

What is Korean Literature?



Youngmin Kwon
and Bruce Fulton

KOREA RESEARCH MONOGRAPH 37

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Youngmin Kwon and Bruce Fulton



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Preface

What is Korean literature? More specifically, what is Korean about Korean literature? These are questions the junior member of this authorial team (Bruce Fulton; hereafter BF) asks annually to the students in his survey courses in traditional and modern Korean literature at the University of British Columbia. He doesn't expect definitive answers, only that we begin to engage critically with a millennia-old literary tradition that still struggles for recognition beyond the Korean Peninsula.

In the English-speaking world, the academic field of Korean literature is top-heavy with specialists in modern fiction, with the literature and culture of colonial Korea an ongoing focus for many. Few of us offer instruction in all periods and all genres of Korean literature, as Peter H. Lee, the late Marshall R. Pihl, and other pioneers once did. This is unfortunate if for no other reason than that the wave of Korean popular culture that is increasingly driving popular culture worldwide in the new millennium draws significantly on the oral and performance elements of traditional Korean literature and the improvisational nature of the composition of *hanshi* (poetry written in Chinese by Koreans).

There has long been a need for an introductory text on Korean literary history from earliest times to the new millennium. The present volume, inspired by the manuscript "Han'guk munhak iran muōshin'ga?" (What is Korean literature?) by the senior member of this authorial team (Youngmin Kwon; hereafter YMK), is an attempt to outline the major developments, characteristics, genres, and figures of the Korean literary tradition to students encountering that tradition for the first time—or, increasingly, for students of Korean ethnicity who may have had exposure to Korean literature in middle or high school in Korea and who are now studying abroad—to critically engage with Korean literature. YMK's Korean version provides roughly equal coverage of traditional and modern literature. This version tilts the balance more toward the modern period

with the addition of a chapter on literature from the 1980s into the new millennium.

What makes this volume unique among English-language resources is that it includes examples, in English translation, of each of the genres and works by several of the major figures discussed in the text. These translations, as well as suggestions for further reading, are appended to each of the substantive chapters of the volume. The translations have been selected primarily on the basis of how well, in our estimation, they preserve the flavor of the Korean works and at the same time are viable as works of English-language literature. We are especially pleased to offer the late Marshall R. Pihl's translation of "Hong Kiltong chŏn," the first time this classic translation of a historic Korean story has appeared unabridged in book form.

We have made every effort to contact the translators (or their estates) of the works appearing here. Acknowledgment is gratefully made for their permission to use their works. We also thank the University of Iowa Press, the University of California Press, Koryo Press, and the University of Hawai'i Press for permission to reprint copyrighted material. We acknowledge as well the publishers of earlier versions of the translations.

[Sentence removed because of inaccuracy at time of publication.]

A number of individuals contributed significantly to the development of this volume. Gabriel Sylvian and other graduate students in the Department of Korean Language and Literature, College of Humanities, at Seoul National University, produced a draft translation of an abridged version of YMK's Korean original. That draft was reviewed by a team of bilingual graduate students as well as YMK and BF in a graduate seminar at Seoul National University in the fall of 2011. BF has since expanded that draft to reflect his own ideas and judgments as they have evolved over two decades of teaching half a dozen Korean literature courses annually as well as courses on reading and translating modern Korean literary fiction. BF alone developed chapter 10, which adds almost four decades of coverage, while in residence at the Kyujanggak International Korean Studies Center, Seoul National University, in the spring and summer of 2016; he gratefully acknowledges the support of a fellowship from that center. He is grateful as well for a residency made possible for him and Ju-Chan Fulton at the T'oji Cultural Center in the city of Wŏnju, Korea, in September and October 2019. The several anthologies of poetry—vernacular and classical, traditional and modern—prepared over the years by Kevin O'Rourke have been indispensable. Kevin O'Rourke, David McCann, and Young Jun Lee have been helpful consultants for the poetry contents of this volume. Robert Buswell offered crucial support in consultations on Buddhist terminology.

What Is Korean Literature?

