



INSIDE STORIES

A Human Pattern, Selected Poems
by Judith Wright

Teaching notes prepared by Stefaan Steyn

VATE
Victorian Association for the Teaching of English

A HUMAN PATTERN – SELECTED POEMS

by Judith Wright.

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INTRODUCTION

Judith Wright's poetry is often interpreted within the context of her own life story. Equally, Wright's own life story is seen to be intertwined with the story of her own time and place. As such, there are many interpretations of her story. Once conventionally understood as an exciting new voice of mainstream Australia, Judith Wright was derided later as an opponent of the mainstream. Wright has subsequently been celebrated as a representative voice of a more recently equitable, environmentally and socially responsible Australia.

Wright is often characterised as an activist poet, exploring the principal historical and social factors that shaped twentieth century Australia. She is typified as a passionate Australian voice whose initial exceptional writing about emotional and natural themes was supplanted by less successful politically oriented writing arising from her growing concern about social issues.

It is suggested that Wright – whose life was continually disrupted by a society in conflict – always sought to achieve harmony of a personal, social and ecological nature on an internal level. Wright attempted this initially via her poetry, and later in private and more public ways.

Essentially, Wright can be said to have given public voice - both poetically and more directly politically - to her personal internal dissonance. Just as she was initially praised for voicing the grand internal Australian master narratives in fresh terms, she has more recently been praised for voicing her internal disquiet - for which she had earlier received approbation.

Wright's selected poetry must be assessed within the extensive range of her writing and interests. Her writing spans the last 70 years of the twentieth century, spanning the transition from the late colonial to the initial post-colonial Australian era. Wright's own story, as much as her poetry, can be said to reformulate many of the clichéd conceptualisations of twentieth century Australian history.

Through Wright's poetry one can track the growth and change of Australian notions of nationhood from the era of colonisation, through the impact of the First and Second World Wars, through to the human rights and environmental campaigns of the latter half of the century. In effect Wright's poetry can be said to address most major Australian historical moments of the twentieth century. The crises of her own life overlap with the crisis of twentieth century Australia.

Born during the First World War in 1915 and dying at the turn of the twentieth century, Judith Wright lived through the Second World War, the Vietnam conflict and the Cold War with its nuclear threat. She also witnessed increasing environmental degradation and human alienation from nature and community within Australia. Wright's life is as much shaped by these historical events and trends as she in turn responds to these phenomena through her poetry. Rightly or wrongly, her poetry has often been interpreted by referring to these events and to her own story.

Besides these global disruptions and social trends, Wright also lived through the escalating conflict around Australian national identity. Her later work more explicitly addressed the battle for the environment and Aboriginal land rights, and the extension of individual human rights.

These later more explicitly socially driven themes are properly seen to be developed in a continuum from Wright's earlier concern with the fragile rural natural and social landscape and her more directly nature-oriented and personal earlier poetry.

Wright initially explored the emotional and personal dimensions of familiar Australian themes such as the ambivalent experience of the bush, the recent colonial past with its shadows, and the life of agricultural settlement with its personal and social privations. She also explored the tensions between an attachment to the land and growing urbanisation, and the experience of living within the shadows and the after-effects of war, invigorating the representation of these national tropes in the process.

The development of Judith Wright's own sensibility through voicing these common Australian experiences overlapped in many respects with the development of Australian society, enabling her to

express widely felt emotions in fresh terms. However, Wright's capacity to feel the impact of these influences was intensified by her own personal struggles: including the early loss of her mother at age twelve; her subsequent separation from her family; and the onset of a loss of hearing from age 20, compounding the social isolation she experienced due to the disruption of the Second World War.

Just as Wright's sensibility of common Australian experiences would have been intensified by her personal circumstances, her capacity to express these were similarly enhanced. Many factors would have contributed to this: ranging from the status of her father as a prominent pastoralist and community leader (a founder of the University of New England and its First Chancellor, a leading figure in the first Australian conservation movement, and a proto-environmentalist in his battle against the despoliation of the land) to her upbringing by aunts and her grandmother in a prominent New England family, and the involvement of her uncles in the First World War.

