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A HUMAN PATTERN: SELECTED POEMS

Judith Wright

INTRODUCTION

Judith Wright was both a poet and an activist who questioned the rapid acceleration of technology, lamented the destruction of our environment, wrote critically about war and was disturbed by our indifference to the plight of Aboriginal people. She used her considerable talent as a poet to address these issues but, above all, she was concerned about the survival of common humanity.

She believed that it was the role of the poet and artist to remind us of the nature of pain, death and love. Wright's poetry is grounded in the tradition of the land and exhibits a distinctive quality arising from her relationship with the Australian landscape. The countryside itself was an accepted part of her being, a landscape of the mind; her work springs from a sense of her own affinity, both as a poet and as a woman, with the physical environment.

A starting point for her writing was her perception that the role of the Australian artist was one in which the 'writer must be at peace with his landscape before he can turn confidently to its human figures' (Wright 1964, p.xi). In Wright's work, there is a sense of the wholeness of life that emanates even from the minutiae of the short descriptive lyrics; this sense rests on her notion of continuity: the cyclical patterns where death and decay provide matter for the shaping of new life.

BRIEF SYNOPSIS

Wright's first book of poetry was published in 1946 and shows she was profoundly affected by the uncertainties attendant upon a world engulfed in the cataclysm of total war. Her poetic search was for a unity that would come from a merging of nature, the cosmos and the imagination, which she considered to be a part of man's physical self. Her consistent view of life was that for every one of us it is imperative to accept the knowledge that each individual must survive in a less than perfect world.

Wright appeals to a tradition that is located in the land itself, but this does not mean that her poetry has a limited range. On the contrary, it reveals her concern with larger metaphysical issues. Most of the themes that Wright was to develop were explored in her early work, particularly those relating to the relationship of 'Woman to Man' and to nature's cycle of birth and rebirth. These are an extension of the exploration of humankind's relationship to nature. The later poetry broadens the scope of her themes to incorporate the post World War II preoccupation with nuclear armaments, modern technology, and the conservation of the environment, all of which relate to the larger themes of renewal and of the effects of time.

From the outset, Wright asserts her certainty that the poet is 'the maker' of 'both time and fear,/knowing that to yield to either is to be dead' ('The Moving Image', p.15). This poetic consciousness pervades the entire range of her poetry. Her awareness of creativity, both in art and in nature, doubly emphasises her anxiety for humankind's continuing search for harmony with nature.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Biography: 1915–2000

Judith Wright was born in Armidale, New South Wales, in the region known as New England. She was the daughter of wealthy pastoralists who were granted

large tracts of land in the Hunter Valley in the 1830s. In Britain, the family was descended from a lineage of country gentry on one side and Scots Rebels on the other. Her father had a long and distinguished public career as president of the Hereford Society of Australia, was a prominent member of the New State movement in New England and campaigned to establish the University of New England, of which he was the second Chancellor ('one of us helped to found a university', 'Pastoral Lives', p.228). Wright inherited a sense of social obligation, but her feelings of responsibility and care for other human beings and the rest of creation stemmed from personal awareness and insight. From the beginning, she was determined to be her own person.

Born a few weeks after the Gallipoli landings, she became conscious early on of the sacrifices that war demanded. She moved away from the family's belief in England as the motherland, perceiving that Australia provided a unique environment.

After attending Sydney University at the beginning of World War II, the shortage of manpower brought her back to her father's station. In her twenties she became increasingly deaf, a situation that probably augmented her other senses and allowed her a deeper awareness of the minutiae of natural objects. When she was 30, she met J. P. McKinney, a man 23 years her senior. In 1950, the pair moved to Mount Tamborine in Queensland where their daughter Meredith was born. This unconventional *de facto* arrangement belied her conservative upbringing and showed her assertion of independence both of mind and spirit. The pair did not marry until 1962, just four years before McKinney died.

Her writing was deeply inspired by the places in which she lived: New England, the subtropical rainforests of Tamborine and the plains of the southern highlands of New South Wales where she moved after her husband's death.