We define Korean literature as a distinct literature developed and transmitted from prehistoric times by the people known as Koreans (*Hanguk minjok*), through the linguistic medium of the Korean language. Koreans trace their hereditary origins to two ancient periods: Ko Chosŏn and Tan'gun. We assume that Korean literature germinated between the first prehistoric settlements by Koreans on the Korean Peninsula and the emergence and flourishing of these ancient Korean states. During this time, the ancestors of the Korean people migrated eastward from Central Asia and settled in the area of Manchuria and the Korean Peninsula. Diverse, scattered tribes merged in this peninsular region over thousands of years, culminating in the states known to history as the Three Kingdoms, and then Unified Shilla, Koryŏ, and Chosŏn. Korean literature developed in response to dynamic changes in popular life and culture taking place over the millennia, and as such it is an expression of the region's distinctive history.

For much of their history the Korean people had no script for their language; oral narratives were the only form in which Korean literature existed. Ultimately, Koreans adopted the Chinese writing system together with many other aspects of Chinese culture, greatly enriching their native literature. With the invention of the *hangŭl* script in the mid-fifteenth century Korea's reliance on Chinese orthography came to an end. But, it was not until the twentieth century that classical Chinese lost its position of dominance as the literary language of Koreans. Until that time, literature recorded in Chinese and literature recorded in Korean continued to develop side by side, as did Korean oral literature.

To efficiently plot the development of Korean literature, scholars have usually divided Korean literary history into two cumbersome epochs: classical and modern. This convention has not been without problems. Generally, literary works prior to the nineteenth century are considered classical, and subsequent works, modern. Classical literature took root and flowered in the cultural soil of East Asia. The subject matter drew heavily

from the indigenous beliefs of Koreans, yet from the Three Kingdoms through the Koryŏ period it was also nurtured by Buddhism. But then in the Chosŏn period, Neo-Confucianism (*sŏngniphak*) was adopted as the state ideology, and it became the basis for much of the literature produced from then on. Korea's modern literature must be seen as an outgrowth of this classical tradition even as it developed through contact with European literary trends. Modern Korean literature evolved into its present state in the face of Japanese colonialism and the subsequent national division.

Korean literature has been transmitted both orally (resulting in *kubi munhak*) and in writing (*kirok munhak*). The bulk of recorded literature exists either in classical Chinese or in *hangŭl*. These two forms of written literature are referred to as *hanmunhak* and *kungmun munhak*, respectively. Before the creation of *hangŭl*, Koreans also used *hyangch'al*, a system of recording with sinographs their native language as spoken. A writer's choice of script—classical Chinese, *hyangch'al*, or, after the mid-1400s, *hangŭl*—not only influenced the text's orthography but also determined its form and content. Texts often differed sharply depending on the medium in which they were recorded. Korean literature may thus be outlined as (1) oral literature and (2) literature recorded in (a) classical Chinese, (b) *hyangch'al*, or (c) *hangŭl*.

Oral literature is a crucial element of Korean literature. Orality was the exclusive means for literary creation by the Korean people prior to their adoption of writing systems. Even thereafter orality continued to be the sole means of literary expression among the illiterate classes. Oral literature is the cultural product not of a single creator but of a collective. Moreover, it changes as it is transmitted orally from person to person. It is a flexible and unbound form of communication. Oral literature is based in performance, the conditions and sites of which are important. As performance contexts change, so does the literature. Oral literature contributed significantly to the development of written literature. Indeed, most classical fictional narratives borrow their structure from folk tales. *P'ansori* stories eventually became the basis of a type of classical fiction. And there are numerous instances of folk songs recast as modern poems.

Oral literature has existed from ancient times, and even after the ruling classes came to rely, during the Koryŏ period, on classical Chinese for formal written communication, the lower classes, who had no access to Chinese writing, remained reliant on orality as their means of literary production. This continued to be the case in the Chosŏn period. But with the dramatic increase in the use of *hangŭl* beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, oral literature became less prevalent. Nevertheless, it maintains a presence even today, a vehicle of expression of Korean life and aesthetics.

Introduction to Classical Literature

“Classical literature” is the conventional designation for Korean literary works produced from ancient times into the mid-nineteenth century. Subsequent works are referred to as *kūndae* (modern or early modern) and *hyōndae* (contemporary) literature. This terminology distinguishes not only historical periods but also the conditions that prevailed during those periods. The period in which classical literature developed was characterized by rulers who wielded absolute power, a strict class system that demarcated aristocrat from commoner, and a patriarchal family structure.