The impact of Wright's initial university education, exposure to literary life in Sydney, and her travels in England and Europe (including Germany, Austria and Hungary) immediately prior to the outbreak of war cannot be overlooked. Wright's continued exposure to university life and politics, and her involvement in Conservationist and Aboriginal rights organisations throughout her life in various capacities would also play a significant role in shaping her as a poet.

Profoundly unique relationships also shaped her writing. The singular impact of her relationship with the eccentric ex-drover, First World War veteran and philosopher Jack McKinney, 23 years her senior, was far reaching. Beyond the profound personal impact of their relationship – which unlocked Wright's emotional isolation, and which saw them move to Queensland together, have a child, and later marry – Wright can also be said to have found a partner who shared many of her central concerns. McKinney's philosophy attempted to address the inadequacy of Western rationalism to deal with World War and the ravages of modern life by considering the irrational foundations of human experience within the human relationship to nature and within community. McKinney's notions overlapped in many respects with Wright's own central concerns.

Just as her life with McKinney would affect her profoundly, his death when she was only 51 would also affect her deeply. After McKinney's death, Judith Wright's friendships with people such as the prominent Aboriginal writer and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal deepened - her concerns about the land and Australian society converging with theirs.

It can be said that Judith Wright came to the issues central to Australian society - the impact of war, the land rights and reconciliation questions, and the concern for the environment - via a personal and relational journey rather than via any ideological route. Her related poetry and political activism thus stemmed from an experiential understanding of these issues.

WAYS INTO THE TEXT

'Ramona Koval: One of the notable comments that Judith Wright has made publicly is that she doesn't want her poetry taught to schoolchildren. Why?

Judith Wright: What I object to is being turned into an instrument of torture for children. [laughs] And that, unfortunately, is what often happens in schools.'

(ABC Interview with Judith Wright, 1999)

Reflections

Go outside of the classroom to a green space - a local park, somewhere on the school grounds, or on excursion. Take time to be completely silent for some minutes and afterwards spend some time individually writing down your impressions. You could either share these impressions in a class discussion, or write them up individually in a reflective piece and then share these within the class.

Ambivalent Nature: Drought, Fire, Floods and Tsunamis

- Reflect on the impact of the ongoing drought and associated water restrictions on your own life. Recall images from your own experience - think of the impact on gardens, recreational areas, and personal life. What activities did you do in earlier times that may not feel the same at present due to the drop in rainfall or intensified heat? What emotions are associated with these earlier times and what emotions are associated with these times of drought? Brainstorm and write down key words. Draw on this material and produce a song or a poem that reflects your personal response to drought.
- In similar terms, other groups or individuals in the class may choose to examine the personal and emotional impact of other fierce elements of the natural world and its impact on our lives. Besides drought, students could examine the personal impact of natural forces such as floods, fire and tsunami - all of these have had a significant impact on recent Australian society.

Emotions and Social Issues - Persuasive Writing

Work individually or in small groups to develop a visual response to one of Judith Wright's poems. After reading a specified poem and reflecting on how it relates to a particular issue, decide what phrases or words you would like to include as a core quote in making a poster which will express your own point of view. Your visual imagery may be suggested by the imagery of the poems.

National Reconciliation: 'The Dark Ones' (p. 193), 'Two Dreamtimes' (p. 166) 'At Cooloolah' (p. 83), 'Nigger's Leap: New England' (p. 8) and 'Bora Ring' (p. 2).

Environment: 'The Two Fires' (p. 70) 'At Cedar Creek' (p. 204), 'Platypus' (p. 201), 'Dry Storm' (p. 109) 'Drought Year' (p. 50) 'Flood Year' (p. 51) 'Eroded Hills' (p. 49) 'Night after bushfire' (p. 28).

Gender: 'Smalltown Dance' (p. 219); 'Eve to her Daughters' (p. 134), 'Woman in Orchard' (p. 203) 'Eve Scolds' (p. 194) 'Naked Girl and Mirror' (p. 138) 'Woman to Man' (p. 20) 'Woman's Song' (p. 20).

