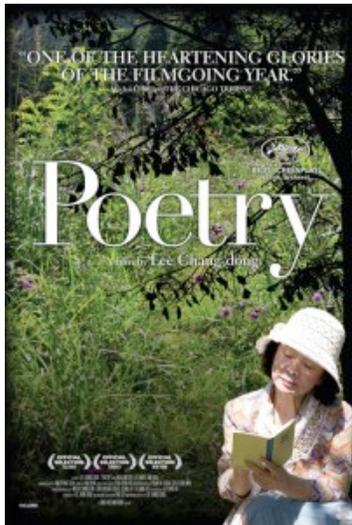




## Has Lee Chang-dong Found the Meaning of Life in 'Poetry'?

By Christopher Clemente

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### *Poetry*

Written by Lee Chang-dong

Directed by Lee Chang-dong

South Korea, 2010

Like its namesake at its best, Lee Chang-dong's *Poetry* elevates and juxtaposes thoughts that are provocative and gentle, complex and simple, and thoughts that are akin to life and its definition. At its core, *Poetry* is life filled with the memories of good and bad, memories that are held onto and those we absolutely want to forget. And as in life, like all memories in some degree or form, fade into the obscure thicket that is perceived as the expression of life's meaning.

*Poetry* tells the story of Mija (Yun Jung-hee), an aging house maid and guardian of her delinquent grandson, facing early signs of Alzheimer's disease. Mija takes up a poetry class, where she finds herself more in sync with her natural surroundings. Meanwhile, a schoolgirl's suicide implicates her grandson, who is affected by the girl's untimely death. In a masterful performance, Yun Jung-hee does an exquisite job in layering her character's emotions between the delicate nature of her failing mentality and the heavy-handed guilt over her grandson's criminal involvement. To explain who Mija is, is to allude her to poetry itself, and Jung-hee encompasses her with mysticism and grace.



To say that this film is a drama about an elderly woman struggling to keep herself alert and aware, is incorrect, just as saying that this film is a thriller about an alleged teenage rape and suicide. One part of the film cannot exist without the other, nor would the film be what it is without both plotlines, and that's the masterful essence to *Poetry* and Chang-dong's direction. It's no coincidence that Chang-dong

intertwines the discovery of the dead teenage girl's connection to Mija, just as Mija becomes more committed to her poetry. With end of a young life comes birth of creativity, spawning the resurgence of an old life, and the film hits just the right tone for each side of this proverbial coin.

If life is all about the connections we share with one another, Chang-dong exemplifies to the nth degree the lengths in which we are all a part of our human soul. For Mija, a girl's death made her into the person she could have been at her young age; a poet. Somewhere within the 139 minutes of *Poetry*, Chang-dong finds the threads that make up life and breaths it to new life on screen, and somewhere within that time the audience will too, in all its shocking yet heartwarming glory.

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