Occupation

SUMMARY

The speaker describes soldiers working diligently to construct a house. They pound corpses into the dirt as though they were nails. They cover the house's walls with blood for paint. All of the doors inside the house are closed, reminiscent of tombstones or the cold, unmoving eyes of the dead. The flights of stairs in the house only descend and they're covered in ice. The house doesn't have a floor and its roof is covered with the ash of burnt bodies, which falls like dense, black snow. The soldiers invite you into the house, which they declare will never fall. The soldiers say that you, all of you, will live in this house, which can fit everyone.

THEMES

THE BRUTALITY OF WAR AND FORCED ASSIMILATION

Suji Kwock Kim's "Occupation" depicts, in visceral detail, the brutality of the Japanese occupation of Korea. The poem's speaker describes soldiers building a house with nails made of bodies, walls painted with blood, and a roof covered with ashes. The house's construction represents the way occupying Japanese soldiers devastated the Korean people, supposedly in the name of ushering in stability and modernity. The fact that the soldiers invite listeners to "occupy" this house, meanwhile, reflects Japan's goal of cultural assimilation, or the imposition of Japanese values, beliefs, and culture on Korea. Homes usually connote comfort and safety, yet the poem's irony rests in the fact that *this* house is built on a foundation of horror and death. And while tied to a specific historical event, the poem also broadly argues that invasion, occupation, and forced assimilation carry an immense human cost.

The poem begins with a simple image: soldiers building a house. As the speaker continues to describe this house, however, the details of its construction become increasingly brutal. The soldiers pound corpses "into the earth," ash made from burning bodies falls on the roof, and the walls are painted with blood.

Homes should be a place of refuge and comfort, yet the one depicted in "Occupation" is anything but. By mixing imagery that should make the speaker feel safe with images of the dead, the poem undermines any justification for the soldiers' actions and attempts to convey the true cost of war and occupation.

The poem closes with the soldiers saying that "there is room for everyone" in the house they have built, much in the same way that Japan promised to include and assimilate everyone in their empire during the occupation of Korea. When placed directly after the gruesome descriptions of the house's construction, however, the soldiers' invitation to join them becomes terrifying, and the promise that the home "will last forever" becomes a threat.

In this way, the poem presents forced assimilation itself as an act of violence. Although it may appear, at first, that the Japanese soldiers in the poem are being inclusive, their house wouldn't exist without the ruthless oppression of the Korean people.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-29

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-3

The soldiers are ...
... building a house.

"Occupation" begins with the image of soldiers building a house, setting up the poem's central extended metaphor.

The poem never actually identifies where these soldiers are from or what country they're occupying, which allows its message about the brutality of occupation to feel universal. At the same time, knowing that the poem was inspired by the early-1900s occupation of Korea will enrich readers' understanding of the poem.

Although the poem's speaker will go on to describe these soldiers perpetuating a variety of horrors—from "hammering bodies into the earth like nails" to "painting walls with blood"—the first three lines offer some insight into the soldier's motivations. At the beginning of the poem, they're simply doing their job, "hard at work" modernizing Korea and rebuilding it in the image of the Japanese empire.

The fairly neutral tone and content of the poem's first three lines stand in stark contrast to the rest of the poem's dark mood and imagery. It becomes clear that the title, "Occupation," has a double meaning, referring both to the historical occupation of Korea and to the idea that those responsible for some of the occupation's most violent deeds were simply fulfilling the responsibilities of their jobs, or "occupations."

LINES 4-8

They hammer ...
... with blood.

The poem's opening lines made the soldier's building project

seem innocuous, even noble, perhaps; they were working "hard." Now, however, the speaker bluntly reveals the true horror of what they're doing. The soldiers "hammer / bodies into the earth / like nails," a simile that implies that this house is being built through violence and death. The walls, meanwhile, are painted with blood.

This graphic imagery, presented with unflinching directness, pokes holes in the hollow justification that the soldiers perpetuating the occupation are just "doing their jobs," by showing, in detail, the violent reality of what that job entails. The parallel grammatical structure of these lines also emphasizes that the soldiers are the ones responsible for these deaths: "**they** hammer" the bodies and "**they** paint" the walls.

Through these comparisons, the speaker builds on the central conceit of the poem, showing how brutal the Japanese occupation of Korea was. In comparing the occupation to the construction of a house, the speaker demonstrates the human cost of Japan's attempt to modernize Korea. The house, a modern construction, stands in for the Japanese Empire's claims that their rule would bring stability and innovation to Korea. These supposed benefits, however, come at the price of the lives of the forced laborers who died building the "house" as well as other Koreans killed during the occupation.

