

**Title:** Discovering Culture through Literature

**Subject:** Sociology

**Grade Level:** This lesson is for grades 10-12 in a basic sociology class. It could easily be adapted for the lower grades and even to a different subject.

**Time Duration:** This lesson can be completed in two class periods.

**Overview:** During the Sociology unit on Culture, students will explore ways to examine culture through literature.

**Objective:**

- Students will read the story The Last Seventeen Years by Kim Yong Ik
- Students will be able to derive cultural clues from the context of the story.
- Students will develop a compare/contrast between traditional Korean culture and contemporary American culture by creating a Venn Diagram
- Students will demonstrate awareness of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism in examining traditional Korean ceremonial traditions.

**Materials:**

- Copies of the story The Last Seventeen Years by Kim Yong Ik
- The Last Seventeen Years by Kim Yong Ik Comprehension Questions
- Venn Diagram sheet
- Material and Non-Material Culture List
- Material and Non-Material Culture Worksheet

## **Activities and Procedures:**

### **Day 1**

- Bell work: Students contemplate the following statement "Actions speak louder than words" and record in their journals what that means to them.
- Students will pair share what they have written (1-2 minutes)
- Students will share through a directed discussion what they know. 3 minutes
- Teacher introduces the idea that we can use this same concept in discerning cultural characteristics from literature.
- Teacher passes copies of the story The Last Seventeen Years by Kim Yong Ik out to each student and gives them time to read it in class. - 20 minutes
- When students have completed the story they receive a list of comprehension questions that they must answer. (see attached). Students may use the remainder of class time to complete the questions, and may finish for homework what they do not get done in class.

## Day 2

- Teacher collects the comprehension question homework.
- Teacher puts a blank copy of the homework questions on the overhead, and has the students pair-share answers.
- Teacher reviews the homework while they are doing this, going to any students that appear to have had trouble and addressing them individually.
- After the teacher has determined that the students have a sufficient comprehension of the story the students will move on to analysis.
- Students will be given a sheet on which they will list items of material culture and non-material culture from the story. They will do this in pairs, so as to provoke deeper thinking.
- Once the students have completed their lists, we will begin a class discussion on what they have gleaned from the reading.
- Teacher will put a blank sheet on the overhead, and will fill it in as students share things they have found.
- The class will engage in a discussion of values as they can be discerned through the items of culture that have been identified from the story. What did you learn from what the characters said? What did you learn from what the characters did?
- After discussing periphery items, the focus of the discussion will shift to the wedding ceremony.
- Homework: Teacher passes out the Venn Diagram and asks students to draw a comparison between contemporary American wedding traditions and Traditional Korean wedding traditions.

# **The Last Seventeen Years**

## **Material and Non-material Culture List**

### **Location:**

- Korea, near the seacoast (protagonist is a diver), probably not far from the northern border (husband worked in Manchurian gold mine).

### **Time:**

- Probably not long before 1910 or between 1945-1950 (husband appears wearing Western coat and Korean trousers; Korean names used, therefore not between 1910 and 1945 when Japanese rulers forced use of Japanese names; no indication of the Communist control of the north that followed partition).

### **Foods:**

- Rice, red bean soup, pickled cabbage, crabs, soy sauce, roast pig, beef stew, wine, vegetables, mushrooms, seaweed, clams, bread, five kinds of fruit, pumpkins.

### **Housing:**

- Thatched roof, porch, fire pit, no chimney -- smoke escapes through door and thatch, *ondol* floor heated by flue beneath, charcoal heated iron, no indoor plumbing (bathing in stream); wood and charcoal as fuel.

### **Occupations:**

- Wet-rice farmer (paddies), diver (women), butcher, fish dealer, gold miner, sedan chair carrier, carpenter, beggar, ship builder, sailor.

### **Technology:**

- Use of iron, brass (alloy of copper and zinc), charcoal from pine trees, silk and hemp fabrics.