Classical literature is rooted in the East Asian tradition. Its earliest influence was Buddhist thought, but it came to manifest great esteem for Confucianism as well. This literature gives concrete expression to the sentiments and values, the traditional modes of life, and the aesthetic tastes of the Korean people.

Korea’s classical literature is characterized by a mythic worldview that involves continuity between the mortal and the divine. Human life is determined by the divine realm and receives its value from it. Nowhere is this more evident than in the classical narrative, in which the two worlds often appear together. In the world of the narrative, the natural and the supernatural are always linked, as are mortal and deity. In classical narrative, humans are seen as a part of the world they live in, not at a remove from it. Spirits and people, natural and supernatural, often commune with each other.

The richness of many classical narratives owes to their orality. Indeed, most of them grew out of *chōnsōl* and *mindam* (folk tales). In short, orality is a fundamental characteristic of the classical literature of Korea. For example, *shijo* and *kasa* were sung and *p’ansori* was performed. That commoners, most of whom were illiterate even in *hangūl*, could enjoy these three important genres of vernacular literature attests to the significance of orality in the Korean literary tradition.

TWO

Verse

A. *Hyangga*

Hyangga (“native songs”) are the first examples of Korean verse to exhibit a distinct form, and the first Korean literary form to be recorded by Koreans. *Hyangga* survive in *hyangch'al*, a hybrid script using certain sinographs for their meaning and others for how they were pronounced by Koreans. A precise understanding of this highly unusual form of writing requires the aid of linguistic analysis. These songs can be considered the first Korean literary works to be created by individuals.

The term *hyangga* refers to verse produced from Shilla times into early Koryŏ, but it also distinguishes a Korean verse form distinct from poetry written in classical Chinese by Chinese. *Hyangga* have also been known as *sanoega*, a term originally applied to songs sung by Buddhist clergy in Sanoeya, the area surrounding the Shilla capital of Kyŏngju, but then broadened to represent all verse composed during the Shilla period.

Hyangga are usually associated with Shilla, but examples of the form are seen as late as the twelfth century (early Koryŏ). Historical records refer to a collection of *hyangga* compiled by the court official Wihong and the monk Taegu at the request of the Shilla queen Chinsŏng (887–897), titled *Samdaemok* (*Hyangga* from the three periods of Shilla history), but this work is no longer extant. Among the *hyangga* that survive today, fourteen are found in *Samguk yusa* (Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms), compiled by the monk Iryŏn during the reign of the Koryŏ monarch Ch'ungyŏl (1274–1308). Of these, four are of the “four-phrase” type: “Sŏdong yo” (Sŏdong’s Song), “Hŏnhwa ka” (Presenting the Flowers), “Tosol ka” (Song of Tsita Heaven), and “P’ung yo” (Song of the Wind); the other ten are either “eight-phrase”—“Mo Chukchi rang ka” (Song in Praise of *Hwarang* Chukchi) and “Ch’ŏyong ka” (Ch’ŏyong’s Song; translated in the “Readings” section of this chapter)—or “ten-phrase”—“Hyesŏng ka” (Comet Song), “Wŏn wangsang ka” (Song in Search of Eternal Life), “Ujŏk ka”

THREE

Narrative

A. Classic Fiction

The term *kojŏn sosŏl* (traditional fictional narrative; literally, “classic fiction”) designates two categories of fiction appearing in the Chosŏn period: that written in Chinese (*hanmun sosŏl*) and that written in the vernacular (*kungmun sosŏl*). Some scholars recognize only the latter. These works were initially known as “folk stories” (*p’aesŏl*) and “old tales” (*kodam*). Works written in the vernacular script were termed “vulgar stories” (*ŏnp’ae*) or “old tales in vulgar books” (*ŏnsŏ kodam*). All of these terms contain the idea of “story books.” *Kojŏn sosŏl* became a standardized scholarly term at the end of the nineteenth century. With the emergence of the “new fiction” (*shin sosŏl*) during the early Enlightenment period, the term “old fiction” (*ku sosŏl*) was coined to differentiate the fictional narratives of the traditional era from those of the new. Both terms are still in use.

