

Task for *The ABC Book of Australian Poetry*

Lyric poetry

Close study: 'In Time of Drought' and 'Rainwater Tank'

Have students read 'In Time of Drought' (p. 48) and 'Rainwater Tank' (pp. 88–89).

They may underline or highlight the words or phrases that stand out for them. They can then connect the lines and words with emotions, considering their connotations and if these are positive or negative feelings.

Following this interpretation of the words and phrases, they can draw conclusions about what is valued.

Here is a sample application of the activity using the first stanza of 'In Time of Drought' by Mary Hannay Foott.

The River of God is full of water – Psalm

The rushes are black by the river bed,
And the sheep and cattle stand
Wistful-eyed – where the waters were –
In a waste of gravel and sand;
Or pass o'er their dying and dead to slake
Their thirst in the slimy pool
Shall they pine and perish in the pangs of drought,
While Thy river, O God, is full!

| Words and phrases | Positive or negative? | Interpretation |
|---|--|--|
| The rushes are <u>black</u> | | Black often suggests evil or sorrow |
| cattle stand/ Wistful-eyed | | The animals long for something better |
| <u>In a waste of gravel and sand;</u> | | The landscape is not inviting |
| their <u>dying and dead</u> | | The alliteration of <i>d</i> reinforces the harshness of the landscape and the finality of death brought by it |
| they <u>pine and perish in the pangs</u> of drought | | Alliteration of <i>p</i> to extend the notion of slow death |
| While Thy river, O God, is full! | | Strong contrast of fullness criticising God |
| Conclusion | The poet paints a negative setting of the animals and landscape in trouble, compared to expectations from God. | |

Writing about poetry

Students can read the sample paragraph and look closely at how it is written. Use different highlighter colours to highlight words or phrases that are about:

- meaning
- techniques
- explanations of techniques
- effect.

Paragraph

The major theme here is the harshness of the Australian outback in drought and the lack of intervention from a God who would withhold rain. The underlined words reveal a sorrowful tone for the animals caught in a drought. The biblical reference to the Psalm develops an irony in the poem as the persona questions God in the last line: shall they perish while thy river is full? This is emphasised by the punctuation choice as an exclamation, rather than a question mark. The imagery of the wasteland of gravel and sand, where sheep and cattle pass over dead or dying animals, creates a sense of tragedy. This is further emphasised by the harsh cacophonous sounds of the ‘k’ in ‘black’ and ‘slake’ which add to the discomfort of the reader when confronted with this scene.

“Rainwater Tank” carries a similar theme with the focus on the poem being the farmyard, the water tank and its inhabitants. These themes of hardship and drought recur often in Australian poetry and serve as a contrast to the romantic writing of Patterson and others who often overlooked these struggles in the aim to glorify the bush.

Understanding rhyming schemes and rhythm

It’s important for students to know that rhyming scheme refers to the end rhyme while rhythm is about meter and phrasing throughout the line. Rhyme is about the sound and not the spelling of the words and sometimes it is a half rhyme - suggested but not exactly the same.

Here are the last words in stanza one of “In Time of Drought” with matching lines coloured the same.

| | | | |
|--------------|----------|----------|---|
| Bed | a | a | Each new line ending is identified with a letter of the alphabet. We can see here that the pattern is repeated every four lines so the rhyming pattern is identified as a repeated abcb pattern even though the next four lines have different endings because they follow the same pattern. |
| stand | b | b | |
| were | c | c | |
| sand | b | b | |
| Slake | d | a | Poetry is about understanding the patterns that the text forms. Sometimes this pattern can be linked to the ideas (themes). For example, in this poem, contrasting the sorrowful reality of drought with the fullness of a river of god, we might say that the alternating rhyme pattern reflects the two sides of the landscape. |
| pool | e | b | |
| drought | f | c | |
| full | e | b | |

Stand and *sand* have the same rhyming ending so they are full rhymes.

Pool and *full*, however, do not look at all similar but have the same long ‘oo’ sound and end in ‘l’. These words are half rhymes.

Students can complete the rhyme pattern for the rest of the poem and for “Rainwater Tank”; they should identify full and half rhymes and consider if there is any meaning created by the rhyme pattern or if it is simply for an aural effect.

Have students complete the following questions and activities:

1. Are the stanzas and lines of the same or similar length? If different, do the ideas change markedly in the different length stanzas?
2. In order to understand meter, count the syllables across the first four lines noting how many are in each line. What pattern can you see? If you really struggle with counting syllables, you could visit the [syllable counter](#) website. Describe the rhythm that the meter creates: slow, fast, steady, beating, etc.
3. Identify other techniques like alliteration and assonance. Consonant sounds such as ‘s’ and ‘l’ are regarded as soft sounds and sounds such as ‘d’ and ‘t’ are called hard sounds (or cacophonous – bad sounding). Go through the alphabet and identify all consonants as hard or soft (or both). Compare your findings with other students. How might these sounds help the rhythm of the poem?
4. Assonance is repetition of vowel sounds - these are identified as long or short and change the mood. Find tables of long and short sounds on the internet or compile your own. How do these help the rhythm of the poem?

Discussion:

- Have you been to parts of Australia in drought? Or have you ever lived in a place suffering from drought? What was it like?
- Do you think poems like these better reflect the Australian Outback than “Clancy of The Overflow”? Give reasons why or why not.
- Listen to [Darcy Howard’s](#) recent poem on the Australian drought:
 - How does the poem fit within the structure of a lyric poem?
 - Compare the poem to “Rainwater Tank” and “In Time of Drought”. In what ways is it similar?
 - How does the poem touch on other themes?
 - How can you tell that this poem is set in our time and not that of the 1800s?

[\(ACELA1547\)](#), [\(ACELT1619\)](#), [\(ACELT1621\)](#), [\(ACELT1627\)](#), [\(ACELT1623\)](#), [\(ACELT1630\)](#), [\(ACELY1719\)](#), [\(ACELY1721\)](#), [\(ACELY1733\)](#)