### **Customs:**

- Wedding: feast given by bride's family; formal visit by bride to mother-in-law; white the costume color for ceremonial occasions.
- Husband/father the head of the household (son told to bow to father, sedan chair to wedding, *my* son, shame at remarks about baby-care and being supported by wife and having to compete with women at mine). Wife's status from bearing a son ("Yang Ho's mother, are you at peace?")
- Extended family (added room for son and wife instead of separate household).
- Tiger regarded as protective/auspicious animal, symbol of the mountains and of the nation (compare the eagle in the U.S.).

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# After Seventeen Years

By Kim Yong Ik. From *Asian-Pacific Literature*, Vol. 2, edited by James and Cheryl Harstad, Honolulu, HI: Department of Education, State of Hawaii, 1981. Reprinted by permission.

Gray dusk of the winter solstice day was gently covering the valley. Scattered sounds of pounding indicated that some of the women were still mashing rice for the little balls they would serve in red bean soup.

Choon Soo was coming home from returning a neighbor's sieve when she felt someone following her. She moved faster toward the shelter of her home, straining her ears for sounds behind her. Once she thought she heard faint choking as if someone were trying to speak to her.

"What do you want?" she said, defying her fear. "You do not need to creep behind me." There was silence so absolute it seemed she had only been imagining things. Choon Soo entered her house and came out, carrying a little lamp, which she held high, her face averted from its glare. The light shone on a shabby man with a bundle under one arm, an umbrella in the other hand. He wore a torn and faded Western coat and Korean trousers, patched on the knees with yellow. A glance was enough to tell her that here was Meng Dol. Not the boy of her early married years, but a thin, tired man, whose gaiety had left him long ago. Her husband, but a husband from whom she had been separated for many years. Had it been this man for whom at every meal time she always found herself cooking an extra bowl of rice as if he would return any moment to join them?

"It is you," she said at last. From the fish dealer's words, she had learned where to find Meng Dol, and when she had written him, her letter did not contain a plea, nor even an invitation, but just the facts of Yang Ho's wedding, Meng Dol, who had gone away on his own decision, would have to make up his own mind about attending the wedding. She did not really believe he would come.

As though he had approached too near before calling out to a strange woman, she moved back with several uneasy steps.

A sudden voice behind him exclaimed, "Who are you?" Yang Ho had come up from the new house where he was checking the fire in the pit of the room.

With a startled jerk of his shoulder, the man tried to answer. "I am ... I am..."

Yang Ho had come nearer to make sure that he was a stranger and demanded again impatiently, "Who are you?"

"Is this Yang Ho?" Meng Dol asked quietly.

Choon Soo held her chin high as she looked at her son and said, "This is your father. Bow to your father."

A frown came on the boy's face. "What! My fa ... ! Did you not say my father was in Manchuria?"

"I told you that your father left us soon after you were born. He was chasing the spring wind. What he has done in Manchuria and Pusan, I do not know. Bow to him."

"But this man could be ... Does he say he is my father?" argued Yang Ho stubbornly. As Choon Soo's eyes stayed on him in command, he bowed ever so slightly. Meng Dol's hands reached out to his son awkwardly but dropped without reaching him.

"I did my duty by letting you know of your son's marriage," said Choon Soo primly. "Now that you are here, you should know that tomorrow, your son's wedding day, was set by your old teacher, Pak, who said the early lucky day comes after the longest night shadow of the year. You should also know perhaps that a new house is added to the old one for Yang Ho and his bride, and the village people already call him the newhouse son."

Meng Dol stood awkwardly looking beyond the garden patch to the solid mass of new thatched house against the darkening sky. Still uninvited, he walked in weakly and sat down on the porch. His eyes were traveling over his son's strong wide figure and then over Choon Soo as if comparing them. Then seeing his eyes turned to the velvet shoes, Choon Soo became embarrassed and hurried into the house.

She had been keeping his velvet wedding shoes on the porch, dusting them every morning as if he were coming back that very day. Remembering the hunger on his face, she soon brought out a tray, on which was a little plate of pickled cabbage and crabs dipped in soya sauce. This she set before her husband, and then fetched the same brass bowl that she had kept filled with warm rice during his absence.

Without any words, she went back to the kitchen and busied herself with balls of pounded rice she was making for her son. She shaped each ball by pressing and rounding between her palms, and then placed it on a large wooden platter. Her fingers trembled as she worked. Each rounded bit of rice meant a year, and there would be eighteen.