As an environmentalist, Wright was a founding member of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland. She fought to save the ecology of the Great Barrier Reef when it was threatened by oil drilling and she campaigned

against sand mining on Fraser Island. She was also an ardent supporter of the Aboriginal Land Rights movement and strove for reconciliation between white Australians and Aborigines.

The winner of many literary prizes, including the Queen's gold medal for poetry in 1992, she was also an acclaimed literary critic. Her work remains a unique accomplishment in the Australian canon of poetry and literature.

STRUCTURE, LANGUAGE & STYLE

How to approach a poetry response

It is not always possible to discuss poems under the usual headings. 'Characters and Relationships' as a category, for example, has less relevance than in a novel, perhaps, although the personae or speakers do demonstrate the use of narrative voice. Our understanding of a poem, and our response to it in discussions, should take in the structure and language of the poetry, its use of images, and finally, an understanding of the values and themes that the poem conveys.

Some points to consider in your approach:

- Who is the **persona** – the person speaking in the poem? (see below under 'Narrative Voice')
- How does the **form** the poet has used contribute to the readers' understanding of what the poem is about?
- Is it a strictly rhyming poem?
- Are the verses of even length?
- Is the poem in open verse form?
- Why do different poets adopt different verse forms?
- Does the **rhythm** (metre) evoke an emotional response?
- How does the **rhyme** scheme help to make the poem effective?

- How does the abandonment of formal metre and rhyme – **free verse** – contribute to a poem’s effectiveness?
- What kind of **vocabulary** is used?
- Is the poem packed with adjectives or adverbs?
- Is it purely descriptive?
- How are contrasting words used for effect?
- What kind of **emotional response** does the language elicit?
- Does it make the reader feel sad/happy/angry, etc.?
- Is the reader’s sympathy engaged?
- Is this the response the poet intends?
- What kind of **tone** does the poet use?
- Is there a reliance on sarcasm, wit, persuasion, etc. to win over readers?
- What **devices** does the poet employ to manipulate the reader’s response? (e.g. metaphors, similes, assonance, onomatopoeia, alliteration)
- Is the **voice** used in the poem private or public?
- Is the voice that of a storyteller? commentator? reporter? person reflecting? bystander? observer?
- What kinds of **images** promote an understanding of what the poet conveys?
- What makes the poem **memorable**?

These and other aspects of the poetry are embedded in the discussion below but it is important to note that Wright generally uses an ‘open’ form of verse. Its apparent simplicity permits a presentation of complex images and a subtle, imaginative response to her environment.

Imagery

One way of approaching a response to Wright's poetry is through an exploration of the imagery that characterises her poetry as Australian, both through the poems of landscape and those that are human centred. There is, too, a spiritual element that often refers to the cycle from birth to death and the possibility of renewal.

Images work in complex ways. A poem's meaning can be located on several levels at the same time, an effect that is achieved through a layering of images and ambiguity to extend the range of meaning. To achieve her desired effects, Wright relies on a range of poetic devices, such as metaphor and simile, and the use of concrete images.

Images of landscape

Wright examines the nature of the Australian landscape by fixing on an object and pointing out its most elementary aspects. The poems that focus on the particularities of flora and fauna, and on man himself within his physical environment, convey Wright's special understanding of the orchestration of the natural world.

Often Wright's imagery is most effective when she uses an alternation of scale between a broad overall view and a narrow concentration on microscopic physical details. In '**Wildflower Plain**' (p.94), for example, she begins with the broad scope of 'The angry granite/the hungry range', the mountains that 'must crumble away ... melt and change' in order for the plain to form below. 'Like the words of a lover' (simile), its purpose is to nurture the delicate flowers that spring in response to the earth's bounty. So the aged mountain range disintegrates to give life to the gentle 'Blue orchid', the image enhanced by the simile 'as skies seen early'; this indicates a particular shade of blue – that of the early morning sky. She lists the flowers of the plain, their transience contrasting with the age old 'rock', yet granite must make way over time, 'be humble' and 'decay' into 'new earth' which permits new life out of 'the truth of death'. Here, then, the wide view of the mountains contracts to the

delicacy and ephemerality of flowers blooming as they draw their sustenance from the decomposing rock: an act of rebirth made possible by the death of the old.

