: _____

Setting: _____

Characters: _____

Literary focus – Identify: _____

Identify an example or demonstration of that focus. (Cite page numbers):

Explain the effect of this on the selection: _____

Theme – Analyze the way the theme represents **a view or comment on life.**

Identify the theme: _____

Cite the text: _____

Style

Analyze the ways **imagery, symbolism, and figures of speech** affect the selection.

Examples: (include citation) _____

Analysis: _____

Analyze the ways **irony, tone, and/or mood** affect the selection.

Examples: (include citation) _____

Analysis: _____

Other notes that might help you:

Conflict:

Identify the conflict: _____

Cite the selection: _____

How is the conflict solved (or is it)? _____

How do you know? (Cite the text.) _____

Point of View:

Who tells the story? _____

How can you tell? (Cite the text.) _____

What is the point of view? _____

Plot:

What are the main events in the selection? _____

VOCABULARY:

“Almaden”

by

Kim Chi-won

Maria T. Kelsay
Rochester High School
1 Zebra Lane
Rochester, IN 46982
(219)223-2176
Maria.Kelsay@Zebras.net