

# **A Single Shard Study Guide**

**A Single Shard by Linda Sue Park**

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# Plot Summary

*A Single Shard* is the Newberry Award winning novel by Linda Sue Park. In this novel, Tree-ear is an orphan who lives under a bridge with Crane-man, a physically disabled man who took him in when Tree-ear was only a small child. Tree-ear is fascinated with the potters in his village, especially Min, and often watches them work. One day Tree-ear goes into Min's yard and investigates the work that he has drying in the sun. When Min comes out and startles Tree-ear, he drops and breaks a box. To pay for his mistake, Tree-ear offers to work for Min for nine days. Nine days turns into eighteen months, changing both Tree-ear and Min's life forever. *A Single Shard* is a story of self-discovery and hope that will inspire readers of all ages.

Tree-ear will often stop at the home of Min, a potter in town who throws his clay in the backyard where Tree-ear can watch without being seen. As Tree-ear watches, he imagines what it would be like to learn to throw a pot. One day, Min has left several pieces of his work in the yard. Tree-ear sneaks over to have a look, so fascinated with a box that contains multiple smaller boxes that he does not hear Min come into the yard. Min begins to beat Tree-ear, accusing him of spying. Tree-ear drops one of the small boxes, shattering it on the ground. Min demands that he leave. Tree-ear begs Min to allow him to work for him for nine days in order to pay for the box.

As Tree-ear arrives for his first day of work, he feels a great deal of excitement at the idea of learning the craft of the potter. However, Min wants Tree-ear to cut wood for the communal kiln. For nine days, Tree-ear cuts wood for Min. When the nine days are over, Tree-ear returns to Min's and requests a continuing job. Min informs Tree-ear that he cannot pay him, but Tree-ear only wants to learn the trade therefore he does not expect payment. Min agrees, sending Tree-ear to the river for clay.

One afternoon word spreads throughout Ch'ulp'o that a royal emissary is coming to offer commissions to the best potters both in their village and another village down the coast. All the potters begin working at a fast pace in order to have their best work ready to display. During this time, Tree-ear notices some odd behavior in another potter, Kang. One night, Tree-ear sneaks up to Kang's work shed and sees him carving out flowers in the side of a vase and then filling the holes with colored clay. Tree-ear wants to tell Min what he has seen, but he is concerned that by doing so he would be stealing from Kang, so he waits.

The day the royal emissary arrives, all the potters set up stalls on the beach filled with their work. Min's is the smallest display but it is one of a few that earns extra attention from the emissary. The emissary leaves, but will return in a month to offer commissions. The potters who received extra attention before again begin working quickly to prepare new samples for the emissary. Tree-ear tells Min about Kang's inlay work. Min immediately begins creating inlays in his own pottery. However, after the pottery is fired in the kiln, it all comes out with brown stains that sometimes appear in the finish. Min breaks them all and prepares to start over. Unfortunately, the emissary arrives before he can create anything new. The emissary offers to give Min a commission if he can bring a

sample to the capital city, but Min confesses that he believes he is too old for such a trip.

Tree-ear overhears the conversation between Min and the emissary. Tree-ear offers to take a sample of Min's work to Songdo for him, as a gift to Min's wife who has befriended and cared for Tree-ear over the past year. Once again, Min works quickly to create two melon shaped vases with intricate, inlaid flowers along the side. Crane-man is hired to create a basket that will carry the vases without breaking them. After taking care to be sure Crane-man will be cared for during his absence, Tree-ear sets off alone for the capital city.

Tree-ear walks for days alone, sleeping in the homes of strangers, or alone in the woods. When Tree-ear reaches the city of Puyo, he goes up to a mountain cliff where it is said a group of women jumped off to the river below to prevent capture by an invading army. At the top of this cliff, Tree-ear is attacked by two robbers who steal all his coins. The two robbers also take the vases and throw them over the edge of the cliff to the river below. After they have gone, Tree-ear rushes down to the river to check on the fate of the vases. Both vases are broken but one has broken in large pieces, allowing Tree-ear to take a single shard and continue his journey.

When Tree-ear arrives in Songdo, he talks his way into a meeting with the emissary. Tree-ear reveals his attack by the robbers and then shows the single shard. Despite the incredulity of the emissary's assistant, Min is offered a commission and Tree-ear is given safe passage home on a ship. Once home, Tree-ear goes directly to the home of Min to tell him about the commission. Min has news for Tree-ear as well. Crane-man died a few days before when a farmer's cart forced him over the side of the bridge and into the cold water. Tree-ear is devastated by this news and afraid for his own future. However, Min's wife tells him that he is to move in with her and her husband. Later, Min reveals that he intends to teach Tree-ear, now known as Hyung-pil, the art of pottery.

# Chapters 1-2

## Chapters 1-2 Summary

This novel is set in the twelfth century on the western coast of Korea. It features a type of pottery known as celadon or a pottery known for its jade green glaze. The novel was inspired by a vase known as the Thousand Cranes Vase, which is a vase dated to this century that has dozens of cranes inlaid inside medallions surrounded by clouds where yet more cranes fly.

