

**KINO**  
INTERNATIONAL

PRESENTS



# Poetry

A film by Lee Chang-dong  
2010, South Korea, 139 min, 1.85:1

*Best Screenplay*, Cannes International Film Festival  
*Official Selection*, Telluride Film Festival  
*Official Selection*, Toronto International Film Festival  
*Official Selection*, New York Film Festival

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## SYNOPSIS

*(Adapted from text provided by the Toronto International Film Festival)*

Mija (veteran actress Yun Jung-hee) is a beautiful woman in her sixties who moves gracefully through life, contemplating a trivial daily routine that is ill-suited to her refined persona. With elegance and a dash of eccentricity, Mija takes care of her ungrateful grandson Wook (Lee David) and makes a living by cleaning house for an elderly man who, though paralyzed by a stroke, still responds to her charm with bouts of drug-induced arousal.

On a whim, Mija enrolls in a poetry class at the local cultural centre and begins a personal quest to find the perfect words to describe her feelings. However, she's plagued by the onset of Alzheimer's disease, and struggles with new vocabulary and the challenges of the creative process. When her world is turned upside down by the discovery of a monstrous crime, it is Mija's unique and touching poetry that allows her to defy the weight of shame and distance herself from a painful proximity to violence.

## CAST AND CREW

Mija – Yun Jung-hee

Wook – Lee David

Ki-bum's father – Ahn Nae-sang

Mr. Kang (old man) - Kim Hi-ra

Market owner - Kim Gye-sun

Soon-chang's father - Min Bok-gi

Hee-jin's mother - Park Myung-shin

Park Sang-tae - Kim Jong-gu

Kim Yong-tak (poet) - Kim Yong-taek

Cho Mi-hye - Kim Hye-jung

Park Hee-jin - Han Su-young

Jong-chul's father - Lee Jong-yeol

Tae-yeol's father - Park Woo-yeol

Byung-jin's father - Park Joong-shin

Oh Dong-jin (the journalist) - Hong Sung-bum

Written and Directed by Lee Chang-dong

Produced by Lee Joon-dong

Executive Produced by Youm Tae-soon & Choi Seong-min

Co-Executive Produced by Michel Saint-Jean,

Jung Myung-soo, Lee Seung-ho & Lee Jang-ho

Co-Produced by Lee Dong-ha

Cinematography by Kim Hyung-seok

Editing by Kim Hyun

Production Design by Sihm Jeom-hui



### **ABOUT LEE CHANG-DONG (WRITER/DIRECTOR)**

Lee Chang-dong was born in Daegu, South Korea, and studied Korean literature at Kyungbuk University. He began his career as a high school teacher and novelist before co-writing and working as an assistant director on Park Swang-su's *To the Starry Island* (1993) and writing Park's *A Single Spark* (1995). From 2002 to 2004, he served as South Korea's Minister of Culture and Tourism, and he currently teaches directing and screenwriting at the Korean National University of the Arts. His other feature films are *Green Fish* (1996), *Peppermint Candy* (2000), *Oasis* (2002) (winner of the Best Director and Best New Actress awards at the Venice International Film Festival) and *Secret Sunshine* (2007) (winner of the Best Actress award at the Cannes International Film Festival).



### **ABOUT YUN JUNG-HEE (MIJA)**

Born in 1944, Yun Jung-Hee rose to stardom in 1967 with her debut film *Sorrowful Youth*; over the course of her career, she has appeared in over 300 films (including *Mist* (1967), *Legend of Ssarigol* (1968), *Sim Cheong* (1973), *A Splendid Outgoing* (1977) and *Manmubang* (1994)), and she was recently voted the greatest actress in Korean cinema in a public poll. *Poetry* is her first acting role in 16 years.



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

These are times when poetry is dying away.  
Some lament such loss and others claim, "Poetry deserves to die."  
Regardless, people continue to read and write poetry.

What does it mean then to be writing poetry when prospects of an ongoing future seem dismal?  
This is a question I want to pose to the public.

But in fact, it is a question I pose to myself as a filmmaker:  
What does it mean to be making films at times when films are dying away?

## A CONVERSATION WITH LEE CHANG-DONG

*by Claude Mouchard*

**During the process of making a film, when do you decide the film's title? When and how did you come up with the idea of making a film about poetry literally using the title, *Poetry*?**

Normally I decide the film title at a fairly early stage. If I don't do this, I cannot convince myself that the film will be made at all. A few years ago, there was a case in which several teenage boys from a small rural city gang-raped a middle school girl. For quite some time, I'd been thinking about this act of violence, but I wasn't sure how I would tell the story on film.

Then one morning in a hotel room in Kyoto, Japan, I was watching TV when the title, *Poetry*, just came to me. I think it was a TV program made for tourists spending sleepless nights. As I watched the screen playing meditative music to the extremely typical landscape of birds flying over a peaceful river and fishermen throwing their fishnets, it hit me that this film dealing with this insidious crime could have no other title. The main character and plot were conceived almost at the same time. My companion during that trip was an old friend who is a poet. When I told him about the title and the plot I was thinking about, he [told me that he thought it was an] extremely reckless project. He warned me that the several successes I had with my previous films — although they may have only been small successes — had made me overly confident. But strangely enough, his words only reinforced my conviction.