Listen to these or similar tracks by Australian musicians and write a creative response.

- Gippsland musician Lisa Gerrard, 'Ajhon', 'Space Weaver' (Album: *The Silver Tree*)
- The Northern Territory Group Yothu Yindi, 'Treaty Now' (Album: *Tribal Voice*)
- Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, 'From High Hills' by Peter Scullthorpe (Album: *Alchemy*)
- Genevieve Lacey, 'The Grey Thrush' by John Rodgers (Album: *Weaver of Fictions*)
- Midnight Oil, 'Dreamworld' (Album: *Diesel and Dust*)
- Crowded House, 'Mansion in the Slums' (Album: *Temple of Low Men*)
- Riley Lee, 'Sky Sensations' (Album: *The Eagle and the Ocean*)

RESEARCH: THE CONTEMPORARY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF JUDITH WRIGHT'S WRITING

Some knowledge of Australian society and history is required to grasp Judith Wright's poetry. In addition, understanding some of the contemporary issues which Wright's poetry addresses is also important in understanding its significance. Students might choose a number of the topics below to research via the Internet and present a brief oral summary of the core issues to the class.

National Environmental Issues:

- Salination in agricultural land and rivers
- Nuclear Testing and Energy
- The El Nino Effect.
- Aboriginal Land Management
- Murray Darling Basin management
- Pesticide use in farming
- Carbon Trading Scheme
- Pulp Mill Tasmania
- Logging of Old Growth Forests

National and Regional Aboriginal Issues:

- Land Rights - The Mabo judgment
- Treaty
- 'Terra Nullius'
- 'The Stolen Generation'
- The Federal Apology, Sorry Day
- Aboriginal Languages and Education
- The Federal 'Intervention'
- 'Closing the Gap'
- Responses to Federation/ Australia Day

Victorian Environmental Issues:

- Desalination plant, Wonthaggi
- Goulbourn River pipeline
- Windfarms in Gippsland and Ballarat
- Dredging Port Phillip Bay
- Forest burn-offs and tree clearing ('Black Saturday')

Key Figures and Social History:

- Oodgeroo Noonuccal
- Nugget Coombs
- Aboriginal Treaty Committee
- Campaign against mining the Great Barrier Reef
- The Mabo judgment

Links Between Judith Wright's Own Life and Her Poetry

Read the brief timeline of Judith Wright's life. Read the poems listed below and consider how they may have been influenced by personal circumstances or historical events.

How does our understanding of these events shape our interpretation of these specific poems? (Keep in mind that the year of publication is not often the year of writing). When is it appropriate to refer to the details of Wright's personal life in our interpretation of her poems,

and when may this distort our understanding of a poem? Which poems have relevance beyond their origins?

'The Moving Image' (1946): 'Soldier's Farm' (p. 5), 'South of My Days' (p. 11).

'Woman To Man' (1949): 'Woman to Child' (p. 21), 'Spring After War' (p. 24).

'The Gateway' (1953) 'Two Songs for the World's End' (p. 62).

'The Two Fires' (1955): 'Wildflower Plain' (p. 94).

'Five Senses' (The Forest) (1963) 'Q to A' (p. 107), 'Age to Youth' (p. 113), 'Double Image' (p. 114).

'The Other Half' (1966) 'Turning Fifty' (p. 141).

'Shadow' (1970) 'This Time Alone' (p. 146), 'Australia 1970' (p. 152).

'Alive' (1973) 'Habitat' (p. 156), 'Two Dreamtimes' (p. 166).

'Fourth Quarter' (1976) 'Tightropes' (p. 186), 'The Eucalypt and the National Character' (p. 197) 'At Cedar Creek' (p. 207) 'Moving South' (p. 211).

'Phantom Dwelling' (1985) 'Victims' (p. 223) 'For a Pastoral Family' (p. 226), 'Rainforest' (p. 230),

'Rockpool', (p. 235) 'Skins' (p. 239) 'Dust' (p. 239) 'Winter' (p. 240).