In Chapter 1, Tree-ear was out scavenging in rubbish heaps for food when he came up behind a farmer whose rice container had sprung a leak. Tree-ear told the farmer about the hole. The farmer was so grateful that he allowed Tree-ear to take the spilled rice home. Crane-man, Tree-ear's guardian, is happy about the rice, but happier with Tree-ear's honorable behavior. That night, as a kind of reward, Crane-man once again tells Tree-ear the story of how he came to him. Tree-ear's parents had died in the capital city, Songdo. A monk there sent Tree-ear with some travelers to Ch'ulp'o in hopes of finding an uncle who lived there. When the travelers could not find the uncle, they took Tree-ear to the local monastery, but there was illness there as well. The travelers were told to take Tree-ear to Crane-man, a physically disabled man living under a bridge, until the monks could retrieve him. When they finally came a few months later, Tree-ear refused to leave and Crane-man had kept him for more than ten years.

In Chapter 2, Tree-ear goes to the home of Min, the best potter in Ch'ulp'o, to watch him throw his pottery. However, Min is not in the yard. Unable to resist, Tree-ear sneaks into the yard to get a closer look at Min's work. Tree-ear inspects a duck shaped water dropper, a melon shaped bowl, and a box that contains more, smaller boxes. As Tree-ear is holding one of the smaller boxes, Min comes out of the house and begins beating him about the head with his cane. Tree-ear drops the small box and it shatters on the ground. Min complains that Tree-ear has just ruined several days of work. Tree-ear requests that he be allowed to work nine days to repay Min for the broken box. Min reluctantly agrees. The next morning, Tree-ear arrives at Min's, eager to learn the potter's trade. Therefore, Tree-ear is deeply disappointed when Min sends him into the woods to chop wood for the communal kiln. It is hard work and Tree-ear gets a bad blister on his hand that Crane-man quietly cleans and bandages.

## Chapters 1-2 Analysis

These chapters introduce the main characters of the novel. First is Tree-ear, a young orphan in a time when being an orphan was considered bad luck for anyone who befriended him. This leaves Tree-ear isolated. Compounding this, Tree-ear lives with a disabled man who cannot work, therefore they depend on the kindness of strangers and whatever supplies they can steal or beg. This is a difficult life for a young child.



However, Tree-ear has dreams like anyone else. Tree-ear wants to be a potter like Min, a talented potter Tree-ear admires.

Also introduced in these chapters are Crane-man and Min. Crane-man is a man who was born with a deformed leg that has left him unable to do any work. In fact, Crane-man was supposed to die as a child, but he surprised everyone by growing to old age. Unfortunately, Crane-man has outlived all his relatives and been forced to give up his home to live under a bridge. Crane-man is a good man, though, and he has taught Tree-ear strong values. Tree-ear also admires Min, a potter whom he would like to learn from. Min is also an old man who is angry and rarely speaks more than he needs to. This promises to be a difficult relationship that could be deeply rewarding for both Tree-ear and Min.



## Chapters 3-4

### Chapters 3-4 Summary

In Chapter 3, Min yells at Tree-ear for leaving the wood outside his house the night before rather than taking it to the kiln sight. Then Min sends Tree-ear to collect more wood. Over the next eight days, Tree-ear cuts wood and delivers it as requested. Crane-man offers to help, but Tree-ear refuses. When his nine days are up, Tree-ear returns to Min's and asks to be given a job. Min tells Tree-ear he cannot afford to pay him, but he gives him a job anyway. Tree-ear is sent to collect clay that day. The process of cutting the clay from the river bank is difficult, but Tree-ear learns it quickly. As he is cutting clay the first day, Tree-ear recalls that as his employer, Min has to feed him the mid-day meal. Tree-ear rushes back and is excited by the warm meal. That night, Tree-ear returns to his bridge and discovers that Crane-man broke his crutch trying to catch a flounder. Tree-ear feels guilty that he did not attempt to save some of his mid-day meal for his friend and decides the next day to bring his own bowl so that he might save half the food for Crane-man.

In Chapter 4, Tree-ear hides his bowl in the garden only to return several hours later to discover an animal has eaten all the leftover food. Tree-ear finds a more secure place to hide the bowl. After several days, Tree-ear is surprised to find that the bowl has been refilled during the day. During this time, Tree-ear is assigned to the drain pits where he mixes the clay with water, runs it through a sieve, and drains it to prepare it both for the wheel and for the glaze. It is tedious work that Tree-ear feels is made more difficult by Min's stubborn insistence that the clay be processed more than four or five times in some instances. Time passes quickly, with Tree-ear rotating from cutting wood, to cutting clay and draining the clay.

### Chapters 3-4 Analysis

The true desperation under which Tree-ear and Crane-man lives is made clearer in these chapters as first Crane-man breaks his crutch in his attempt to get a flounder for their dinner and later when Tree-ear tries to save half his midday meal to feed Crane-man at night. It is also made clear in these chapters that Min is a crabby old man, but his wife is a kind woman who has begun refilling Tree-ear's bowl without his knowledge in order to help him share his good luck with his friend, Crane-man. This foreshadows a kindness that will create a loving relationship between these two characters.