Similarly, in '**The Forest**' (p.104), Wright's gaze, within the vastness of the forest, focuses on the intricacies of its flora, on the fragility and fragrance of 'white violets smudged with purple/the wild-ginger spray/ground-orchids small and single' and 'the cunjevoi's green hood'. The ability to bring the vastness of the forest to this concentration on its details is a mark of her originality as a poet. The colours blue and purple reflect the sky and the distant mountains while green indicate the softness of the New England valleys. The first-person speaker brings readers a personal experience of the forest, referring back to an earlier time when she 'first ... knew this forest'; this suggests she was young and innocent of what life could bring, experiencing the forest before everything was named: the future stretched out timelessly in front of her. Now 'those first strange joys are gone' and with maturity she seeks 'the truth from which they grow'. Wright sees unity in the natural world, a harmony that often escapes humankind's consciousness.

Through such synthesising imagery, the reader is drawn to a greater appreciation of the complexities of nature, of both its magnitude and its diminutiveness.

Other patterns of imagery that might be explored:

- the celebration of trees as symbols of permanence
- technology as a threat to the harmony of mankind in nature
- the depiction of Australian animals and birds.

Narrative voice

The term 'narrative voice' refers to the speakers in the poems. They are the characters and, although they sometimes describe others, it is their thoughts and reactions that must be analysed. Wright's poems people her country with

living figures such as old Dan, Thunderbolt, the bullock driver, the remittance man and Aborigines.

Personae or speakers

Many of Wright's poems tell a story through a speaker or narrator that in poetry is sometimes called a 'persona'. It is important to work out the story of the poem and its central thought or mood before beginning an analysis of its features. Establishing the identity of the poem's persona, or speaker, assists us in making sense of the poem's central message.

The use of the first-person speaker, 'I', for example, enables readers to participate directly in the speaker's experiences. In '**South of My Days**' (pp.11–12), Wright tells the story of an early 20th-century drover who moved cattle from Queensland through New South Wales. Also intrinsic to the drover's story is a demonstration of her own love of the rugged Australian landscape. The title indicates that this is a personal experience of Wright's; she is now living in Queensland, but her mind goes back 'South' to her beloved New England country. 'My days' circle' refers to the passing of each day.

The speaker begins with her own story as a background to that of Dan the drover. She demonstrates the harshness of the tableland country, but it is 'part of [her] blood'. This is a landscape stripped bare, its 'bony slopes' mirroring the bleakness of winter and the 'outcropping granite/clean, lean, hungry country' is relieved only by 'low trees blue-leaved and olive', a grey-green colour that underlines the barren slopes that end in a creek choked with feral shrubs and trees. She shelters in an old cottage that provides only a modicum of warmth, but here she feels close to all the others who, over time, have also found refuge there, including Dan the drover. In the depth of winter she finds it hard to believe 'that summer/will turn up again some day'. Life is as cruel as the landscape through which the drover brings the cattle.

The barren landscape becomes a frame for Dan's yarns. He is an old man strengthened by his memories and 'Seventy years of stories'. Through the

speaker, we hear of his life droving from 'Charleville to the Hunter', through the mountains at Bogong and around Tamworth. His tales are of drought, where 'the mud round them/hardened like iron' (simile), and of death and survival above the odds. Wright captures the extremes of climate and weather that afflict Australia. The cattle reached the Hunter only to find 'the river was dust', then 'up in the Bogongs' the snow 'blizzards' came; but through all weathers the drover got through with the cattle. In another yarn Dan encounters the bushranger, Thunderbolt, and gives him the 'wink' that 'the troopers are just behind' searching for him. These are just yarns, 'True or not', but they colour and illustrate the story of his life. The apt simile, 'like a pack of conjuror's cards', expresses the elusive nature of memory as 'he shuffles the years' (metaphor). In the end 'it's all the same'; this is another winter but it is his last and now 'no one is listening'.

In the last stanza the speaker returns to complete the 'south of my days' circle', underlining the eternal process that ends at the point at which it began. The 'yarns are over' for Dan, but this 'high lean country' is still 'full of old stories' that stay with the narrator. The narrative structure here is complex, as it is both the speaker's story and the drover's. The speaker creates the backdrop for Dan's yarns so that they become first-hand, as told to her.