Furthermore, likening human bodies to inanimate objects (corpses to nails and blood to paint) dehumanizes those who lost their lives, reducing them to the building blocks necessary to construct a new empire.

LINES 9-11

Inside, the doors ...
... eyes of stone.

The speaker enters the house the soldiers have built. In doing so, they go from being a passive observer of the house's construction to becoming a potential occupant. In the same way that Japan invited Koreans to become a part of their empire during the occupation, the speaker enters the new and modernized world built by the Japanese soldiers and, for the first time, considers living in it.

At this point in the poem, it also becomes clear how difficult it will be to *leave* this house. Inside, the speaker notes, all the doors are shut tight and locked, creating a feeling of being trapped.

In a simile, the speaker likens the closed doors of the house to "eyes of stone." This image brings to mind the unmoving, unseeing eyes of the dead, once again demonstrating the brutality and the human cost of the occupation. It is also evocative of tombstones, reminding the reader of the many lives lost during the war.

The enjambment of these lines adds to their tension. The poem flows swiftly down the page, conveying the swiftness with which the speaker is suddenly locked behind these tomb-like doors.

LINES 12-17

And the stairs ...
... ash is falling—

As the poem goes on, the descriptions of the house become increasingly nonsensical. Inside the house, all the stairs are covered in ice and only go down, not up. The house also doesn't have a floor.

These descriptions of the house's interior, which would be difficult to imagine literally, instead reveal the speaker's feelings about the absurdity of the war and the Japanese occupation.

The house's icy stairs are slippery, dangerous, and offer no escape route, only leading deeper into the house. Like the poem's previous image of rows of locked doors, this suggests the seeming permanence of the Japanese occupation. It is impossible for flights of stairs to only "go down," but the image adds to the poem's surreal mood, lending the house a dream-like, nightmarish quality.

The speaker also reveals that the house has no floor, another seemingly impossible detail. Instead of being taken literally, this is meant to show the instability and uncertainty many Koreans felt during the occupation; occupants of the house would have no solid ground to stand on.

The house does, however, have a roof. While a roof can be a symbol of safety and security, here it's another thing that makes this house feel impenetrable and difficult to escape. There's "ash" falling on this roof as well, an ominous image meaning something is burning nearby. The dash after "falling" creates a moment of suspense in which readers can wonder what, exactly, is on fire. Again, then, the speaker mixes imagery that would usually feel reassuring with images that are dangerous and unsettling.

LINES 18-21

dark snow, ...
... falling.

The speaker compares the falling ash to "dark snow." Snow *should* be white, so already this image feels threatening. The speaker continues by saying that the ash falling on the house's roof is in fact "human snow"—that is, it's the cremated human remains of those killed during the occupation.

The human ashes raining from the sky are particularly disturbing when one takes into account the poem's historical context. In 1912, Japan established cremation as the primary form of burial and outlawed private graveyards in Korea. The ashes, then, represent not only the literal deaths of those killed during the occupation but also the destruction of Korean culture under Japan's mission of forced cultural assimilation.

The repetition of the word "snow" emphasizes the horror of

this image, which the speaker lingers on longer than they do on any other image in the poem. They describe it in detail: the ash is "dark," falling "thickly, blackly." The image is horrific: air obscured by a thick smog of human remains.

Note, too, that lines 18 and 21 both end on the word "falling" (in fact, this is the *only* word in line 21). Already the speaker has said that the house's stairs only "go down" and that there's "no floor." The repetition of the word "falling" adds to the sensation of instability, of being pulled further and further into some dark abyss.

LINES 22-24

Come, they say. ...
... last forever.

After spending most of the poem describing the house, the speaker once again switches their focus to the soldiers. The soldiers directly address the speaker inviting them to "come" join them in the house. They promise that it will "last forever."

When paired with the violent imagery that preceded it, this entreaty to "come" is far from welcoming. The promise that the house, and by extension, the occupation, will "last forever" sounds downright threatening. The occupation is as inescapable as being trapped in a building with locked doors and stairs that only go down.

The soldier's invitation to join them in the house specifically harkens back to Japan's promise that everyone in Korea could assimilate into and join their empire under the occupation. Under the guise of ushering in a new age of modernity and innovation, Japan erased many aspects of Korean culture, forcing Korean people to speak Japanese and worship at Japanese shrines, and even encouraging people to change their Korean surnames.