Tree-ear wants nothing more than to learn how to throw a pot. However, as his job with Min continues, Tree-ear finds himself relegated to the more difficult tasks of preparing the clay and cutting wood for the communal kiln. Tree-ear shows his faith in humanity, however, as he continues to go to work everyday without complaint.

# Chapters 5-6

## Chapters 5-6 Summary

In Chapter 5, Tree-ear is on his way to work early one morning and he sees Kang, another potter, sneaking off to the kiln. This suggests that Kang has created some form of pottery he does not want anyone to see. Tree-ear attempts to see what this might be, but the pottery is not at the kiln sight several days later when the kiln is emptied. Over the next few months, Crane-man spends his time weaving baskets and mats from rice straw. Crane-man makes Tree-ear a pair of sandals, but Tree-ear has grown so quickly that the sandals no longer fit when Crane-man finishes them. Winter arrives and Tree-ear knows that he and Crane-man will have to move from the bridge to their temporary vegetable shed soon. One day Min's wife brings Tree-ear a pair of pants and a jacket that were once meant for her son but he never wore them before he died. Tree-ear deeply appreciates the gesture, but he gives the jacket to Crane-man to help him stay warm as well. About this same time, Tree-ear snuck up to Kang's workshop and saw him carving out flowers and filling in the carvings with colored clay.

In Chapter 6, word reaches Ch'ulp'o that a royal emissary will be coming to their village and the village of Kangjin to offer commissions to the best potters. With this news, all the potters in town begin working quickly to create pieces that they hope will win them a commission. Tree-ear wants to tell Min about the inlay work Kang is doing, but is afraid by telling this he is stealing from Kang, so he keeps quiet. The day before the emissary is to inspect everyone's work, Tree-ear works with the other potter's apprentices to set up his master's display space. Min orders Tree-ear to set it up so that the emissary will be looking at the pottery with the sea behind it. As everyone sets up their stalls, a crowd is attracted to Kang's stall. Tree-ear is among this crowd. Although Kang's pottery is flawed, his work with the inlay is impressive. This worries Tree-ear. The emissary comes and spends a long time at Kang's stall. However, he also lingers at Min's stall. Afterward, the emissary leaves to visit the other village. He will return soon and announce who has won the commissions.

## Chapters 5-6 Analysis

These chapters focus more on the pottery than previous chapters. In these chapters, Tree-ear witnesses the strange behavior of another potter that leads him to discover that this potter has begun experimenting with inlay. Tree-ear is greatly impressed and is afraid that this inlay work will earn the less talented potter to get a commission in Min's place. However, Tree-ear knows that if Min were to attempt this work he would be sure to get a commission. Unfortunately, Tree-ear's strong sense of morals prevents him from telling Min what he has seen. It is ironic that Tree-ear feels free to spy, but does not feel free to share what he has learned.



To win a commission from the royal palace is something all potters want and something Min needs in order to allow him to survive working at the slow pace in which he works. However, Kang threatens this for Min, leaving Tree-ear uncertain for both their futures. This foreshadows a moment when Tree-ear will tell Min of this work and Min will take it to a much higher level than that that Kang works at. How this will turn out, the reader does not know yet, but hopes will bring all that is desired to both characters.

# Chapters 7-8

## Chapters 7-8 Summary

In Chapter 7, Tree-ear tells Min about the inlay work Kang has been doing. Min sends Tree-ear to gather colored clay. As Tree-ear prepares the clay, he finally discovers he can feel the difference in the well processed clay over the lesser worked clay. Min makes multiple versions of the same pot in hopes that one of the pots will survive the firing process without the browning that inexplicably affects the glaze of many pots. Tree-ear and Min sneak the pots into the kiln early in the morning and then Min stays at the site for the multiple days it take to finish the pots. When they are complete, Tree-ear and Min take the pots out under the cover of darkness, unable to see the finish until morning. The next morning Tree-ear arrives at Min's to discover that the pots were all flawed and Min has destroyed them.

In Chapter 8, Min begins work on new pots but the emissary returns before he has completely thrown them. The emissary gives Kang a commission, news that travels quickly through the village. The emissary then visits Min, but is disappointed to learn he has nothing new to show. The emissary tells Min if he can produce something with the same type of inlay that Kang has done, he can bring it to Songdo to show him. However, Min is concerned that he is too old to make such a journey. Tree-ear hears this conversation. Later, in the yard, Tree-ear tells Min's wife that he would gladly make the journey to Songdo. Min's wife agrees to tell this to Min if he will promise to return safely and if he will agree to call her Ajima, a familiar term of affection. Min agrees. When Tree-ear tells of this journey to Crane-man, Crane-man is proud of Tree-ear's courage and agrees to make him extra sandals for the trip. A few days later, Tree-ear asks Min if he will ever teach him to throw a pot. Min says that he could only teach his son and Tree-ear is not his son.

