

7 Worksheet on Analysing Poetry

Text: Oodgeroo Noonuccal, "Municipal Gum", originally published in *The Dawn Is at Hand*, (Milton: Jacaranda Press, 1966).

This version of the poem is quoted from:

http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/oodgeroo_noonuccal/poems/4598

A video version of the poem is presented on YouTube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RshUn6iiojE>

You can also find a song version of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poem "No More Boomerang" (*Students Book*, text 6) on YouTube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=codU1Ei2Etg>

The poem is sung by *Coloured Stone*, a band from Ceduna, South Australia.

You may copy and paste these hyperlinks into your browser.

A INTERPRETING POETRY

How to approach a poem

Read the poem at least three times and look up all the unknown words so that you can understand the text. If possible, read the poem aloud.

- Do not reject it as boring or ridiculous after the first reading!
- Don't let difficulties at the first reading put you off!
- Try to retell the poem in your own words (in plain English).
- Do not attempt to comment on every poetic device, but only on those which contribute to the effect of the poem.

Analysis

Answering the following questions will help you to understand a poem:

- What kind of event or **situation** is presented?
- Is there a **speaker**? Is he different from the poet?
- Does he speak to anybody? (**addressee**)

- What is the poem about (**theme, topic**)?
- Which **similes, metaphors, symbols and images** does the poet use?
- Are there any obvious structural devices? (e.g. **anaphora, enumeration, climax, parallelism, repetition**)
- Is there a **rhyme scheme** or a regular **metre**?
- What is the **purpose** of the poem or the poet's **intention**?
- What is the **tone** or **mood** of the poem?

HOW DO ALL THESE DEVICES HELP TO CONVEY THE MESSAGE OR IDEAS OF A POEM?

B METAPHORICAL LANGUAGE/IMAGERY

Simile: The simplest form of metaphorical language in which two mental pictures are compared by means of linking words, e.g. "as ... as" or "like".

Ex.: My love is like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June:
My love is like the melody / That's sweetly played in tune. (R. Burns)

Metaphor: A metaphor is a comparison without the linking words "as ... as" or "like". It can be called a simile condensed or an implicit comparison. A metaphor says that a thing is another while a simile says that one thing is like another. As a metaphor is more compressed, it is often more suggestive than a simile.

- **Dead metaphors (conventional):** egghead, junkie, star, hit
- **Creative (original, fresh) metaphors:**
 - "There's daggers in men's smiles" (*Macbeth*)
 - "The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window panes ... " (T.S. Eliot)
 - "the girl with kaleidoscope eyes" (Beatles)

Animation/Personification: Things or objects are presented as if they were alive.

- **Animation:** Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo
Shovel them under and let me work -
I am the grass; I cover all. (Sandburg)
- **Personification:** Rough wind that moanest loud ... Sad storm whose tears are vain (Shelley)

Symbol: Usually a concrete object which represents something abstract.

It is a form of metaphor or image which is far more suggestive and complex.

- Conventional symbols are: cross = Christianity
white dove = peace
- Colour symbolism: black = night/evil/death
white = light/good/virgin

By a highly imaginative use of language a poet or novelist may also develop a personal symbolism. In Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* it becomes clear from the context that "rain" is a symbol of death.

Allegory: A story, description or picture in which an abstract meaning is represented by characters and their actions. The characters are often personifications of ideas such as Pride, Hope, Wealth, Wit.

Ex.: Old man / skeleton = death

Image: A word or group of words which produces in the mind of the reader an idea which is not abstract (as in an allegory), but has the form of a sense impression (smell, taste, touch, see), "a picture made out of words" (C.D. Lewis). In literature **imagery** is often used as a collective term for such devices as simile, metaphor, symbol, etc.

Ex.: The apparition of these faces in the crowd,
 Petals on a wet, black bough.
 (Ezra Pound, *In a Station of the Metro*)

The Poem

Municipal Gum by Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Gumtree in the city street,
 Hard bitumen around your feet,
 Rather you should be
 In the cool world of leafy forest halls
 5 And wild bird calls
 Here you seems to me
 Like that poor cart-horse
 Castrated, broken, a thing wronged,
 Strapped and buckled, its hell prolonged,
 10 Whose hung head and listless mien express
 Its hopelessness.
 Municipal gum, it is dolorous
 To see you thus
 Set in your black grass of bitumen—
 15 O fellow citizen,
 What have they done to us?

C TASKS

1. Describe the situation presented in the poem.

2. One may distinguish five different parts:

1. ll. 1-2
2. ll. 3-5
3. ll. 6-11
4. ll. 12-14
5. ll. 15-16

Explain what the speaker does in each part.

3. Contrast the situation of the cart-horse with that of a wild horse. The following expressions characterise the cart-horse: *castrated – broken – wronged – strapped and buckled – hell prolonged – hung head*. What do they suggest?

4. The poem may be read as an allegory. What do the gum tree, the bitumen, the cart-horse and - by implication - the wild horse stand for?

5. Show that the last two lines determine the meaning and the message of the poem and explain what the poem tells us about the situation of Aborigines in Australia.

6. Consider the rhyme scheme and discuss if it supports the message of the poem.

7. In the poem the speaker addresses the gum tree. Whom did Oodgeroo Noonuccal have in mind when she wrote her poem? Give reasons for your view.

(Karl Sassenberg)