RUNNING SHEET AND STRUCTURE OF THE TEXT

Biographical Timeline: Judith Wright.

1915: Born 31 May at Thalgarrah Station, Armidale, NSW, shortly after the landing at Gallipoli during World War I.

1918: World War I ends.

1927: Mother dies (Judith aged 12). Grandmother educates her.

1929: At the age of 14 attends New England Girls' School in Armidale as a boarder. Decides to become a poet.

1934: Sydney University. Starts publishing poems in magazines and journals (throughout 1930s and 1940s).

1935: Starts to lose her hearing. Fierce bushfires throughout Australia.

1937/8: Travels in England and Europe (including Germany, Austria and Hungary).

1939: World War II begins. Secretarial employment until 1942.

1942: Returns to the family farm. Extended drought, fierce bush fires.

1943: Judith Wright meets Jack McKinney (who was married but separated at that stage).

1944: Statistician at University of Queensland. Fierce dust storms in Brisbane.

1945: World War II ends.

1946: Publishes *A Moving Image* (poems primarily written during the war).

1949: Publishes *From Woman to Man*. Awarded a Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowship.

1950: Grace Leven Prize. Moves to Mt Tamborine, Queensland with McKinney. Daughter, Meredith, born.

1953: Publishes *The Gateway*.

1955: Publishes *The Two Fires*.

1959: Writes *The Generations of Men* about Aboriginal dispossession and her family's colonial past.

1960s: Era of social and political upheaval in Australia: Aboriginal rights and Republican movements, Whitlam Labor Government dissolution, Vietnam War, Great Barrier Reef campaign, social mores challenged by alternative lifestyles.

1961: Publishes *Australian Bird Poems*.

1962: Marries Jack McKinney. Publishes *Birds: Poems*. Honorary Doctorate University of Queensland (Wright returns it later on political grounds). Australia fights Vietnam War from 1962-1975.

President of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (till 1976). Phillip Wright, her father, was a life member of the first Australian Conservation Society and an environmental proto-activist.

1963: Publishes *Five Senses: Selected Poems*. Begins lifelong friendship with Aboriginal poet and activist Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker). Honorary Doctorate, University of New England. (Her father, its first Chancellor, helped to establish the university.)

1964: Publishes *Tentacles: A Tribute to Those Lovely Things and City Sunrise*. Australia-Britannica Award, Council member Australian Conservation Foundation (till 1972).

1965: Becomes a member of the Australia Council.

1966: Wright's husband dies. Publishes *The Other Half*.

1973: Publishes *Alive: Poems 1971-72, (73-74)*. Member Committee of Enquiry into the National Estate.

1975: Appointed to Australian National University's Council as Governor-General's nominee (till 1979).

1976: Publishes *Fourth Quarter and Other Poems*. Moves from Queensland to Braidwood, ACT, ostensibly as an act of protest against the Queensland government. Honorary Doctorate University of Sydney.

1977: Robert Frost Memorial Award. Honorary Doctorate, Monash University.

1978: Publishes *Train Journey and The Double Tree: Selected Poems 1942-76*.

1979 – 1983: Member of the Aboriginal Treaty Committee with friend Nugget Coombs.

1981: Honorary Doctorate, Australian National University.

1984: Australian World Prize (1984).

1985: Publishes *Phantom Dwelling*. Honorary doctorate from UNSW and Griffith University. Withdraws permission for her poetry's use in schools due to nationalistic misinterpretations.

1988: Honorary Doctorate, University of Melbourne.

1990: Publishes *A Human Pattern: Selected Poems*.

1991: Resigns as patron of the Wildlife Preservation Society as it doesn't support Aboriginal land rights.

1992: The Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry.

1993: Publishes *The Flame Tree*.

1994: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Poetry Award for Collected Poems.

1995: Stops writing poetry actively.

2000: Attends Reconciliation rally in Canberra in late May. Dies in Canberra on June 26 aged 85 of a heart attack.