On the other hand, '**Bullocky**' (p.9) is narrated in the third person (omniscient narration). The bullocky, a character similar to a drover, transported goods overland with a team of bullocks (castrated bulls tied together in a team). This is not a first-hand account but, rather, the view of one who could be considered to be a universal man. As in 'South of My Days', he is firmly placed within the landscape (see analysis under 'Different Interpretations').

The ending in 'Bullocky' is less poignant than that in the story of Dan the drover. The first-person strategy that allowed us a personal view of both the speaker and Dan is more successful than the third-person view of the Bullocky. First-person narration brings readers an immediacy of experience that is lacking in the second poem, where we see the Bullocky from a

distance. This extra remove does not permit us to engage so readily with the subject and leads to some ambiguity of meaning.

In '**Remittance Man**' (pp.4–5) Wright uses a similar third-person narration. Here she contrasts life in England for the privileged 'squire' who has 'inherited' the family estate, with his 'spendthrift' brother who, 'disinherited and graceless', has immigrated to Australia. Wright makes it clear, though, that despite 'his pittance' and poor circumstances, he is more fortunate because he was able to 'escape' from the empty mores of English society to the freedom of 'the track' to 'nowhere'. His restlessness could not be contained within the social framework of 'pheasant-shooting' and 'county ball[s]', but he has no regrets. Wright's obvious approbation for the 'scapegoat's' escape to this 'harsh biblical country' is clearly celebratory as she contrasts the 'rainy elms' of England against the 'sparse swinging shadow of trees no longer foreign'. Her repetition of the word 'escape' underlines this point.

Again we are removed from an immediate participation in the action through the third-person narration. Wright's narrative strategies vary, but she is generally more successful when she brings experiences to us through first-person narration.

As with the drover, the remittance man and the bullocky, Wright often places her characters firmly against a background of the Australian landscape. By underlining their oneness with nature, she is able to show that we are all part of the cycle of renewal and that we must live in harmony with the natural world.

THEMES, IDEAS & VALUES

Hope through an affirmation of life

Wright maintains a concern for humankind's survival throughout her work, but this is balanced by a faith in the countervailing force of creativity.

Wright believed it is the job of the poet to affirm life and creation against the forces of death and destruction and to be tuned to into 'the incredibly fragile beginnings of creation, to spring and the irrational resurgence of life' (*Because I Was Invited*, p.44). Yet, her faith in the renewable resources of both humans and the earth is not shallowly optimistic.

In Wright, this affirmation of life is often manifested in a tension between life and death, darkness and light. The conflict is usually resolved through an act of creation such as in '**Midnight**' (p.36) where the first-person speaker adjusts her 'sight' to the darkness. She imagines her sight to be 'As a plant in winter dies ... and lies/leafless, tongueless, lost in earth' until 'imaging' its 'fierce rebirth'. The string of poetic devices here underlines the main thought: the simile – 'as a plant' – is followed immediately by the assonance of the repetitive syllable in 'leafless/tongueless'; and the strict rhyme scheme, unusual in Wright's poetry, enhances the rhythm of the stanza. With the simile 'like a god is born again', finding her 'sight' becomes the equivalent of a hopeful new start.

Similarly, in '**Dark Gift**' (p.44) new life and hope are synonymous in an 'act of passionate love' as 'The flower', which 'begins in the dark/where life is not', springs from 'night's mud ... to take shape and rise'. The 'message' that 'death send[s]' is the 'dark gift' of new life. This imaginative portrayal of the birth of the flower through the process of growth equates with human birth where from the 'darkness' of the womb the child will emerge with a similar 'passion' ('**Woman's Song**', p.21).

In '**Train Journey**' (p.48), the first-person speaker exhorts the 'box-tree and ironbark' to 'Clench down [their] strength' to 'Break with your violent root the virgin rock' until 'the unliving come to life in you'. This is Wright's overt tribute to the landscape she loves – the 'country that built my heart' – to bring from the darkness the 'flowers more lovely than the white moon'. Again and again, flowers represent hope and life springing from darkness.

