



FILM: **POETRY**

FDG RATING: 4.0 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Lee Chang-dong: *director, writer*

Yun Jun-hee: *actress, Mija*

Kim Hi-Ra: *actor, Mr. Kang*

DATE: February 20, 2022

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **POETRY**

Poetry, a 2010 South Korean film, tells the story of a quiet, unassuming older woman, Mija, who takes care of her slacking, resentful teenage grandson, Wook; and spends a couple days a week, cleaning and caring for Mr. Kang, a demanding older gentleman who has suffered a paralyzing stroke. He and his daughter and family are financially well-off and hired Mija. We liked that Mija's outfits were unexpectedly light, colorful, and youthful, usually a floral print and a white summer hat. Sadly, she is starting to have memory issues, which a doctor visit confirms as the onset of Alzheimer's, so she decides to take a poetry writing class to stimulate her mind and help her memory.

A parallel story line is that a teen age girl, who is in Wook's class at school, has committed suicide by jumping in the river. As the film opens, we see a beautiful river with some children playing nearby, until one child spots a corpse floating in the river. The story lines converge when the fathers of four boys, Wook's class mates, invite Mija to join them when they meet to discuss the repercussions of their sons' involvement in the girl's suicide. The school is aware that the boys, including Wook, raped her, but the administrators want to hush the incident as do the fathers who plan to offer settlement money to the girl's mother. Mija would be required to contribute her fair share. We remember that in the opening scene, Mija was extremely shaken when she saw the girl's mother uncontrollably sobbing as the girl's body is brought from the river. The men are more concerned about how the incident would negatively affect their sons as well as tarnish their own reputations. A published critic noted that this exemplifies "Lee's implicit criticism of South Korea's patriarchal culture - of men protecting their boys, with no real regret for the brutal theft of a girl's life." One father chillingly states, "Although I feel sorry for the dead girl, now is the time for us to worry about our boys."

One discussion participant noted that the film is remarkably understated for the inflammatory events in the plot. The men convince Mija to visit the girl's mother and offer the settlement. Although she makes the somewhat lengthy trip, her interaction with the woman is tender, never mentioning the settlement. She has asked Mr. Kang for the amount of money that is her share of the settlement without explaining why she needs the money. And it is interesting that the payment almost becomes a slightly twisted mirror image settlement for the sexual encounter Mija has with Mr. Kang.

At the same time, Mija is concentrating on her poetry assignment in everything she does. The teacher told her to "really see" so she continuously writes her observations in her journal which are actually tentative lines of poetry about what she observes and the thoughts she has. It is also interesting that the young girl had kept a journal which is how the assault by the boys was discovered and determined to be the probable cause of her suicide. By the last day of class, each student is to submit a poem. Mija is the only student who completes the assignment. Her poem gives voice to the young girl.

We almost unanimously gave the film high scores, including five scores of our highest rating, with one participant saying that she dreamt about film after watching it. She liked that the poetry teacher opened Mija's eyes to the beauty in simple things and really taught her to see. We noted that he was the only male character with positive attributes. Yun's performance was mesmerizing. One published critic said, "Her vintage elegance allows the actress to create a complex character, who seems both childish and insecure, as well as mature and dominant. This contrasting depiction of an elderly woman facing the tumultuous reality of modern Korea is the film's strongest element."

The ending was poetic justice. Mija couldn't live with the shame of what her grandson had done (and what she had done), and so by turning Wook in, she has implicated the other boys who, along with their fathers, will have to experience accountability for what happened.

A highly original, cinematic, beautifully filmed story, the cumulative score for Poetry rose to a lyrical 4.0 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).



See you at the movies!

Adriane Dedic, adedic@pacbell.net

www.filmdiscussiongroup.com