## Chapters 7-8 Analysis

In these chapters, Min works hard to make a pot with the same type of inlay Kang has done but only better. Min's hard work shows the reader that he really wants the royal commission and he knows that this is the best way to do it. However, Min is a perfectionist, so that when all the pots come out with discoloration in the glaze, he breaks them all even though he knows he does not have time to make another. When the emissary comes, Min gives up his only chance at a commission. Tree-ear, however, wants to repay Min's wife for all her kindnesses and he knows that her husband's success is the only thing she wants, so he agrees to make the trip to Songdo that could still win Min the commission. This shows Tree-ear's depth of character and the growing relationship between him and Min's wife.

At the same time, Tree-ear has continued to hope that Min will one day show him how to throw a pot even though he has worked for him nearly a year and has not been

shown a single technique. However, when Tree-ear asks Min, Min becomes upset and refuses to show him because this is a skill that is passed down from father to son. This underscores the fact that Tree-ear is an orphan and that Min thinks of him only as an employee, not a friend or surrogate child.

# Chapters 9-10

## Chapters 9-10 Summary

In Chapter 9, Tree-ear is deeply upset about Min's refusal to teach him. However, while sitting at the draining site a few days later, Tree-ear realizes that he is good at molding clay and that is not throwing pottery, therefore it is something he should be allowed to learn. Over the next few months, Min slowly begins working on the vases that he will allow Tree-ear to carry to Songdo for him. It takes until early fall, but the vases are finally ready. Crane-man is hired to make a basket that will carry the vases easily without breaking them. Min's wife asks Crane-man to come work for her while Tree-ear is gone but his pride will not allow him to take the job. Tree-ear becomes upset with Crane-man and tries to convince him that he needs to care for Min's wife in Tree-ear's absence. Crane-man sees through the ruse, but agrees to work for Min's wife in order to receive a meal daily. On the night before he leaves, Tree-ear gives Crane-man a monkey he molded out of clay and snuck into the kiln. Crane-man ties it with a string to his belt so that he might have it with him always.

In Chapter 10, Tree-ear is on the sixth day of his journey when he reaches a point where he must sleep alone in the woods. Tree-ear is nervous, especially when it grows dark. As Tree-ear attempts to sleep, he hears a noise in the woods. Tree-ear crawls into a space between two massive rocks and sees a fox enter his campsite. Tree-ear, afraid the fox will mesmerize him and cause him to go to his lair, closes his eyes. When Tree-ear opens his eyes, he discovers he fell asleep and survived the entire night without injury from the fox. A days walk from the next village, Tree-ear comes to the city of Puyo. Puyo was once the capital. Under siege from enemy armies, the King and his guard, as well as the ladies of the palace, were forced up a cliff where they awaited the invading army. As the army approached, the ladies jumped to their death in the river below for fear of what might happen to them if they were captured. This spot is known as the Rock of the Falling Flowers. Tree-ear has promised Crane-man he will go see it.

## Chapters 9-10 Analysis

Min makes two more pots and Tree-ear prepares to take them to Songdo. Before leaving, Tree-ear, true to his nature, arranges for Crane-man to receive at least one meal a day at the home of Min's wife in exchange for some simple work. Crane-man is too proud to accept at first, but later agrees when he sees how important it is to Tree-ear, showing the reader the depth of their relationship. At the same time, Tree-ear gives Crane-man a monkey he made that again shows their great affection for one another, but also shows how strong Tree-ear's talent for working with clay is.

Tree-ear begins his journey and survives a frightening night with a fox. This gives Tree-ear a great deal of courage. Foreshadowed here is Crane-man's request that Tree-ear go to the Rock of Falling Flowers, a historic location in a city Tree-ear must pass

through. It seems to the reader that this stop might be dangerous for a boy walking alone, an isolated place that could invite trouble from wild animals or even immoral people.

# Chapters 11-13

## Chapters 11-13 Summary

In Chapter 11, Tree-ear climbs to the top of Rock of the Falling Flowers and tries to remember everything he sees so that he can tell Crane-man about it. While he is there, Tree-ear is joined by another man who begins asking him strange questions. Tree-ear quickly realizes this man is a robber. The man grabs Tree-ear's jiggeh and tries to take it from him. Tree-ear is successful in fighting this man, but then he is joined by another robber. The second robber grabs Tree-ear and holds him while the first man inspects the jiggeh's contents. They find the vases and Tree-ear's meager coins. Before leaving, the two men throw the vases over the side of the cliff. Tree-ear is devastated and unsure what he should do next. Tree-ear begins to hope that the second vase did not break. Tree-ear goes to the river below and finds the tiny remnants of the first vase. On the beach, Tree-ear finds the second vase, which is broken in larger pieces. Tree-ear takes the larges and carefully places it in a pouch on his belt to carry to Songdo.

In Chapter 12, Tree-ear arrives in Songdo with single-minded determination. At the gate to the palace, Tree-ear insists on meeting with the royal emissary for pottery ware. At first the guards hesitate, but finally retrieve the emissary's assistant. Again the assistant puts up resistance, but Tree-ear insists. When Tree-ear is finally allowed to see the emissary, he explains about the robbers and then shows the emissary the single shard he was able to save. The emissary immediately arranges passage for Tree-ear back to Ch'ulp'o so that he might tell Min he has been given a royal commission.

