

7 Analysing Poetry – Answer Key

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

1. Describe the situation presented in the poem.

On his way through the city the **speaker** of the poem comes across a gum tree which stands all forlorn in the street, his roots mostly covered by bitumen. The sight of this poor tree sets her thinking.

2. One may distinguish five different parts. Explain what the speaker does in each part.

1. II. 1-2

The speaker sees the gum tree and starts to reflect on its situation.

2. II. 3-5

She realises that in these surroundings the gum tree is out of place. It does not belong here but should rather grow in a forest, its natural environment, a place of plentiful vegetation. The expression "wild bird" stresses the idea of freedom and contrasts this wilderness with the unnatural prison the tree is forced to live in.

3. II. 6-11

She compares the tree to a poor cart-horse (**extended simile**). Her description of the cart-horse is supposed to illustrate the misery of the gum tree.

4. II. 12-14

Her thoughts return to the tree but now she finds it painful to look at it as she has realised the full extent of its misery. The tree is not allowed to grow on fertile ground, i. e. the green grass of nature, but is set in the "black grass of bitumen" (l.14). In terms of colour symbolism black is conventionally associated with death which suggests that the tree is doomed to die.

5. II. 15-16

At the end of the poem she reveals that she identifies with both the cart-horse and the gum tree. The final question "What have they done to us?" is purely **rhetorical** and implies that they have been displaced and mistreated.

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?**

A contrast of the two horses brings out clearly the misery of the cart-horse. You may write down your thoughts in two columns.

cart-horse	wild horse
castrated -> deprived of his masculine strength/ unable to father children/ humiliated	- strong/virile/proud to be alive
broken -> lacking determination/free will/fighting spirit	- strong will/fierce/ready to fight any foe or competitor
wronged -> unjustly/unfairly treated/not granted equal rights	- stands up for his rights/fights injustice
strapped and buckled -> like a madman/ lunatic/he has lost his sanity (and dignity)	- throws off any fetters
hell prolonged -> not allowed to die/kept alive in hell	- lives in Paradise
hung head -> shame/resignation	- lifted head/ ready to face life

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?

gum tree: There is no hint in the poem that the speaker must be distinguished from the poet. So we may safely assume that the situation of the gum tree represents that of the Aborigines.

bitumen: The poet wants us to develop a chain of associations:

bitumen (road surface) – > city – > white civilisation

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grass, earth – > natural surrounding – > wilderness (freedom)

Bitumen is used as a metaphor (metonymy, synecdoche) and represents the forces which keep the displaced tree in its unnatural prison.

cart-horse: The last two lines show that the horse stands for those who were torn from their homes and forced to live a life of suppression in an alien society, i. e. the Aborigines "whose lives were ripped apart by the actions of successive governments" (Kevin Rudd, *Students Book*, text 3, p. 10, ll. 13-14.)

wild horse: By contrast the wild horse stands for Aboriginal people in their natural environment.

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.

In lines 1- 14 the speaker compares a displaced a gum tree and a cart-horse. It is only in the last two lines that she reveals why she does so. Her exclamation "O fellow citizen" shows that she identifies with the tree (and the horse).

The rhetorical question in the last line is an accusation against those who have displaced and suppressed all three, the tree, the horse and the speaker. They are the white Australians, the ones who built the city streets, removed Aborigines from their homes and imposed a foreign culture on them. Like the cart-horse these Indigenous Australians were humiliated, degraded and deprived of their dignity (cf. *Students Book*, text 3, p. 10, ll. 9 – 11).

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

Rhyme scheme: a a b b c c b d e e f f d g h h d g h h g

There is a rhyme scheme but it is fairly irregular. The same applies to the metre which varies from two stresses (dimeter) to five stresses (pentameter) per line. These irregularities on the level of sound support the idea of disorder and underline the fact that the lives of Aboriginal people have been messed up.

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.

The description of gum tree and cart-horse illustrates how miserable and hopeless the living conditions of Aboriginal people are. It expresses the feelings of the Indigenous people, who were displaced and robbed off their native culture. In the last line the speaker uses two pronouns, "they" and "us", and it becomes clear from the context that they stand for two different groups of Australian society, the Whites and the Aborigines. Read again with this line in mind the poem is addressed to the white Australians and supposed to show them what they have done to the native population.

[Karl Sassenberg]