The soldiers' invitation is thus ironic in two ways. First, the soldiers present themselves as welcoming and inclusive while perpetuating horrors against the Korean people, which the speaker describes in brutal detail throughout the poem. Second, the soldiers present the option to join the Japanese empire as a choice, when in reality, the Korean people did not consent to the occupation.

LINES 25-29

You shall occupy ...
... for everyone.

The poem closes with the soldiers telling the speaker that they (the speaker) will occupy the house. The soldiers then turn to address a small crowd, telling them that they will all be included in their vision of the future. "There is room for everyone," the soldiers say.

Here, the speaker once again plays on the multiple meanings of the word "occupy." The soldiers are not referring to the foreign occupation of Korea when they invite the speaker to occupy the house; rather, they simply mean "to live in."

The poem's closing line once again alludes to Japan's mission to assimilate the Korean people. The soldiers may appear to be welcoming and inclusive, encouraging everyone to join the Japanese empire and "live in their home." However, when placed directly after the brutal descriptions of those who died during the occupation, it's clear just how sinister this invitation really is. The poem implies that it is impossible to forget that the house, like Japan's new and modernized vision of Korea's future, was built at the expense of hundreds of thousands of Korean lives and the destruction of Korean culture.

SYMBOLS

THE HOUSE

The house the soldiers are building represents the brutality of Japan's occupation of Korea. The poet's choice to use a house to represent this occupation isn't random: houses *usually* symbolize comfort, safety, and familiarity, yet this house is built on a foundation of terrible violence and death. This, in turn, reflects the idea that Japan's supposed mission to bring innovation, modernity, and stability to Korea came at a horrific human cost.

The soldiers act like they're simply "hard at work," doing their job. Yet the poem doesn't shy away from showing how, in constructing this house, the Japanese soldiers are actively destroying Korean lives and culture. The house's very building blocks—the paint, nails, and roof—are infused with death.

The soldiers' demand that the speaker live in this house, meanwhile, represents Japan's promise to assimilate and include everyone in a new empire built on the ashes of Korean people and culture.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Line 3:** "building a house."
- **Lines 5-6:** "bodies into the earth / like nails,"
- **Lines 7-8:** "they paint the walls / with blood."
- **Lines 23-25:** "This house will / last forever. / You shall occupy it."
- **Lines 28-29:** "There is room / for everyone."

POETIC DEVICES

EXTENDED METAPHOR

The entire poem consists of an extended metaphor that compares the Japanese occupation of Korea to soldiers building a house. The house represents Japan's vision of modernity and stability for Korea—supposed improvements

that come at the cost of hundreds of thousands of Korean lives and the destruction of Korean culture.

The speaker says that the walls are painted "with blood" and compares corpses to nails being hammered into the earth. These terrible images reflect the brutality of the house's construction and, in turn, of the occupation. They also imply that the house—the new, "modern" Korea—is *inseparable* from the horror and violence inflicted on the Korean people. Such terror, the metaphor implies, is built into the house's very foundation and walls.

At the poem's end, the soldiers invite the speaker to live in the house, saying that "there is room for everyone." This promise of stability and inclusion represents Japan's mission of cultural assimilation, or the idea that everyone in Korea would join the Japanese empire and adopt Japanese culture, traditions, and values. Beneath such a promise, the extended metaphor illustrates, is a brutal, terrifying reality.

Where Extended Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "The soldiers are / hard at work, / building a house."
- **Lines 4-8:** "They hammer / bodies into the earth / like nails, / they paint the walls / with blood."
- **Lines 16-19:** "only a roof, / where ash is falling— / dark snow, / a human snow,"
- **Lines 23-25:** "This house will / last forever. / You shall occupy it."
- **Lines 27-29:** "Come, they say. / There is room / for everyone."

ALLUSION

The poem's title, "Occupation," alludes to the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910-1945. While the poem can also be read as commenting on the brutality of war and occupation in general, this context enriches readers' understanding.

For example, the description of human ashes falling on the roof of the house in lines 17-21 might be read as a subtle allusion to a 1912 law outlawing private Korean graveyards and establishing cremation as the only acceptable form of burial—an example of cultural erasure under Japan's rule.

The soldiers "hard at work" in the poem's first line, meanwhile, might be Korean men, thousands of whom were drafted to join the Japanese military or became forced laborers. Finally, the invitations to "come" and "occupy" this house where there's "room for everyone" nod to Japan's goal of cultural assimilation.

Where Allusion appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "The soldiers are / hard at work, / building a house."
- **Lines 17-21:** "where ash is falling— / dark snow, / a human snow, / thickly, blackly / falling."
- **Lines 22-29:** "Come, they say. / This house will / last forever. / You shall occupy it. / And you, and you— / Come, they say. / There is room / for everyone."