Traditional fictional narratives differ from myths (*shinhwa*) in that the latter are deity-centered whereas the former address the experiences of human beings. They also differ from legends (*sŏlhwa*) and narrative shaman songs (*sŏsa muga*) in that they are descriptive literature recorded in prose. Traditional fictional narratives depict the lives of Chosŏn-period Koreans and focus on conflicts arising in the course of human life but are distinguished from modern fiction by their allowance of intervention by the supernatural world.

Vernacular fictional narratives begin with “Hong Kiltong chŏn” (Tale of Hong Kiltong), ascribed to Hŏ Kyun. Appearing in the early 1600s, this work deviated from the dominant ideology that took writing in Chinese as its standard. It has historical importance as the first fictional narrative written in *hangŭl*. That the Korean script was used as its literary form is rooted in the author’s consciousness that a prose work should embody reality, the aim of all descriptive literature.

Literature in Classical Chinese

A. Sinographs and *Hanmunhak*

Sinographs (*hancha*, “letters of the Han Chinese”) constitute the writing system of China. Koreans borrowed the orthography of China for use in their own writing culture. Poetry composed in Chinese by Koreans is termed *hanshi*, and prose, *hanmun*; together the two forms are termed *hanmunhak* (“writing in the manner of the Han”). But precisely when sinographs began to be used by Koreans cannot be known with certainty. According to *Samguk sagi* (History of the Three Kingdoms, 1145) by Kim Pushik, a National Confucian Academy, called T’aehak (“Great learning”), was founded in the Koguryŏ kingdom in the fourth century to advance the learning of the young. Records also tell of the Paekche scholar Wang In introducing the sinograph primer known as *Ch’ŏnjamun* (The thousand-character classic) to Japan in the third century. Shilla instituted a state examination in the reading of texts for societal advancement (*toksŏ ch’ulshin kwa*), with the goal of fostering the development of history studies (*sagi*) and literacy in the Buddhist sutras. These records imply that Koreans began to use sinographs well before the Three Kingdoms period—that is, before the Christian era in the West. For more than fifteen hundred years, then, sinographs were the primary means by which the Korean people represented their native language in writing.

Sinographs have form, each graph possessing a sound (*ŭm*) and meaning. Both the sounds and the meanings of sinographs were adopted to represent the Korean language. Several methods, collectively termed *ch’aja p’yogi* (borrowed-graph orthography), were developed for this purpose. *Ch’amyŏng* used Chinese to represent substantives. *Idu* used Chinese to represent entire Korean sentences following native word order. After the creation of *hangŭl*, texts in Chinese were sometimes annotated to facilitate their translation into Korean. This was done by inserting *hangŭl* letters as grammatical markers (*to*) into the texts, a system known as *kugyŏl*.

FIVE

Oral Literature

Oral literature is produced through the medium of oral performance without regard to the written word. But oral literatures may develop differently, depending on changes in the given society's writing practices. Oral literature is presumed to have been the only literature in Korea before the introduction of the Chinese writing system to the Korean Peninsula in the second century BC. From that time, literature in Chinese (*hanmunhak*) took root as the recorded literature (*kirok munhak*) of one segment of the ruling class. But oral literature lived on among the commoners in the form of their songs and stories. Even in the Koryŏ period, by which time classical Chinese had been adopted as the official writing system, recorded literature by the ruling class and oral literature by the peasant class remained in coexistence. With the invention of *hangŭl* during the Chosŏn period, recorded literature branched into literature in Chinese and literature in Korean. Stories passed down as oral literature often became the subject matter for vernacular fictional narratives or were recorded as stories and songs. New forms of oral literature, like *p'ansori*, also emerged.

Oral literature takes multiple forms: narratives such as myths, legends, and folk tales (*mindam*); lyrical forms like folk songs (*minyŏ*); and dramas like the mask dance and puppet plays. *P'ansori* contains both narrative and dramatic elements. The methods of representation proper to oral literature combined functionally with the rites (*kut*) and ceremonies of practitioners (*mudang*) of native spirituality, with the songs (*muga*) of those practitioners, or with various modes of labor as in rice-planting songs (*moshimki norae*) and boat songs (*paennorae*). Oral literature also appeared as a form of entertainment, as in the mask dance (*t'alch'um*).