Yang Ho came in and sitting down beside her, began to count the balls.

"You should sit with your father while he eats," she told him. "Though he has been away, you should treat him with respect."

Later, Choon Soo observed Yang Ho gathering up his bedding to carry to the new house. "Why do you want to move?" she reproached him. "Take blankets to the new house and tell your father he is to sleep there."

"I just want to sleep in the new house."

"From tomorrow," said Choon Soo, "you know, you will stay three days at your bride's home, and then you will move to the new house. Isn't that soon enough? Don't you want to sleep beside me the last one night?"

"Well, I just thought . . .," he murmured, but dropped his quilt back in its old spot.

While her son was gone, the room looked unnecessarily large as she realized that she and her son would no longer occupy it together. "I shall have to make a dry cough before I enter my son's room," she told herself. "Can I work for my son? Only discreetly. I recall how my husband's folk interfered during my bride days!"

It came to her with a shock that the boy of her bride days was back again. What was she going to do about him after the wedding? Perhaps he would solve the matter by leaving.

The words of an old song came back echoing on her cold dry lips. "Oh, the sea girl's heart is redder than the crest of the strutting rooster " Like a fretful child, the melody plucked at her attention. A word or two at a time, a line or two at a time, the song now moistened her lips.

Yang Ho coming in the room remarked, "You are singing to yourself, and the song was not one I ever heard you sing before."

"It is just something I used to know in the days when I sang a good deal." She stopped singing.

"Mother," Yang Ho said, "I was sorry for him when he told me he had worked among women in a gold mine. He picked up pebbles that had been thrown aside when gold was so much cheaper that it did not seem worthwhile to use those stones. He said it was hard for a man to make wages because the women darted ahead of him and scrambled and grabbed to get their boxes full, and get their wages of ten won a box."

"When I asked about Manchuria, he said that land was not the place to make money unless he joined the bandits, sold opium, or ran a wine-and-women house near an army camp. He said women were worse in Manchuria. They did not even let him talk leisurely."

Choon Soo interrupted Yang Ho as the shabby clothes bundle Meng Dol carried under his arm came to her mind. "I didn't invite him to unpack his story bundle."

"He said that he had remembered you all these years and that he left us only because he was young and foolish."

"A man does not stay young and foolish for so many years," she replied crisply. "Now go to sleep. We have to get up early to do many things before your sedan chair arrives. Your father will be no help."

"Mother, what will he wear tomorrow?"

"I do not know," she answered simply. Then she said to herself, "Why should I? A man who has been away for so long, and comes back looking like a beggar does not deserve new clothes. No one can blame me that I do not provide new clothes."

The silver bell tree swayed against the lobster red sky. "Northwest wind!" she almost shouted with joy, taking this as prophecy of a fine day. Choon Soo went out to bathe in the stream, her heart full of gratitude to the Spirit of Surroundings for sending such a beautiful day for her son's wedding. Below, the wind left a white path over the ocean, and the clean waves washed softly in and out, leaving seaweeds, driftwood, sparkling white shells, and myriads of clams. Waves of emotion rolled on Choon Soo's heart. Her son's wedding day! Her husband had come back, but he would have to leave again. He had merely come home for his son's wedding.

She went on bathing and, much refreshed, she hurried back to the house and again began to go over Yang Ho's marriage clothes with the charcoal iron. As she ironed, she glanced now and then at the brass-hinged chest that had once been bought for her own wedding. "After all, he is Yang Ho's father and must ride in the wedding procession," she said to herself. Going to the chest she pulled out from the bottom the old garments saved through all the years. They would come near enough to fitting him, she thought. She went over them with the iron, added the velvet slippers she had kept on the porch and a pair of Yang Ho's cotton socks.

"Take these to your father," she said through tight lips, "and tell him to put them on hastily. The chair carriers will be here soon."

Three sedan chairs soon appeared, each borne by two carriers dressed in green and blue. All the village people seemed to know that Yang Ho's father had come as though someone had shouted the news from the hill. They even knew that he had slept alone in the new house. She had heard someone talking outside of her house, "It must be that Yang Ho, who knows nothing, did not understand that he should have been the one to sleep alone."