In Chapter 13, Tree-ear returns to Ch'ulp'o, excited to tell Min the news of his royal commission. When he arrives, Tree-ear is directed to the draining site by Min's wife. There, Min receives the news of the commission in silence. Then Min tells Tree-ear that Crane-man was killed a few days earlier when he was forced into the river by a large farmer's cart. The cold was too much for his heart. Min's wife allows Tree-ear to spend the night in their home. The following morning, Tree-ear wakes early and walks to the river where he mourns for his good friend. Tree-ear hopes that wherever Crane-man is, he has at least two whole legs now. Back at Min's house, Min's wife tells Tree-ear that he is to live with them from now on as long as he agrees to allow them to change his name to Hyung-pil, an honorable name that should have been reserved for the sibling of their dead child. Min then tells Tree-ear to go retrieve large pieces of wood so that they might make him a wheel to learn to throw pots on.

## Chapters 11-13 Analysis

In these chapters, Tree-ear faces danger from a couple of robbers. However, true to Tree-ear's character, he does not give up and go home out of fear. Instead, he finds a single shard and continues his journey. Tree-ear's persistence pays off and Min is given

the royal commission he so needed to continue surviving as a potter. Tree-ear has done what he set out to do, giving back to the Min's what he could not repay in any other way.

Tree-ear returns home to discover the only man he has only known as a father has died. Tree-ear is now without a home, without love, without protection. However, almost immediately Min and his wife make it clear to Tree-ear that they now consider him their child. Tree-ear will now learn to throw pots like Min and might someday make a prunus vase as he has always wanted to do. Maybe it was even Tree-ear who made the Thousand Cranes Vase.

# Characters

## Tree-ear

Tree-ear is a young orphan who lives in the seaside village of Ch'ulp'o in Korea. Tree-ear was orphaned when his parents died from an illness. Tree-ear was brought to Ch'ulp'o in the hopes of finding an uncle to care for him but the uncle could not be found. Tree-ear was placed with Crane-man, a man who lives under a bridge until he could be taken to the monastery. However, when the monks came for little Tree-ear, he refused to leave his new companion.

Tree-ear does not know for sure how old he is but assumes he is around twelve because he has been with Crane-man ten years and was about two when he came to him. Tree-ear does not know what his name was before Crane-man took him. Instead, Crane-man gave him the name of a mushroom that grows without a parent seed on dead trees, a name he felt fit an orphan.

Tree-ear greatly admires the potters who live in the village. Tree-ear often stops to watch them while searching through rubbish heaps for his next meal. Tree-ear particularly likes to watch Min because he does not attempt to hide his art in a shed and because he is one of the most talented potters in the village. It is through Tree-ear's admiration for Min that he comes to break one of his pots and offers to work for him to pay off the debt. Eventually Tree-ear is able to prove his worth to Min and is taken into the family as a sort of adoptee.

## Crane-man

Crane-man is a Korean man who was born with a deformed leg that causes him to look like a crane when he stands up right. Crane-man walks with a crutch. It was once thought that Crane-man would die as a child, but he defied the odds and survived into old age. However, Crane-man outlived his family and was unable to work and therefore he soon found himself homeless. Crane-man came to live under the bridge when a fox frightened him away from the path to the monastery.

Crane-man is a strong man who has a good moral base. Crane-man often talks with Tree-ear about his behavior, reinforcing good behavior while attempting to dissuade Tree-ear from bad behavior. As a result, Tree-ear grows up to be a strong and moral child. When Crane-man dies in a freak accident, Tree-ear feels as though he has been left without his main source of affection and protection.



## **Min**

Min is a potter. Min works alone and often throws his pots many times before finding one that lives up to his expectations. Min also makes many replicas of his work in case one should have a flaw in the glaze after the firing in the kiln.

Min has lost a child and is not happy to have Tree-ear working for him. Min does not want to lose another child and so he is often hard and mean to Tree-ear. In fact, when Tree-ear asks to learn his trade, Min refuses on the grounds that Tree-ear is not his own son. This causes Tree-ear a great deal of pain, but he continues to work for Min, even going to the capital of Korea in order to show the Royal Emissary of Pottery Ware in hopes that he will give him a royal commission.

## **Min's Wife, Ajima**

Min has a wife whom Tree-ear meets when he becomes a full-fledged employee for Min. Min's wife comes out and gives Tree-ear his midday meal each day and is also the one who gives Tree-ear warm clothes when winter approaches. In time, Tree-ear and Min's wife develop a close relationship. In fact, Min's wife encourages Tree-ear to call her Ajima, a name that is like aunt and is reserved for highly respected adult family members. Tree-ear is deeply touched by this gesture. Later, when Tree-ear returns from Songdo, Ajima gives him the name Hyung-pil and asks him to live with her and Min.