The most important feature of oral literature is its performativity (*kuyŏnsŏng*). Oral literature is not created by individuals. It is passed down as the accumulated heritage of a cultural group to be performed orally by individuals or groups of performers. Of prime importance is the feeling of affinity (*konggamdae*) between performer(s) and audience. Oral literature

Introduction to Modern Literature

Modern Korean literature emerged during Korea's modernization. Scholars continue to debate the origins of modernity, modernization, and a modern Korean literature, some finding sprouts of the modern in the writings of the Practical Learning scholars of the 1700s, but most agree that the modernization of Korean literature began to take root during the Enlightenment period (*kyehwa kyemong shidae*, or *kaehwagi*) of the late 1800s and early 1900s. As outmoded social practices gave way to modern modes of life, modern literature replaced premodern literature as a cultural base for the social system. However, modern literature was not limited to being the medium of expression for the ruling class, as premodern literature in Chinese had been, nor was it the property of any single class. Based in *hangŭl*, the Korean script, it was popularized through the medium of the people's native language. Furthermore, it connected with a broad readership through newspapers and magazines then fast gaining prominence as mass media.

Modern literature is based in writing and reading in Korean, and may be seen as a form of writing culture. The key component in traditional literature was the oral tradition. In premodern times, verse forms were meant to be sung. Traditional fictional narratives also included much content passed down by word of mouth. But modern verse forms developed independently from music, and modern fiction was the creation of professional writers.

Whereas Korea's premodern literature was based in the local conditions of East Asia, its modern literature marked a revolutionary departure from the past and owed its form and inspiration largely to European influence. Literature up to the Koryŏ period was influenced greatly by Buddhism, and Chosŏn literature by Neo-Confucianism. But modern literature grew from Korea's interaction with elements from the West, including Christianity and many other cultural currents. Korea's modern literature pursued Western modernity as a new universal knowledge, while preserving

SEVEN

Poetry

Written in the native script, modern Korean poetry began to come into mass popularity during the Enlightenment period. During the Chosŏn period, poetry existed in the dual forms of *hanshi* (poetry composed in Chinese) and *kungmin shiga* (native verse). The dominant mode was the former; native forms, such as *shijo* and *kasa*, were marginalized in comparison. When Chosŏn intellectuals wished to write poetry, they wrote in Chinese. When they wished to sing, they composed *shijo*. But with the popularization of the National Language Movement, Chinese-dominated poetry lost its importance, and new poetry forms based in Korean writing rose up in its place. This was the advent of *shin shi* (new poetry).

The new poetry forms were free from formal rules governing structure and content. Through this freedom the revolutionary modernization of traditional Korean-language poetry forms, represented by *shijo* and *kasa*, took place. The many Enlightenment *kasa* and *shijo* published in newspapers and magazines during this period clearly reveal a departure from the musical compositions that were the traditional *kasa* and *shijo*. Abandoning the fixed nature of traditional poetry, they pursued freedom in form. Free verse (*chayu shi*) was the starting point for Korean modern poetry.

Modern Korean poetry from its inception looked to Western poetic techniques as models. Insofar as modern Korean poetry is written in the Korean language, it is an expression of Korean sentiments, but it did not develop autonomously, nor was it unaffected by outside influence. The Korean poets who developed modern verse writing in the early stages of Korean modern literature were for the most part students in Japan, where they cultivated professional knowledge of and received education in Western literature. Their interest was largely occupied with the problems of poetic form and rules. They dispensed with fixed poetic forms such as *kasa* and *shijo* and adopted Western free verse, bringing formal balance and structural harmony to the creation of a new poetry tradition in the Korean language.

EIGHT

Fiction

With the decline of Chinese as a literary language during the Enlightenment period, the newly popularized native script, *hangŭl*, became the medium through which modern fiction was established. The use of *hangŭl* enabled modern fiction to be read and enjoyed by an expanded popular readership. It was through the native script that modern fiction realized the ideal of *ŏnmun ilch'i*, unity of written and spoken language. *Hangŭl*, in other words, made it possible to write the living language of daily life. A new prose aesthetic was thus established.

Different from the classical fictional narrative with its structure rooted in mythic imagination, modern fiction represents daily reality through experiential imagination based in experiential time. These are the building blocks of the modern fictional narrative, which demands that the characters be self-aware and live the life given them. As they interact with concrete, realistic conditions, the characters come into clearer focus and achieve greater verisimilitude as subjects.