Her neighbor, the carpenter's wife, rushed over and directed Choon Soo and Meng Dol to sit on the pads spread in the yard. Choon Soo chose to sit a way apart from Meng Dol, behind whom her neighbor set the tiger-painted screen. Still she could not help stealing a glance at her long-absent husband to see how he would react to the ceremony of having his son bow to him on his wedding day, just the same as if he had assumed his parental responsibilities. She was gratified to see a look of embarrassment on his pale, thin response features.

Her own heart was brimming with pride as the wide, tall boy in purple robe advanced and gave his parents a slow, deep bow. How handsome he looked in his wedding finery! Was this young man in shimmering silk only a double-chinned baby with bubbles on his lips like a crab when her husband had left? Was it eighteen years? She had to wipe away her tears.

The wedding procession formed itself with the village leader in the first sedan. Then came Yang Ho in the groom's chair, which was brightly painted and gilded, with a tiger-skin canopy. In the third chair rode the groom's father, Meng Dol, still rather bewildered by the change in his circumstances. He had lost much of his wilted look, however, and taken on a comfortable sense of importance.

The carriers had to keep up constant shouting to chase the curious children out of the way as the bright little procession jostled along the narrow road. Then the cries changed as the way led between the swaying golden rice paddies, and a happy chanting floated back to Choon Soo, standing alone by the painted screen.

After the voices had died in the distance, her mind still tried to follow her son and his wedding procession. How far on the way would they be now?

Choon Soo felt very much alone. Everyone else in the village had gone to the wedding, even the carpenter's mother, who had had to be helped every step of the way. Only one mother, the mother of the groom, must stay behind, alone that day except for the ceremonial call of her new daughter-in-law. Why could she not just let her thoughts and feelings stop until she saw the carriers approaching with the bride's chair, from which her daughter-in-law would emerge to pay her short homage visit? She would enjoy this occasion more than she had her own homage visit to the Cho home long ago. Yang Ho's bride was a sweet, gentle girl, and this was a love marriage.

Suddenly she decided to go to the hillside from where she knew Yang Ho had so often watched his prospective bride's home. But when she reached there, what with not wishing to be observed, and seeing that the wedding guests were crowded into a mass from which no one was distinguishable, she gave up trying to really see anything.

At the conclusion of the ceremony, the bride and groom would bow to the east, she recalled. So she gravely bowed to the east, and went back home, saying to herself, "Tomorrow I will go back to the sea."

The call of the bride was in the mid-afternoon, brief and formal. After having Choon Soo's offering of rice water with honey, the bride returned to her chair for the trip back to her old home.

The entire incident had had an air of unreality, Choon Soo reflected. She thought she could give it more reality by recalling her bridal visit to Meng Dol's mother, but it was not so. That too seemed unreal.

Choon Soo felt weak and tired. Why was she so tired, she wondered. Perhaps she had grown nervous with waiting for the bridal homage visit. Perhaps she needed food. She had not eaten since morning. Or, had she eaten and forgotten it?

In her kitchen, stooping to replenish the fire with pine splinters, Choon Soo realized there was no one to cook for but herself. She expected Meng Dol, but he might be late, and was sure to be satisfied with wedding food. Probably she could make out a meal with leftovers.

The iron pot suddenly looked huge and empty, and the fire needlessly brisk as new flames flickered and fought with drifts of smoke that puffed out into her face.

Turning her head away from the fire, she saw Meng Dol comfortably leaning in the doorway. His posture was like that of her husband in the early-married days, ready to tell her of his day's happenings. As in old times, he held out a package. She turned her face back into the smoke, which she partly escaped by rising.

"Yang Ho's mother, are you in peace?" The tone and manner gave familiarity and gaiety to the formal words. "I have brought you a piece of the wedding bread and roast pig."

When she did not move to accept the offering, hungry though she was, he stepped in and laid it on the little table.

Choon Soo cleared her throat, but could not bring out any word of either greeting or thanks.