Hope and an affirmation of life are often beyond what can be perceived. In '**Gum Trees Stripping**' (pp.75–6), the trees are seen as the repositories of wisdom. Words, on the other hand, are 'not meanings for a tree' which contains within it the 'trigger' for the 'silent rituals' of bark stripping and new life. To say 'These rags look like humility/or this year's wreck of last year's love' is not wisdom, for 'wisdom lies outside the word'. Wisdom here represents enlightenment and enlightenment is symbolic of hope. Instead of something ragged or wrecked there are the delicate colours of 'rose' and 'grey'. The tree is a 'sculpture' of nature and the old bark symbolises the end of a season. Trees, unlike humans, 'can be quiet and not look/for reasons past the edge of reason'. They silently observe the cyclical patterns of nature through the seasons without the need for categorising and, instead, represent stability and hope for the continuance of the cyclical processes of life.

Through all her work, Wright affirms life and hope even through human darkness. We cannot always banish the darkness of human activity. In '**The Moving Image**' (pp.14–17) we are shown as 'dwarfed by the dark'. All we 'inherit' is 'a handful of dust and a fragment of stone'. The poem ends optimistically, though, as we are urged to 'Yet listen' for 'the music grows; around us, before us, behind/there is sound in the silence; the dark is a tremor of light'. The repetition of 'us' and the predominantly sibilant 's' accentuate the point that there is an expectation that the darkness has passed, for the 'grass' is 'rising'; 'winter is done' and we are surrounded by music, the emblem of harmony.

Although she understands our pain and suffering, Wright maintains hope for humanity. That is why she advocates conservation and reconciliation with our

indigenous peoples. Hope comes from a belief in affirmation of life and she shows this through her attention to the natural world and to an understanding of our human strengths and weaknesses.

Compassion

There is an overwhelming sense of compassion throughout Wright's poetry whether for the victims of war and technology or for ordinary human life, our loves, our pain and suffering and death. Nowhere, though, is her compassion more obvious than in her consciousness of the ravages that European settlement wreaked on the Aboriginal population.

This empathy for Aborigines can be seen early in '**Bora Ring**' (p.2), which becomes a lament for what has been lost. The plaintive tone is established in the opening sentence – 'The song is gone'. There follows a list of what else has been lost – 'the dance', 'The hunter', 'The nomad feet'. Wright paints a graphic picture of the dispossession of a race. Now what is left is 'useless' as the 'tribal story' has been diminished.

The beauty of the images combines with the plaintive rhythm to create an elegiac mood, despite the brevity of the poem. She mourns the passing of 'the painted bodies/a dream the world breathed sleeping and forgot'. Sometimes, though, we are reminded by the 'sightless shadow' (alliteration emphasises the point) of the old Biblical story of Cain killing his brother. This 'ancient curse' brings 'fear' that we will all have to account for Aboriginal deprivation and dispossession.

Throughout her work, Wright acknowledged indigenous history and presence, advocating recognition of their past, present and future. From '**Nigger's Leap: New England**' (p.8) to the end of her writing, Wright shows her consciousness of the wrongs committed against Aborigines. 'Did we not know their blood channelled our rivers/and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?' she asks of her generation and of our own. The productive pastures of New England were gained at the expense of the 'thin black children dancing like the shadows/of saplings'. The effect of this simile is repeated through

other poems where Aborigines are made a constant presence through the effect of shadows. Again in '**The Dark Ones**' (pp.193–4), Aborigines are painted as shadowy—'mute shadows glide'—while the 'pale eyes' of the conquerors apprehensively acknowledge that '*they*' are 'still here'. 'We thought' we had wiped them out but these 'night ghosts' haunt us with those 'dark gutters of grief/their eyes'. There is 'shamed relief' when they 'drift away' while the 'bargaining' for land rights and recognition continues endlessly.

The most pronounced celebration of Aborigines is, however, in Wright's tribute to her fellow poet, Kath Walker – '**Two Dreamtimes**' (pp.166–9). This is also her most overt condemnation of the European conquerors' ignorance and greed. She addresses Walker at the outset as 'my sister' and then outlines her own experiences with Aborigines. Narrated in the first-person, the poet and speaker are one. As a child, she was not allowed 'to play' with 'the dark children' who were, according to her family, 'the wrong colour'. She acknowledges that she was ignorant of black/white history and the dispossession that allowed her ancestors to prosper while the other children were 'dying'. The complex narration strategy combines Wright's own experiences with those of Walker's so that they come together, the stories interlocking.