## **Royal Emissary for Pottery Wares, Kim**

The Royal Emissary for Pottery Wares, a man known as Kim, comes to Ch'ulp'o looking for a potter to give a royal commission to. Kim shows a great deal of interest in Min's work, but would like for it to include the inlay work that Kang has shown. Kim is disappointed when Min cannot show him any work with inlays and returns to Songdo. Later, Tree-ear makes the trip to Songdo to bring Kim some of Min's work but an attack by robbers leave Tree-ear with only a single shard to show Kim. Kim offers Min the commission anyway.

## **Kang**

Kang is another potter in Ch'ulp'o. Kang begins working with inlays and using colored clay to make the inlays stand out. Tree-ear sees Kang doing this work, but he is afraid that telling anyone would be stealing from Kang. As a result, Tree-ear keeps this information to himself until after Kang places his new work on display for the Royal Emissary. Kang receives a commission from the emissary and his work is quickly replicated throughout Korea.



## Robbers in Puyo

When Tree-ear arrives in Puyo during his journey to Songdo, he goes up to the Rock of the Falling Flowers as he promised Crane-man he would do. Two men follow Tree-ear up the cliff and try to steal his jiggeh from him. These two men easily overpower Tree-ear and take what little money he has. The men then throw the two pots that Tree-ear is carrying to Songdo off the cliff, shattering them on the rocks below.

## Monks

There are a group of monks who live in the hills over Ch'ulp'o. These monks will often take in people who have become homeless, giving them shelter until they can move out on their own or they take their vows to become monks as well. When Tree-ear first arrived in Ch'ulp'o as a toddler, he was to go to the monks after it was discovered his uncle no longer lived in the village but the monastery had been struck with illness. Tree-ear was taken to Crane-man as a result. The monks eventually came back for Tree-ear but he refused to go with them.

## Hyung-gu

Hyung-gu was the name of Min's son. When Hyung-gu was about twelve years old or Tree-ear's age, he became sick and died. Min is heartbroken over the death of his son and he refuses to teach Tree-ear to be a potter based on the tradition that potter's pass their skills down to their sons. However, after Tree-ear returns to Ch'ulp'o after the death of Crane-man, Min and his wife take Tree-ear in, changing his name to Hyung-pil. The fact that both names share a syllable is a great honor for Tree-ear because this sharing of syllables is normally reserved for siblings.

## Royal Emissary for Pottery Wares' Assistant

The Royal Emissary for Pottery Ware has an assistant who helps him in his job. It is this assistant who was called when Tree-ear came to the palace gates asking to see the emissary. This assistant allows Tree-ear inside the gate under the belief that he has some wares to show the emissary, therefore he is deeply angered when he learns that the boy has only a single shard. The assistant is double outraged when he learns his boss is going to offer a royal commission based on that single shard. However, Tree-ear and Min get what they wanted despite the outrage of this young man.

# Objects/Places

## Rice

Rice is a main staple of the Korean diet during this time period. Tree-ear spends a great deal of time gathering rice after the local harvest for himself and Crane-man to eat.

## Clay

Tree-ear harvests clay from the local river that will be used to make both the pots and the glaze that the potters use.

## Wood

Tree-ear spends the first nine days he works for Min to cut wood for the community kiln.

## Crutch

Crane-man walks with a crutch that he carves himself.

## Sandals

Crane-man makes Tree-ear sandals out of rice straw.

## Monkey

Tree-ear molds a monkey out of clay for Crane-man before he leaves for his journey to Songdo.

## Gourd

Tree-ear has a bowl made from a gourd that he brings to Min's every day for his midday meal so that he can save half and share it with Crane-man.

## Jiggeh

A jiggeh is a contraption that is used like a backpack. Tree-ear uses a jiggeh to carry the straw container that holds the two pots Min has made to show the emissary in Songdo.



## Chrysanthemums

Tree-ear sees Kang carving out chrysanthemums on a wine glass and filling the holes in with colored clay.

## Straw Container

Crane-man creates a basket-like container to carry the pots Min has made to be shown to the emissary in Songdo. This basket-like container is extra strong so that the pots will not break.

## Ch'ulp'o

Ch'ulp'o is a small village on the western coast of Korea that is mostly populated by potters.

## Songdo

Songdo is the capital of Korea at the time the novel is set and where the royal palace is located. Tree-ear walks to Songdo to show the Royal Emissary of Pottery Ware Min's pottery with inlays.

# Themes

## Family

Tree-ear is an orphan. From a very early age, Tree-ear has lived with Crane-man, a homeless man who can barely care for himself let alone take care of a young child. However, Crane-man is a good man and he raises Tree-ear to the best of his ability. Tree-ear learns a strong sense of morality from Crane-man that becomes his compass as he moves through the common trials of life.

Min and his wife once had a son. This was their only child and a child who was deeply loved by them both. However, the child died when he was about Tree-ear's age and left a hole in the Min family. For this reason, Min has difficulty allowing himself to care about another child, particularly Tree-ear.