Structure of the Text

The poems in Judith Wright's own selection from her collected works are arranged chronologically by publication. Wright's first collection *The Moving Image* (1946), published subsequent to poems appearing widely in journals such as *Meanjin*, presented a survey of the Australian inner landscape. The poetry's narrative point of view appears to be strongly biographical. Nonetheless, a constructed social mask is presented, rather than a simple personal, intimate self. This apparently 'naïve' initial self is an edited representation, a narrative device allowing perspectives beyond Wright's own to be explored.

Poems such as 'The Company of Lovers' (p. 2) represent the struggles of wartime Australians to seek some sense of vitality and connection in a disrupted situation. Here, from the start, the social dimension (here, the culture of war) is drawn on to publicly explore private passion (relationships, mortality). Also present from the very inception ('Bora Ring', p. 2) is the tension within the Australian culture and psyche around Aboriginal dispossession. As with 'Nigger's Leap: New England' (p. 8), the suppressed side to colonial discourse is brought to the surface. The psychological and social implications of this repression of the oppression of Aboriginals are explored. From the start too, poems such as 'Bullocky' (p. 9) which celebrate settler icons – the pioneer's struggle against the land and against isolation and cultural displacement – also present a sense of disquiet and disjunction.

Other poems such as 'South of my Days' (p. 11) are celebrated for their exploration of the link between the physical landscape and the inner geography of the Australian soul. This is a post-romantic representation and appreciation for the complexities of nature from an Australian point of view. 'The Moving Image' (p. 14) presents contemporary Australia as historical drama, unfolding transcendently from an omniscient point of view. Wright presents the tragic tension within society and the individual: caught between Platonic absolutes and a more subjectively contingent individual point of view. Judith Wright continually juxtaposes these perspectives in her poetry: combining and contrasting multiple perspectives – engaging 'Nature', 'Society', the 'Individual' and the 'Historical' in conversation.

Judith Wright's next collection, *Woman to Man* (1949), represents an integrated biographical and social exploration of female consciousness and sexuality in poems such as 'Woman to Man' (p. 20), 'Woman's Song' (p. 20) and 'Woman to Child' (p. 21). Again, the adoption of an intimate tone and the pseudo-biographical mask of the first person voice enables Wright to partially hide the ideological and more controversial aspects of her exploration of the intimate side of relationships. Wright also integrates the natural and the emotional in thematic terms, as well as poetic convention (standard cross rhyme, hexameter, literary and Biblical references) and an apparently 'natural', colloquial idiom. Texts like 'The Sisters' (p. 24) and 'Spring After War' (p. 24) further Judith Wright's critical social discourse, drawing on iconic Australian images from nature and the farming life to represent inner emotions and the ambivalence of relationships. In these latter poems, the sense of disquiet and ambiguity within the human psyche is worded in natural terms such as 'the treacherous earth' and 'the gaping flesh'.

In the poem 'The Garden' (p. 26) for instance, 'Eve (is) walking with her snake and butterfly.' Wright further explores the ambiguous complexity of the human relationship with nature and self via poems such as 'The World and the Child' (p. 27), "Night After Bushfire" (p. 28), and 'Night' (p. 32). In each instance, a sense of awe, wonder and beauty is intermingled with a

sense of uncertainty and harshness. In contrast with English Romantics such as Wordsworth or Keats, Judith Wright offers a similar juxtaposition as that between the Heidelberg School and nineteenth century French Impressionists or English Landscape artists. Her celebration of nature's fierce vitality and humanity's associated joys and grief are consolidated in texts like 'Flame Tree in a Quarry' (p. 37) and 'The Bind Man' (p. 38).

The nature poems from Wright's second collection, *Woman to Man* (1949) may be more explicit about the harsher side of nature than her first, *The Moving Image* (1946). This partial shift in emphasis could be said to continue in her third collection, *The Gateway* (1953). Poems such as 'Dark Gift' (p. 44) explore nature's paradoxical interplay between existence and non-existence, and destruction and creation. Wright embraces these dialectic natural dualities in Heraclitean terms, rather than bewailing them. This means that she celebrates the way that natural forces continually change, positively accepting the tensions between positives and negatives.