"My son's wedding has been a splendid wedding," Meng Dol proclaimed in his old narrative manner. "The narrow road at our bride's home was still white with people when I left. Our bride's father is a fine fellow. Even the poorest of the poor, he invited inside the house. He could tell the poor from the beggars even in the same rag. When his three boys stopped a poor fellow from entering the house, he told them that the man did not come as a market hanger-on but came as a relative and should be an inside guest. Then he told us that the man had always behaved like his relative; the poor man never begged from him, and often ran from him at the market so that he might not see his miserable condition. Also, when the flock of beggars demanded too much at the gate, he threatened to charge them for the nicest smell of food they had ever had. All the time he looked after me and demanded, 'Step aside for my big guest to pass through!' Or 'Bring more beef stew and wine for my big guest.'

"Such food I have never tasted! Many vegetables, mushrooms, seaweeds, clam! I counted nine different kinds of bread and five kinds of fruit."

Meng Dol went back to his comfortable pose in the doorway, and continued. "A sister-in-law of one of the bride's cousins was really breathless after eating, and when she stood up the front of her skirt looked shorter than the rear as if she were going to have a baby in a couple of months. Ahrn's poorer kin ate three or four days' meals without moving from their seats."

Choon Soo now took her package and unwrapped it, leaving the hemp cloth between it and the table. She kept her head turned away, trying not to see a tenderness creep over Meng Dol's features. He went on. "As today's important guest, I had to keep from eating so much. I saw that the bride's mother was watching my manners to see what sort of family her daughter was marrying."

Choon Soo shrugged her shoulder annoyingly.

"I heard much praise of our son. Many said, 'A son is like his father.' I think there must be some resemblance although I do not see it myself," he concluded complacently.

Choon Soo turned without raising her gaze.

"Oh our bride!" he exclaimed. "I should have told you about her first of all. I did not hear any woman in the crowd twitter about any small flaw in the face, and all the men envied our Yang Ho. I overheard our bride's father complain only that she would have been more beautiful without the ghost-white powder." He paused, but there was no reply from Choon Soo. She seemed to be absorbed in her eating, but trying not to show too much enjoyment in it.

Meng Dol dropped his storytelling manner and said, rather to himself, "All day I have thought about our own wedding day, Choon Soo."

"No one envied you your bride." The words came cold and faint.

"Oh, that isn't so," declared Meng Dol. "My father's youngest sister was very angry because she could not secure you for her son's bride."

"Because of my earnings only," said Choon Soo.

"Earnings, yes," admitted Meng Dol. "I was proud of your diving myself, but you were a good wife, Choon Soo, and I liked your looks after I got used to being married."

Choon Soo raised her voice. "I am not small enough for beauty," she started, "and my hair exposed to the salt wind has two colors, and my eyes are squinted. But I have the heart of a woman."

"Look at me, Choon Soo," he pleaded. "I like your eyes. Everyone said a diver's squint eyes are lucky."

"Lucky in diving, yes. But unlucky in keeping a husband! Everyone said you chased the spring wind because of the squint in my eyes, my gnarled hands, and the rough skin of my diver's body."

"Oh no, Choon Soo. You hardly understand."

Her eyes flew open and flashed accusingly. "Then why did you leave us and did not care what became of us?"

He stood abashed before her, and dropped his eyes to the old velvet wedding shoes he was wearing. She awaited his answer until the silence became uncomfortable.

"Oh, I hardly know. There was a good deal said by my father's youngest sister about your being such a good diver. She said that the butcher's wife had said, 'The Cho family married into the contents of a diver's basket rather than a woman.'"

Choon Soo demanded angrily, "How can a diver keep from catching many sea things?"

Meng Dol's voice had a defensive tone. "Well, the men in the market said, 'Look at the pumpkin-headed fellow who sells the catches of his wife for so little that we shall all have to starve in a poor market.'"

"For such a small thing ... ?" began Choon Soo.

"There was more. I liked you but resented my own parents who wanted me to marry you because of your catches. There was one who always taunted me with 'Here is a good housekeeper who hurries home to rock his babe's cradle.' I was tired of hearing it."

"That is why you never came home from market that day?" There was contempt in her voice.