An important characteristic of modern Korean fiction is the emergence of the “day-to-day” person. This individual tends to be the protagonist of the fictional work. His or her status is not lofty, like that of classical heroes created by intervention from the divine world, nor has this individual descended from heaven to live in the realm of mortals. Placing the everyday individual as the central figure of the story fixes the modern protagonist’s narrative journey, namely, the pursuit of his or her individual fate. For the most part these protagonists are not bound by mythic taboos and incantatory magic. They live out their destiny in the day-to-day world, and that destiny is not revealed by a god but, ideally, decided by the individual alone. By understanding and defining themselves as discrete individuals, the protagonists position themselves as the subject of the narrative.

Another notable feature of the modern fictional narrative is the reorganization of experiential time. Unlike the premodern fictional narrative,

Drama

A. The Colonial Period

Drama came onto the modern Korean literary scene in the 1920s, close on the heels of modern fiction. Drama circles early in the Colonial period were primarily engaged in performances of new wave theater (*shinp'agük*), an import from Japan that enjoyed mass popularity. But soon after the March 1, 1919, Independence Movement there emerged among Korean students in Japan a theater movement that gradually expanded to include actual stagings of original dramas written by professional playwrights. Through the efforts of this group, modern Korean literature gained a new art form.

This early theater movement consisted of groups such as the Kügyesul hyöphoe (Dramatic arts association), Kaldophoe (Kaldop association; *kaldop* being a contraction of *kach'i topcha*, "let's help"), Hyöngsölhoe (Association for diligent study), and T'owölhoe (Association for the real and the ideal), whose goal was to stage theatrical performances that would teach people about Western culture. T'owölhoe, organized in 1922 by Korean students in Tokyo including Pak Sünghüi, Kim Kijin, Kim Pokchin, Yi Sö'gu, and Kim Ülhan, was of particular importance. What began as a student theater movement evolved into a professional company. T'owölhoe performances were aimed at public education or enlightenment and were mostly stagings of foreign plays that club members had translated into Korean. In 1924, with its third performance, the group became a commercial troupe. But as students, the club members had difficulty meeting the financial challenges of maintaining a professional touring company, and the club disbanded after only one or two subsequent performances. The club could not maintain its professional status by staging foreign plays to the exclusion of original dramatic works. And so, ironically, in the process of becoming a professional troupe, the club lost its original experimental flavor and fell into commercialism, resulting in the failure of the theater movement itself.

Into the New World

Literature of the Late Twentieth and Early Twenty-first Centuries

A. Fiction

From the Kwangju Uprising to the IMF Crisis

On April 19, 1960, a popular uprising spearheaded by university students compelled Yi Süngman (Syngman Rhee), the authoritarian first president of the Republic of Korea, to step down. Just as April 19, 1960, looms large in the literature of the Hangül Generation, May 18, 1980, the date of the Kwangju Uprising, is a rallying point for much of the fiction of the 1980s and beyond. But more than the victimized aesthetes and inspired rebels of that earlier generation, we see in the later fiction of O Chönghui as well the early work of Ch'oe Yun, Im Ch'öru, and Kong Sönok more explicit examples of trauma literature. Building on earlier works involving trauma, such as Hwang Sunwön's *Namu tül pit'al e söda* (Trees on a Slope, 1960) and Pak Wansö's *Na'mok* (The Naked Tree, 1970), O, Ch'oe, and Im added narrative sophistication to their accounts of individuals traumatized by the Korean War, the Kwangju Massacre, and the torture apparatus of the Chön Tuhwan (Chun Doo-hwan) regime, respectively. O's "Param üi nök" (Spirit on the Wind, 1986) focuses on a young wife seized by wanderlust resulting from a childhood trauma so devastating it has erased her memory of the precipitating incident—the murder by starving bandits of her twin sister and other family members. Ch'oe's debut work, the novella "Chögi sori öpshi han chöm kkonip i chigo" (There a Petal Silently Falls, 1988), weaves together three narrative strands in offering us a more comprehensive view of post-traumatic stress disorder. Im Ch'öru's "Pulgün pang" (The Red Room, 1987) and O's "Param üi nök" employ a dual narrative, the former to reveal trauma experienced by both a torture victim and his victimizer and the latter to highlight the effects of the wife's trauma on her unsuspecting husband and son. Trauma within the family

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