**When did you first think of working with Yun Jung-hee? Will the Korean audience recognize her, or will there be a generation that won't?**

I assume the young audience in their twenties will be unfamiliar with Yun Jung-hee. The generation gap is quite deep in Korean cinema. From the start, or when I thought of a woman in her mid-sixties, I recalled Yun Jung-hee. It came so naturally, as if it was an undoubted fact. It didn't matter that she had been away from the film scene for the past 15 years. The main character's name is Mija, which is in fact Yun Jung-hee's real

name. It wasn't intentional, but a coincidence.

**When did you first come up with the subject of dementia?**

'Dementia' was a word that came to me almost at the same time I thought of all three key elements of the film: the title, *Poetry*; a female character in her sixties attempting for the first time in her life to write a poem; and an old lady bringing up a teenage boy all by herself. As our protagonist learns poetry, she begins to forget words as well. Dementia clearly alludes to death. The poet conducting the lecture never talks about the techniques of poetry writing, but emphasizes scrupulous attention to 'really seeing things.' Likewise, can we relate poetry to film? Yes. 'To see things well' refers to poetry, but it also refers to film as well. Certain films help us see the world in a different light. And some films let us see only what we want to see while others keep us from seeing anything.

**Through the poetry lecture and the 'Love Poetry' group, poetry becomes the central theme of this film. At the same time, I believe the structure of this film has a close relation with poetry. The reason why I prefer this film over your other films is because of the fluidity that connects each moment to one another. Will it do justice to define this as an 'open' film?**

Like a page with a poem on it, I thought of a film with a lot of empty space. This empty space can be filled in by the audience. In this sense, you can say this is an 'open' film.

**For that reason, perhaps you have left the most important part as a blank. When Mija plays badminton for the last time with her grandson, Wook, the detective enters to take Wook away. But it appears that Mija had been expecting him to show up like that. Did Mija report her grandson's crime to him? If so, why did you choose to be unclear about this to the audience?**

Because it is Mija's secret as well as the film's. It is the audience's role to find out what the secret is. Mija would not have wanted to reveal her secret to anyone. However, there are a few but perhaps sufficient hints presented in the film. For example, when we see the detective by her side as she is crying alone outside the restaurant, or when she suddenly treats Wook to pizza, bathes him, cuts his toenails and summons his mother to visit. But I didn't want to show it directly, but suggest it to the audience as a 'morality play' of the medieval ages. The audience can make a choice — or, rather, play a game that requires a moral choice, just like the protagonist has to. Of course such a game can be too subtle for the audience to even recognize.

**In the scene where Mija has sex with Mr. King, is she already thinking of asking him for money? In my opinion, it seems she had come up with the idea afterwards...Was she just granting him his 'last gift' as a man?**

What thoughts go through Mija's mind when she grants the old man this merciful deed? Before she makes her decision to have sex with him, she goes to the river where the girl had died and stands in the rain, deep in contemplation, for quite some time. It must have been deep and complex thoughts that captivated her. She would have brooded over the sexual desires of immature boys that drove a young girl to her death, and the sexual desires of an



old man who begs her to let him be a man for the last time. For some contradictive reason, she decides to grant him this wish. It might have been nothing but pure compassion, but regardless, when she demands to him for money, she dishonors this deed. Sadly enough, it is an inevitable choice she makes.

**I believe this film has a visual echo. For example, the flower works in this way — especially the red flower referring to blood. And then we see the dishwashing basin in Mija’s sink and Mija gazing at the dishwashing basin, and then the poet during a poetry lecture explaining that poetry can be found even in a dishwashing basin. It’s like the film is finding its own rhyme. Likewise, Mija’s hat falling into the water recalls the young girl’s suicide.**

As you have commented, the red flower is related to blood. Beauty is often connected to filthiness. And flowers that are considered beautiful often turn out to be man-made. The hat falling into the river recalls the young girl’s suicide, but moreover, it hints at Mija’s own fate.

**Another related issue is that the conclusion of the film’s narrative is also left as a blank. Where has Mija gone after leaving a single poem? In the last part, when we hear her voice reading her poem, we can merely feel her absence, but we have no clue as to where she has gone.**

That too I want to leave as a blank for the audience to fill in. Yet there is a hint. The flow of the river in the last part of the film emotionally suggests that Mija has accepted the girl’s fate as her own. Like the thoughts evoked from the apricots fallen to the ground.

**When you say that Mija and the young girl’s fate overlaps, does this have any connection to Mija’s last poem, “Agnes’ Song”? And Mija’s voice reading the poem shifts to Heejin’s. Are you suggesting that these two characters have become one?**

Agnes is the dead girl’s baptized name. Accordingly, the one poem Mija leaves to the world is written on behalf of the young girl. In the young girl’s place, Mija speaks what the young girl actually wanted to say to the world. So we can say the two have become one through a poem.

**You asked the question, ‘What is poetry in a time when poetry is dying away?’ And you also commented that it is a question directed toward the cinema in a time when the cinema is dying away. Then are your thoughts on poetry reflected in the film’s ending?**

I just wanted to throw this question at the audience. The audience now holds the key to the answer to this question. Nevertheless, one of my thoughts on poetry is that it sings on behalf of someone’s emotions and thoughts. If someone were to ask me why I make films, I could answer by saying, ‘I am telling your story on your behalf.’