It is traditional in Korea that the sons of potters learn their father's trade because there was once a shortage of potters. This tradition has continued for hundreds of years. Tree-ear wants to become a potter but when he asks Min to teach him, Min points out that Tree-ear is not his son and therefore he will not teach him. This crushes Tree-ear's hopes for his own future. Tree-ear proves himself first by molding a monkey for Crane-man and then by walking all the way to Songdo to secure a royal commission for Min. Min and his wife then essentially adopt Tree-ear, making him a part of their family at long last.

## Ambition

Tree-ear is a homeless boy at the beginning of the novel with a deep desire to learn to be a potter. Tree-ear has a deep sense of ambition, often dreaming of the things he will make when he becomes a potter. Tree-ear's biggest desire is to make a vase known as a prunus vase, which is a vase that is a traditional decoration in Korea. Tree-ear wants to make the most beautiful prunus vase ever made and perhaps one with an inlaid design on the side. This is an ambitious undertaking, especially for a boy who is an orphan with no hope of ever learning the trade.

Kang has ambition too. Kang wants to secure a royal commission. However, Kang's work is not as good as others, especially when compared to Min's work. For this reason, Kang turns his attention to creating unusual work. One of these is inlay work using colored clays that have previously been deemed unsuitable for throwing pots. Kang makes chrysanthemums on the side of a wine glass that are inlaid and filled with white and red clay that will fire into white and black. It is an ambitious creation that does earn Kang a temporary royal commission and inspires other potters to create similar works.

## Loss

Min and his wife have lost their child. This loss has left a hole in the hearts of the older couple that each fills in a different way. Min deals with his grief by throwing himself into his work, creating more complicated yet delicate work. Min's wife deals with her grief by taking an orphan boy, Tree-ear, into her heart and providing for him as best as she can. In the end, Tree-ear manages to break through this grief and give Min and his wife hope for the future. In fact, Min and his wife eventually adopt Tree-ear, giving him the new name of Hyung-pil, which is a name that represents his status as sibling to the child they once lost.

Tree-ear also deals with grief in this novel. Tree-ear has lost his parents but they died when he was so young that he does not remember them. In their place, Tree-ear has always had Crane-man, the homeless man who adopted him when he was still a toddler. Tree-ear has never known any other family but Crane-man. Crane-man teaches Tree-ear how to forage for food and the morality that Tree-ear will use as a compass his whole life. When Tree-ear walks to Songdo for Min, he makes sure that Crane-man is well cared for. However when he returns, Tree-ear learns that Crane-man has died. While Tree-ear tries to be happy for his friend in the belief that he will now have two whole legs and a perpetually full belly, he still misses his friend and worries about his own future. It is a loss that Tree-ear will feel for a long time in his young life.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written in the third-person point of view. The main character, Tree-ear, is the narrating character. Tree-ear tells his tale by sharing his thoughts and emotions with the reader as the events of the plot continuously unfold around him. The point of view of this novel have some aspects of the omniscient with the author allowing the reader to see Tree-ear's thoughts and emotions, but there is also something of the authorial voice in this novel that creates something of a distance between the reader and the narrating character.

The point of view of this novel works well with the plot because it shows the story through the eyes of the main character, a child who is attempting to survive a difficult life by bettering himself and learning a trade. The author allows the reader to develop a level of intimacy with the main character, causing the reader to feel great concern about Tree-ear's future. However, the author tells her story in such a way as to make it feel as if the retelling of someone else's story, causing some distance between reader and character that gives the novel a sense of history. This sense of history is important in this novel because it is a novel about the history of Korean pottery, therefore the point of view of this novel works well with the plot.

## Setting

The novel is set in twelfth century Korea. This setting is an ancient one that deals with the culture and traditions of its time. The author introduces a whole village of people who lived in this time period and lived an existence that is not unlike a rural community in the modern world. The author focuses on the potters of this time who specialized in a type of pottery known as celadon or a pottery easily recognized by its pale green and almost jade glaze. The pottery in this novel becomes a focus of the main characters, becoming something of a character in its own right in the plot.

The setting of the novel is important because it helps set up the conflict that will drive the plot to its conclusion. The novel was inspired by a prunus vase found many years ago that has been dated to this time and place. For this reason, the setting of the novel is essential in establishing the story the author wanted to tell. The setting is also important because there are traditions about this time period that impact the main character of the novel. For example, the main character complains at one point that most of the children of the village avoid him because he is an orphan and orphans are considered unlucky. For this reason and many others, the setting of this novel is essential to the overall plot.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is simple English that is aimed at young readers. The language of this novel contains a few Korean words that the reader will not recognize but are explained by their use in the novel. For example, the word jiggeh is used to describe a backpack type contraption that Tree-ear uses to carry vases to Songdo. This word is not literally defined in the novel but its use makes it clear to the reader what it is supposed to mean. There are a few other words in the novel that are also of the Korean language, but each of these words are carefully defined in their use.

The language of this novel is simple because it is designed for a younger reader to read. The language includes words of a foreign language, necessary to the writer's setting and the circumstances of the characters in the plot. Most readers should have little trouble understanding these words, however, because each one is used in such a way in the plot that the reader is either given an immediate description of the words meaning, or the reader understands how the characters use the word and this offers a definition. Overall, the language of the novel is simple, easy to understand, and should give readers of all ages no trouble understanding it.