IRONY

There are multiple layers of irony in "Occupation." For one thing, houses *usually* represent comfort, warmth, and safety; this house, however, is a terrifying construction built on a foundation of suffering and violence.

Remember that the whole poem can be read as an extended metaphor for the Japanese occupation of Korea, during which the country did indeed see improvements in things like transportation, communication, and public works. Yet the cost of this modernity and innovation was the utter devastation of the Korean people and culture. Ironically, then, this new age of stability and modernity was *inextricable* from instability and barbarity.

At the end of the poem, the soldiers invite the speaker to "occupy" the house they've built. There's another ironic twist here: before this moment, the poem's title of "Occupation" seemed only to refer to the soldiers' job (their occupation of building a house) and Japan's occupation of Korea. Now, though, the word takes on a third meaning, as the speaker (or reader/listener) is forced to live in—to occupy—this house of horrors.

Where Irony appears in the poem:

- **Lines 22-29:** "Come, they say. / This house will / last forever. / You shall occupy it. / And you, and you— / Come, they say. / There is room / for everyone."

IMAGERY

"Occupation" is filled with jarring, graphic imagery meant to demonstrate just the violence and horror of the Japanese occupation of Korea.

The soldiers "hammer bodies into the earth like nails," a simile conveying the brutality with which the soldiers go about their "work" (metaphorically, building the house; literally, violently oppressing Koreans and suppressing their culture). The image also dehumanizes the Korean people, reducing them to lifeless tools whose bodies form the foundation of this new house.

The image of walls painted "with blood" and of doors locked "like eyes of stone" emphasize this house's connection with death and destruction, while the description of a floorless house with "icy" stairs that only "go down" evokes feelings of dread, chaos, and instability.

The speaker then lingers on the imagery of ash falling on the roof of the house, describing it as "dark snow, a human snow,

thickly, blackly falling." Instead of white snow, this world is marked by human ashes—another gruesome image that adds to the poem's disturbing, terrifying atmosphere.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 4-21:** "They hammer / bodies into the earth / like nails, / they paint the walls / with blood. / Inside, the doors / are locked, shut / like eyes of stone. / And the stairs / are icy, all flights / go down. / There is no floor, / only a roof, / where ash is falling— / dark snow, / a human snow, / thickly, blackly / falling."

REPETITION

Repetition appears throughout "Occupation," adding emphasis to certain images and ideas. Take the anaphora of the word "they" in lines 4 and 7, which calls repeated attention to the soldiers' destructive presence:

> They hammer
> [...]
> they paint the walls

This "they" is implicitly in contrast with an "us," the people being occupied.

There's more repetition later in the poem with the lines "dark snow, / a human snow." This diacope emphasizes the brutal nature of the image—that is, the fact that the falling ash is really cremated remains.

These lines are bookended by the word "falling." In combination with the image of icy steps leading "down" and a house with "no floor," this word adds to the poem's sensation of downward motion, of being pulled deeper and deeper into the darkness of this house. The second appearance of the word "falling," dramatically given its own life, also seems to allude to Korea's fall as a *nation*.

The soldiers also repeat their invitation to occupy the house that they have built at the very end of the poem. The line "come, they say" appears twice, hinting that this invitation is really a *command*; listeners have no choice. The repetition of "you" in lines 25 and 26, meanwhile, calls attention to the fact that "There is room / for everyone":

> You shall occupy it.
> And you, and you—

All those "you"s, plus the polysyndeton of "and," make the line much more sinister. They suggest not that *everyone* is welcome, but that *no one* can escape.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 4:** "They"
- **Line 7:** "they"
- **Line 17:** "falling"
- **Line 18:** "snow"
- **Line 19:** "snow"
- **Line 21:** "falling"
- **Line 22:** "Come, they say."
- **Line 25:** "You"
- **Line 26:** "And you, and you"
- **Line 27:** "Come, they say."

VOCABULARY

Soldiers (Line 1) - Though the poem doesn't mention specifics, it's alluding to Japanese soldiers during the 1910 occupation of Korea as well as the hundreds of thousands of Korean men who were forcefully conscripted.

Eyes of stone (Line 11) - The unmoving eyes of the dead; or, tombstones.

Human snow (Line 19) - Ash from cremated human bodies. An allusion to a 1912 Japanese law that forbade private graveyards and established cremation as the primary form of burial.

