

## Task for *Kath Walker in China*

### Critical essay

In her poem 'The Past' Oodgeroo contrasts 'This little now' of the present with the vastness of the past which may now be unreachable but which still has a powerful influence on her. In her dream of an idyllic past, which is not so much a timeline as an all-enveloping presence, the poet recalls the thousands of generations of her Aboriginal ancestors and their intimate affiliation with the natural world. She also acknowledges how much of her sense of identity and even her very essence as a human being are owed to the past. The poem reveals Noonuccal's commitment to her people and her role as a 'song man' to give a voice to a pan-Aboriginality.

The poet's contrast of the narrow present with a boundless revered past is presented through a **three-stanza structure**. The first stanza is an introduction to a lengthier second section that describes the poet's dream of the past; the poem is then brought to a close through a short conclusion that repeats the main idea. The first stanza is written in sentences that express a complex idea, that the poet as a human being in the 'accidental present' is simply the current manifestation of the influences of the past. The first two lines state the poet's belief that the past is alive and envelops us in our daily lives. The next four lines assert the poet's belief that our 'selves', our identities, are the result of endless generations that have come before us. There is a short introduction to the main section of the second stanza; this is a prelude to the poet's dream of the past. Finally, the third section of the poem contrasts the contingent present to the vastness of the past.

The **language** of the poem is simple but expresses a complex idea, that the present moment in time for all of us is the result of what has happened in boundless past time. The language in stanzas one and three is simple and written in sentences to express the poet's idea that the past is still alive, while the longer middle stanza contains a number of images that capture a harmony with nature within which her people lived in the past. The poem begins with a command to the reader ('Let no one say the past is dead'), then expresses in one sentence the poet's belief that the past is still alive and envelops us, and then moves to a lyrical description of the beauty of nature through a series of images that appeal to the reader's senses ('The stars over me'; 'Soft cries of the night').

Oodgeroo uses a number of **contrasting images** to illustrate the difference between her comfortable but narrow suburban life and the richness of the lives of the thousands of generations of her people ('My own people') in the past. The present is described as 'This little now' represented by the 'easy chair' and the 'electric heater' which is then contrasted with the 'thousand thousand campfires' from the deep past. Images like 'camp fire in the bush' and the 'tall surrounding trees' making 'their own music' represent nature as a powerful but benign presence ('old Nature's lives'). The poet also uses the metaphor of 'blood' to express how deeply her Aboriginal past influences her.

The main ideas of the poem are supported by a **mood** of reverence for the past and hope for the future, which is balanced by a sense of regret and loss. Oodgeroo Noonuccal

communicates a sense of regret at what has been lost, but also asserts hope that the past still exerts an influence on her and her people. There is an atmosphere of peace and harmony in the description of the forest scene in her dream, a serene sense of one-ness with nature and with her 'own people'. The atmosphere of the poem is also somewhat wistful, regretful at what has been lost, but there is also hope in the poet's belief in the continuity of past and present.

This is a powerful poem in which Oodgeroo imagines an idyllic past for Aboriginal people, states her belief that this past continues to influence her in her present life, and points the way forward to a better future for her and her people.