## Structure

The novel is divided into thirteen chapters. The beginning of the book gives a brief description of the setting of the novel, helping set the stage for the reader. The end of the book offers a brief description of the Thousand Cranes Vase that inspired the author to write this novel. The novel is written in both exposition and dialogue, giving the reader a full understanding of each conflict the characters find themselves in.

The novel has one main plot. The main plot follows Tree-ear, an orphan, as he comes to work for a potter and yearns to learn his master's trade. There are a few subplots included in the main plot. One subplot shows the relationship between Tree-ear and the man who raised him, Crane-man. Another subplot shows the developing relationship between Tree-ear and the wife of his master, Min. Each subplot comes to a satisfying conclusion as the main plot reaches its own conclusion.



## Quotes

"Tree-ear was so called after the mushroom that grew in wrinkled half-circles on dead or fallen tree trunks, emerging from the rotten wood without benefit of parent seed"

(Chapter 1, pg. 7.)

"Like most of the potter's villages, Ch'ulp'o had a communal kiln. Set on the hillside just outside the center of the village, it looked like a long, low tunnel made of hardened clay"

(Chapter 2, pg. 19)

"He knew that Crane-man had already guessed there would be no rest that day. There was still eight days' work to be done for Min" (Chapter 2, pg. 24.)

"Of one thing he was certain: The feast-day banquets in the palace of the King could never better the modest meal before him, for he had earned it" (Chapter 3, pg. 34.)

"This was his greatest satisfaction. The meals provided by Min's wife were simple, but they never failed to delight his friend, who opened the gourd parcel each evening as if it were a gift of royal jewels" (Chapter 4, pg. 41.)

"Tree-ear knew that potters sometimes attempted to paint designs on their work using colored slip. But the attempts were far from successful" (Chapter 5, pg. 51.)

"The royal emissary was on a tour to assign pottery commissions for the palace!"

(Chapter 6, pg. 61.)

"Tree-ear saw the potter's eyes, fierce with grief and rage. Min chocked out the last words: 'You are not my son'" (Chapter 8, pg. 95.)

"I will tell you this. Of all the problems you may meet on your journey, it will be people who are the greatest danger. But it will also be people to whom you must turn if ever you are in need of aid. Remember this, my friend, and you will travel well" (Chapter 9, pg. 107.)

"Kang's designs - already seen and admired and replicated for sale on the streets of Puyo" (Chapter 10, pg. 119.)

"His every movement was quick with purpose; to hesitate was to doubt. He had made up his mind: he would journey on to Songdo and show the emissary the single shard" (Chapter 11, pg. 130.)

"There were some things that could not be molded into words" Chapter 12, pg. 139.)

## Topics for Discussion

Who is Tree-ear? What happened to his parents? Why does he live under a bridge? How does Tree-ear spend his days? Why does he begin working for Min? Why does Tree-ear become excited at the idea of working with Min? How does Tree-ear become dissatisfied with his job with Min? What changes this?

Who is Min? What is his trade? Why does he hire Tree-ear to work for him? What does Tree-ear do for him? Why is Min a dark and mean old man? Is he unhappy in his work? In his life? Why? Why does Min refuse to teach Tree-ear his trade? How does Tree-ear take this news? Why does Tree-ear agree to go to Songdo for Min? Does he achieve the goal he set out to achieve? How?

Who is Min's wife? Why does she befriend Tree-ear? How does Tree-ear's bowl continuously get refilled? For what reason? Why does Min's wife give Tree-ear warm clothing? What does Tree-ear do with it? What name does Min's wife encourage Tree-ear to call her and for what reason? How does Tree-ear feel about this? What does this suggest about the way Min's wife feels for Tree-ear?

Who is Crane-man? Why is he called Crane-man? How did Crane-man come to take custody of Tree-ear? How does Crane-man feel about Tree-ear? How does Crane-man feel about Tree-ear working for Min? Why does Crane-man refuse to take a job with Min's wife when Tree-ear is to leave town? Why does Crane-man tell Tree-ear that he turned away from the monastery when he needed help? How did this decision lead Crane-man to take custody of Tree-ear?

Who is Kang? How does he invent a new way of decorating pottery? Why? What does this new technique earn Kang? Is this fair to the other potters? How does Kang's new method impact Min? Whose pottery is better, Kang's or Min's and for what reason?

What is celadon pottery? How is it different from other types of pottery of this time period? How was pottery created in this time period? How is that different from how it is created in modern times? Why did Min often make multiple replicas of his pottery? What caused some of these pots to be unacceptable? Is Min too much of a perfectionist? Discuss in detail.

What is a royal commission? What could this mean to a potter such as Min? Why does the Royal Emissary refuse to give Min a commission until he can see his inlay work? Why does Min not show the royal emissary his first round of inlaid pots? Does Min not want a royal commission? Why does Tree-ear agree to go to Songdo for Min? Is this trip successful? What is ironic about it?