Occupation/Occupy (Line 25) - The poem's title plays on the multiple meanings of the word "occupation." The word can refer to the foreign holding or control of a country by military force, and here is specifically referencing the Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910-1945. The word can also refer to someone's job; here, the soldiers are "hard at work." Finally, to "occupy" can simply mean to take, use, or live in—as in, to "occupy" a house.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Occupation" consists of 31 lines arranged into a single stanza of free verse. There's no meter or rhyme scheme, which adds to its stark, striking tone. The poem's language feels organic, as though the speaker is simply observing and conveying what they see in real time. There also aren't any fancy formal elements to distract readers from the poem's brutal imagery.

While the poem has no set meter, all of its lines are quite short. The shortness of the lines lends the poem a blunt, frank tone. Visually, this also makes the poem appear long and narrow on the page. The reader is thus pulled *downward*, mirroring the poem's downward *imagery* (falling ash, a house with no floor, stairs that only "go down"). The poem, essentially, feels like a descent into hell.

METER

As a free verse poem, "Occupation" is not written in meter. Along with the poem's short lines, the lack of meter makes "Occupation" sound blunt and brutally honest, as though the speaker is conveying what they see in as clear, direct language as possible.

RHYME SCHEME

"Occupation" is written in free verse, meaning it does not stick to a rhyme scheme. Rhyme would add music (and, perhaps, beauty) to a very dark poem; the lack of rhyme, by contrast, makes the poem feel like the speaker is conveying exactly what they're witnessing without any embellishments. This adds to the poem's frank, somber tone.

SPEAKER

The speaker of "Occupation" isn't involved in the action until the very end, when the soldiers invite them inside. It's thus safe to say that the speaker stands in for the Koreans forced to live under Japanese rule during the occupation. The soldier's final invitation to join them places the speaker clearly on the side of the Koreans being encouraged (and outright forced) to assimilate to Japanese culture.

SETTING

While the poem never mentions specifics, readers can assume that it takes place during the Japanese occupation of Korea, which lasted from 1910-1945.

The poem itself begins somewhere where soldiers are building a house, though it quickly becomes clear that this house isn't real; instead, it represents the horrors of the Japanese occupation and the way that Japan devastated the Korean people and culture supposedly in the name of ushering in modernity.

While this context enriches readers' understanding of the poem, the fact that there's never any mention of Japan or Korea broadens the poem's message. That is, in addition to condemning the horrors of Japan's occupation of Korea, it also speaks to the horrors of war, occupation, and forced assimilation in general.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The Korean American poet Suji Kwock Kim (b. 1969) published "Occupation" in her 2003 poetry collection *Notes from the Divided Country*. The book won a number of awards, including the Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets, and explores a variety of issues, from colonialism and the Korean War to Kim's own life.

Kim's extended family was born in what is now North Korea, and only some escaped during the Korean War. Much of her poetry deals with themes of family separation and the lingering effects of traumatic historical events. "Occupation," like most of Kim's other poetry, is written in free verse, reflecting a contemporary shift away from strict adherence to traditional poetic forms.

The Japanese occupation of Korea has inspired many other works of literature, including Min Jin Lee's *Pachinko*. The novel was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award and has been since made into a television show of the same name.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1910, Japan officially annexed Korea after years of war. Their goal was to culturally assimilate all Korean people. They forbade people from speaking Korean, destroyed Korean historical documents, and even encouraged people to adopt Japanese surnames. This attempt to erase Korean culture was a means of exerting control over their newly-annexed territory. Japan also promised to usher in a new age of modernity, building railroads, improving roads and public transportation, and revamping Korea's economic system.

Under Japan's rule, hundreds of thousands of Korean men became forced laborers, and, towards the end of WWII, many were conscripted into the Japanese military. Hundreds of thousands of Korean women were also forced into sexual slavery. The occupation came to an end in August of 1945, when Japan's surrender to the Allies brought WWII to an end.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A U.S. Poet Laureate Reflects on "Occupation" — Read former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky's reflections on the poem in The Washington Post. (https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/2006/08/27/poets-choiceby-robert-pinsky/5c69c42e-7a1a-45a9-af91-508036bd65ef/)
- The Occupation of Korea — Learn more about the history of the Japanese occupation of Korea. (https://www.history.com/news/japan-colonization-korea)
- Life Under Japanese Rule — Read more about life in Korea under Japan's rule. (https://www.britannica.com/place/Korea/Korea-under-Japanese-rule)
- Suji Kwock Kim's Life and Work — Read a brief biography courtesy of Poets.org. (https://poets.org/poet/suji-kwock-kim)

HOW TO CITE

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