Here, too, she combines her sorrow for Aborigines with a similar lament for the failure of her own generation to conserve what is left. Both poets share their 'grief for a lost country' and mourn for 'the ripped length of the island beaches/the drained paperbark swamps'; this Eden they both thought they had grown up in is a 'changed world'. And yet, their griefs are 'separate' because there is a sharp divide between them. The statement 'A knife's between us' resonates through the poem and is emphasised by its repetition. The stanza:

I am born of the conquerors,
you of the persecuted.
Raped by rum and an alien law,
progress and economics

is a fierce confession. This is the sum of imperialist history, a list that casts its shadow over the future. And yet, these words in bronzed letters are now embedded prominently in a walkway at Sydney's Circular Quay. Perhaps, then, the extent of Wright's compassion for the Aborigines has, at last, been acknowledged.

- See also the poignancy of the story of '**Jacky Jacky**' (pp.144–6) who assisted the expedition of Edmund Kennedy.
- '**At Cooloolah**' (p.83) also reminds us of the 'arrogant guilt' that still attends black/white relations in Australia.

Renewal: birth and rebirth

It is in the poems that avow the cycle of life that Wright shows the governing theme of renewal that characterises her perception of the poetic task.

Wright uses the symbol of the flame-tree in a progressive exploration of the cycle of birth and rebirth. The 1940s '**Flame-Tree in a Quarry**' (p.37) juxtaposes our technological encroachments on the environment with the ability of nature to renew itself – 'the broken bone of the hill/stripped and left for dead/like a wrecked skull' in the scarred landscape of the quarry, 'leaps' into new life with the blooming of the flame-tree, this 'bush of blood'. The images of birth and death alternate through startlingly precise images as 'Out of the very wound/springs up this scarlet breath'. Life's blood springs from death; there is eternal renewal but not without pain. The flame-tree represents fire and fire is the cleansing element before renewal.

In '**The Flame-tree**' (p.57) of the 1950s, Wright extends the symbol in order to question humankind's place in the universal scheme. Man desires peace and harmony with nature, but is unable to attain that ideal. The first-person speaker asks 'How to live ... as the flame-tree lives? /To know what the flame-tree knows—to be/prodigious of my life as that wild tree ... ?' The flame-tree, however, seems to have found 'that easy answer to the question baffling reason' that lies in the promise of rebirth for 'look how gloriously/that careless

blossomer scatters, and more, and more/What the earth takes of her, it will restore'. The poet is asking how she can mirror the abundance of passion that the tree exhibits. She learns from it, as we all must learn from nature, that love is both given and taken and that in losing part of ourselves we become whole. This is part of the cycle of renewal wherein what we give of ourselves is an act of creation.

The experience of a woman giving birth to her child is Wright's most obvious declaration of the positivity of renewal. In '**Woman to Child**' (pp.21–2), the woman, as mother, makes her commitment to life by giving life. The process is a symbiotic one, however, as the unborn child in the 'darkness', 'warmed' her 'flesh' (p.21) while, at the same time, the mother made 'all the world you hear and see' (p.21). Wright then widens the image to incorporate human life within the cosmos where everything interacts in a pattern. Human life may seem inconsequential compared with 'the multitudinous stars ... coloured birds and fishes' and amongst 'sliding continents' (p.21) but this baby is the 'focus of the world' (p.21) to the mother. This is a celebration of the life-making process where both mother and child are tied together even after the point of birth. The mother is 'the earth ... the root' (p.22) and 'the stem' that fed the foetus; she will always be the 'link' that joins them.

Wright's experiences as a mother merge with her poetic aspirations to record the cycle of birth and rebirth within the wider spectrum of nature and landscape. For Wright, the future for humanity lies in a striving towards unity with nature, in a positive search for renewal. In '**Autumn Fires**' (p.130), we are exhorted to 'discipline' our 'garden', to clear away the 'strangling' restrictions of life and, just as bonfires consume the detritus of autumn leaves and spent plants leave the air 'pure', so we must show an affirmative vision by destroying negative experiences in a spiritual conflagration.

