

Task for *Kath Walker in China*

A guide to responding to poems

General commentary:

1. The poems have been described as a 'verse travelogue', a description of what the poet saw in China during the cultural exchange and her reaction to it. Is that how you experienced these poems?
2. *Structure*: Are the poems narrative, descriptive, polemical or philosophical?
3. *Main ideas*: What ideas are dealt with in the poems? Do they seem to continue ideas from your study of 'The Past'?
4. *Themes*: What underlying messages do the poems carry? For example, an appreciation of the beauty of nature.
5. *Form*: The poems are all written in free verse. This does not mean that they are just speech written down. Look for ways in which the poet has used *metre* to produce rhythmic cadences to place emphasis on certain words and phrases to highlight ideas.
6. *Images and symbols*: How has the poet used images that appeal to different senses to create meaning? What symbols have been used?
7. *Mood/atmosphere*: Is the excitement of the members of the touring group evident in the poems? Their sense of awe? Homesickness?

Some starting points for responding to each poem:

'China...Woman'

1. Note the deliberate connection between China and Aboriginal Australia: the great Wall and the Rainbow Serpent.
2. The poem has obvious political overtones; Oodgeroo sides with the ordinary people of China against the 'ancient Dynasties'.
3. Perhaps Oodgeroo sees a parallel between the triumph of the 'people' and the possible resistance of Aboriginal people to the white establishment in Australia.
4. Research both the 'ancient Dynasties' and the People's Liberation Army.
5. Note the ambiguity about the PLA. It might have liberated China but it crushes 'the weeping wild flowers'.

'Reed Flute Cave'

1. Note the mythological figure of the Earth Mother. This emphasises the Indigenous spiritual connection to the landscape, to living in harmony with nature.
2. The poet makes a direct address to the Dreaming creation story of the Rainbow Serpent. It would be a good idea to research this mythological being.
3. Note the explicit reference to the sacred ('rock cathedral') to link the cave to the Aboriginal Dreaming.
4. The Reed Flute Cave and Stradbroke Island are linked by images capturing the beauty of nature.

‘Entombed Warriors’

1. Research both the history of Emperor Qin Shi Huang and the entombed warriors to understand the references in the poem.
2. Note the list of images to build up a description of the entombed warriors. Find an image on the internet to get a better idea of what they looked like.
3. There is an interesting use of the conjunctions ‘And’ and ‘Until’ to capture the movement in time and change the direction of the poet’s thought.
4. The poet has made good use of the tactic of counter-expectation: the excavation reveals not the emperor’s glory but his human fragility.

‘Visit to Sun Yat-Sen Memorial Hall’

1. First, research the historical figure, Sun Yat-Sen.
2. The lines ‘The ghosts from the past’ and ‘The past and present/Unite within my mind’ are a powerful reminder of the line ‘The past is all about us and within’ from ‘The Past’.
3. Are ‘The spirits of the past’ the poet’s tribal ancestors?
4. The last two lines suggest that the poet is a voice for her people, helping them to regain their pride and dignity.

‘Sunrise on Huampu River’

1. The ‘Oh!’ at the beginning of the poem sounds like a sincere expression of surprise and enjoyment.
2. The poem is a series of images of activity on the river in which the poet uses similes to paint a vivid picture of the scene.
3. This poem is a simple description of the river at dawn. It would be interesting to compare it to William Wordsworth’s poem ‘Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September, 1802’ in which the poet captures an early morning scene in London.

‘A Lake within a Lake’

1. An interesting series of images in the first stanza to capture the exotic scene.
2. The second stanza refers to a Chinese myth that a zigzag path will confuse demons and protect walkers. However, it also refers to the Zen principle of mindfulness: a zigzag bridge will slow the walker down to be more aware of her surroundings.
3. This poem again reinforces the theme of a love of nature.
4. Research the type of building described as a pagoda; see its links with traditional Chinese culture and the Buddhist religion.
5. Note the effect of the lake on Oodgeroo’s party: peace, tranquillity, harmony.