"That spring day," said Meng Dol, "I walked down to the dock to talk to the ship owners about the mainland, as I had done many times before. This time there was one who told me about gold mines on the mainland. He asked me if I wanted to go with him, so I stepped on his boat "

"And never came back," Choon Soo finished for him. "What do you say about that?"

Meng Dol again seemed to be studying the toes of his wedding shoes. "I had no excuse and nothing to bring."

Night was settling down over the little house and creeping in to contend with the glow from the fire. There was chill in the air, and Choon Soo moved to lay on more pine splinters.

Meng Dol spoke so tenderly that, in spite of herself, Choon Soo's body shook slightly.

"My mind never left you. Or, if it did, it always came back again. I was often very lonely, and when I yearned for you and our home, it is strange that your eyes were what I remembered best. Sometimes alone in the darkness, I fancied I saw your eyes, only your eyes, looking at me with tenderness and happiness."

Choon Soo had to force her voice. It came thin and cold. "I, too, have tasted loneliness. You keep the smoke from going out when you stand there like that. You had better go to bed and get a good sleep before you start back to wherever you want to go this time."

His face took on a look of incense pleading, but Choon Soo bit her mouth so tight that it twisted bitterly. He moved as if to speak, but dropped his shoulders and went out.

Two hot tears came to Choon Soo's eyes. She wiped them away with her sleeve. More came, and more.

"What's the matter with me? I shouldn't let anyone hear me weeping on my son's wedding day," she scolded herself. In the room, she covered the bed quilt over herself to smother her crying. She couldn't stop, for she was angry that her heart beat just the same for her husband now as on their bride day. And after those seventeen years!

"I will go out and look at the sky," she finally decided. A crescent moon shone over the valley, and the waves of the sea ran bright with phosphorescence. Somewhere a man, perhaps happily drunk from the wedding, was keeping up a monotonous drumbeat, against the roll of the ocean.

She stayed on the porch a long time. The day was done, but Choon Soo was not tired. She felt rather as if the day had just begun. The house behind her seemed lonely without Yang Ho. She felt reluctant to go in to bed without him, though she knew he would not return even if she waited all night. Choon Soo could not help recalling the wedding night. Nor could she help thinking of Meng Dol, whose story of the wedding was the next best thing to being there herself. She cried to keep her heart hardened against his words of tenderness.

She noted that Meng Dol had not lit a light. The moon perhaps gave light enough for undressing. She could not know whether he had even gone to the new house or whether he was asleep.

The evening grew chillier. Too bad the doors of the new room had not been hung, and she realized suddenly that Yang Ho had undoubtedly not remembered to start a fire under the floor. Of course, the new room was too cold for comfortable sleeping.

She got one of Yang Ho's bedcovers and went in the moonlight to the new room. As she entered the larger room, an oblong piece of moonlight from the door-way showed part of the blanket. Meng Dol was asleep, with his one blanket clutched close around his neck.

For a moment she felt like creeping under the blanket with him and pressing close to his body to give him extra warmth. But no, in the next moment he was only a strange man to whom she was giving shelter. Just a man who needed an extra blanket.

Moving quietly and swiftly, she threw the cover lightly over him and turned to leave.

Meng Dol sat up suddenly and seized her hands. "Don't leave me, please! Please, Choon Soo!"

He drew her down until she fell against his chest, one ear on the throbbing of his heart. He put his arms tight about her.

She tried to raise her head, but his right hand curved over it and pressed it back into the hollow of his shoulder.

"Please, Choon Soo. Remember we are husband and wife."

She began to protest. "After so many years . . ." But she couldn't push herself away -- away from his pleading, away from him.

"Choon Soo," he begged. "Come under the quilt with me, and let us have the mind of a bride and bridegroom."

A thought that had lingered in her mind all day came out in words. "I should not have let you go to our son's wedding in old garments. That was not the conduct of a good wife. Tomorrow," she whispered in a soft, relaxed voice. "tomorrow I will buy you new garments. Silk garments, I will buy..."

**The Last Seventeen Years**  
**Material and Non-material Culture**

**Material Culture**

**Non-Material Culture**