Environment/ecology

While her early poems were a subtle recording of human pain and suffering from war and the destruction of Australia's pristine environment, Wright's

voice became more strident and overt in her message about the ravages of technology. She saw Australia as an Eden that has been progressively destroyed since the advent of European settlement.

The poignancy of this devastation is summed up concisely in '**Platypus**' (p.201). The first-person speaker, synonymous with Wright on this occasion, recalls an incident during her girlhood when, watching the stillness of 'a pool' in a calm part of a river, 'an arrowhead of ripples/broke its clear silence' revealing the presence of a platypus. Rarely seen, even then, it represents a 'paradox' among earth's creatures. She likens this 'wary' beast to 'a strange word rising/through the waterhole's rocks'; then it disappears from the speaker's sight. This momentary disappearance becomes symbolic of the loss of our endangered species.

She charts what has been lost; the 'once bright water' is now 'scummy' and fetid, 'thick/with car-bodies, cans, oil' and other detritus that has killed the river and all life in it. And yet, because she can recall the sighting in a moment of contemplation, the platypus lives on. As her 'mind/runs clear', the platypus 'rise[s] through' and she celebrates it in 'a poem' for its 'sake'. The 'ripples' of its 'wake' are still remembered and, therefore, the platypus has triumphed over human passivity and inertia.

In other poems she becomes more vocal about the conservation of our ecology. In '**Australia 1970**' (p.152), she names us as 'conquerors and self-poisoners' who kill everything with 'the venoms that we make'. In '**For a Pastoral Family**' (pp.226–9), she records the way *progress* is destroying the earth – 'the heave of the great corporations/whose bellies are never full' – and the 'junk-food firms' that creep like a plague in acquiring farming 'land' that owners must sell or be left with only 'small beans in a dwindling row'.

But, in a final word, Wright chronicles her own culpability; '**A Document**' (pp.139–40) is a lament for her own part in the destruction of our environment – she signed over 'the coachwood forest' that she inherited to build 'bomber-planes' in World War Two. Her motives were pure, but the end was the same. Our environment was sacrificed to technology.

This is the paradox of human endeavour. We celebrate progress for the benefits it provides, but the price is high. The Eden that was once Australia has been changed forever as technology, universal communication and even day-to-day human activity transform our environment.

DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS

The following readings of **'Bullocky'** (p.9) present two contrasting interpretations.

Interpretation 1

Through her portrayal of the 'Bullocky' Wright presents us with a negative view of our colonial past.

The first reading shows the Bullocky as a natural extension of the landscape carrying out the 'solitary' task of driving his team. Wright gives the Bullocky his own words, composed of natural speech rhythms that lend authenticity to the character. He has endured through all weathers and harsh conditions, but the havoc wrought by the elements on this man, 'thirsty with drought and chilled with rain' over 'all the striding years' until they 'ran widdershins in his brain' (became mixed up and went in the wrong direction) have taken their toll. He becomes disorientated, seeing apparitions where 'fiends and angels' are part of a 'mad apocalyptic dream'; in this state he and his suffering team become one with 'old Moses, and the slaves'. The biblical references continue as he shouts 'prayers and prophecies' against the inexorable passing of time. Alas, thirst leads to madness, but in death he is enveloped by the landscape as time levels his, and all our aspirations. Now 'Grass is across the wagon-tracks' and 'vineyards cover all the slopes' where the bullock teams used to pass. The speaker invokes the spirit of the vine to 'grow close upon that bone' and become 'fruitful' more as a longing than of a realisation. The speaker appeals to the land that takes life to also renew life.

Interpretation 2

Wright's 'Bullocky' is a legendary figure representing a tribute to Australia's pioneering spirit.

Wright has created the Bullocky as a tribute to our pioneering past. She portrays him as an Australian Moses, a symbolic figure who has enriched the land with his own bones for future crops. He is the representative pioneer who has led his followers into 'the Promised Land'. Her use of 'centuries' suggests a timelessness for the Bullocky who becomes a mythical figure signifying the fruitfulness of the passing generations. The religious imagery 'prayers and prophecies' underscore the motif. For the pioneers it was a 'long straining journey' that led to profit and productivity.

There seem to be difficulties with such a jingoistic reading. There is a definite ambiguity suggested in the vocabulary, which sets up a tension against such an interpretation. To begin with, Moses did not lead his followers into the Promised Land, having died at the border. Wright would, of course, have been aware of this. Further, the Bullocky's identification with Moses is a product of his madness, suggesting therefore that our pastoral history was not altogether heroic. Vocabulary such as 'suffering and stubborn', 'long straining journey' and 'heavy-shouldered' undercuts the proposition that this is an affirmation of the pioneering spirit. 'Widdershins' means to go backwards; and why would the cattle-bells ring with a 'sweet *uneasy* sound' if this is a celebratory tribute to the pioneers?

If this is an attempt to supply spiritual sustenance by mythologising the common figure of the Bullocky, the inherent ambiguities would suggest this is too great a burden on the poem. In fact, Wright might be seen to be undercutting such attempts to create national legends.

ESSAY TOPICS

1. 'Because she often employs a first-person narrator, Wright enables readers to participate directly in the speaker's experiences.' Do you agree?
2. 'Wright's poems celebrate the uniqueness of the Australian landscape through her focus on the particularities of flora and fauna.' Discuss.
3. 'The text demonstrates that "the dark itself is the source" of the meaning of human life.' How does Wright use images of darkness as an affirming medium?
4. 'Wright uses varied images of trees to celebrate their permanence symbolically in the face of human frailty.' Discuss.
5. 'Wright's poems demonstrate an intense compassion for the dispossession of indigenous Australians.' Discuss.
6. 'The text demonstrates that because our eyes "impose a human pattern" on our planet, we neglect the conservation of our environment.' Do you agree?
7. 'The text shows that Wright used her role as a poet to remind us of the nature of pain, death and love.' Do you agree?
8. 'Wright demonstrates that the poet must be at peace with the landscape before they can turn confidently to its human figures.' Discuss.
9. 'The text shows that Wright's awareness of creativity in both art and nature is heightened by her role as a woman.' Discuss.
10. 'The text shows that although our values are effectively shaped by the past, we must continue to question our responses to historical circumstances.' Discuss.
11. 'The text shows Wright's affirmative vision that renewal is possible through the cycle of birth and rebirth.' Discuss.
12. 'The text demonstrates the irony of human endeavour that in striving for the benefits of progress, we destroy our environment.' Discuss.

Analysing a sample question

‘Wright’s poems demonstrate an intense compassion for the dispossession of indigenous Australians.’ Discuss.

Decide whether you agree with the topic. Look at what the question is asking for, such as an examination of the way she uses Aboriginal figures symbolically to signify what has been lost through European settlement. You might point out that this is just as much a loss for the conquerors as for the Aborigines.

Frame your main contention.

- Open the first paragraph with a good topic sentence that sets out your agreement/disagreement with the topic.
- Decide which poems will best support your case such as ‘Jacky Jacky’ and ‘Bora Ring’, for example.
- Explore the position Wright takes. Illustrate your main points with short quotes from each poem selected.
- Show, in subsequent paragraphs, how her position is consistent throughout the Selection, or perhaps how it becomes more strident.
- Show the way in which Wright subtly reveals the history of the continuing dispossession of the Aborigines.
- Point out what stance the speaker takes in each case. The narrative structure might be important in revealing this stance.
- Reiterate the terms of the topic throughout to show that you understand the question and that your discussion is applicable.

The challenge in answering this topic is to show how well you know the text and how well you understand the point of view that Wright is projecting about Aboriginal people through her poems. Remember your opinion must be supported by evidence from the text. Your introduction and conclusion ought

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to provide a frame for your discussion. Your conclusion should re-state your main contention and sum up your main points.

THE TEXT

Wright, Judith 1996, *A Human Pattern: Selected Poems*, Imprint, Sydney.

FURTHER READING

Wright, Judith 1964, *Preoccupations in Australian Poetry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

———1975, 'Meaning, Value and Poetry', in *Because I Was Invited*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.