This duality is also explored in the social realm 'Fire at Murdering Hut' (p. 44), for instance, presents ambivalent memory and history containing mystery and wonder along with cruelty and injustice. 'The Cedars' (p. 46) eulogises the 'dried body of winter (that) is hard to kill', while the 'Eroded Hills' (p. 49), bemoaning human destruction, rewrites the colonial triumphalism over man's domination of nature. Similar to a Shakespearean or Metaphysical love sonnet, Wright's initial nature protest poetry here becomes a memorial to nature: 'When the last leaf and bird go/ let my thoughts stand like trees here' 'Eroded Hills' (p. 49).

Here too, Wright's maturing nature poetry gives nature an emotional human voice, presenting the symbiotic Australian relationship with the natural world. In the poems 'Drought Year' (p. 50) and 'Flood Year' (p. 51) human suffering and Nature's pangs are one. Through personification the poet's voice is coterminous with dingoes' 'strange and loud' cry; driftwood is like 'a frail bleached clench of fingers'; and a crab's pincers are associated with a drowned child's hand. Wright's new apocalyptic response to growing environmental degradation and the nuclear threat marks a further shift in her poetry. The poems 'To a Child' (p. 60), 'The Ancestors' (p. 61) and 'Two Songs for the World's End' (p. 62) express this tension between celebration of the environment and grief at its potential destruction.

The following collection, *The Two Fires* (1955) marks a similar shift in Judith Wright's understanding of nature and human relationships. In the poem 'At Cooloolah' (p. 83), the narrator's close identification with nature is challenged by 'a driftwood spear/ thrust from the water; and like my grandfather,/ (she) must quiet a heart accused by its own fear.' There is a new awareness that the land the speaker has closely identified with has been stolen and is tainted by guilt. Humanity must face up to its alienation from nature and white Australia must also face up to the falsehood of 'Terra Nullius'.

In 'Scribbly Gum' (p. 75) nature is harder to identify with - even incomprehensible: 'the written track/ of a life I could not read.' In 'Gum-trees Stripping' (p. 75) 'Words are not meanings for a tree.' We see a new acceptance of nature's transcendence and, as in 'Sanctuary' (p. 82), a more strident critique of the dominant social attitudes towards natural sanctity. A similar harsher examination of the human is also evident, as in 'Flesh' (p. 86). This more critical disposition is now also extrapolated in more abstract philosophical terms, as in 'Song' (p. 93). In 'Wildflower Plain' (p. 94) a new, more complex integration with nature which embraces this wider set of tensions is achieved; ranging from 'angry granite' and 'the single iron word' to

'this thorny, delicate, tender speech of the flower'. There is again some conciliation as 'time's old anger/ become(s) new earth, / to sign to the heart/ the truth of death'.

Wright's following collection *Birds: Poems* (1962) also relativises the prior elevation of nature. In 'The Forest' (p.104) for instance, 'those first strange joys are gone' while a growing sense of mortality extends her search for meaning in more abstract terms beyond the physical world: 'My search is further./ There's still to name and know/ beyond the flowers I gather/ that one that does not wither - / the truth from which they grow.' This ambivalent disquiet is also found in more personally focused writing. 'Q to A' (p.107) voices this: 'My heart is woe to fear so.' In 'Praise for the Earth' (p.106) a new philosophical cosmic awareness informs the celebration of nature and society, while the 'Wild wandering dark' of 'Dry Storm' (p. 109) presages a 'darker sky'. This trend is developed in the ironic tone of 'Age to Youth' (p. 113) with its bittersweet consideration of eroticism, and 'Double Image' (p. 114) which considers the continuity between civilisation and savagery within the natural domain.

Other poems such as 'Judas in Modern Dress' (p. 115) 'Reason and Unreason', 'For my Daughter' (p.120), 'The Poet' (p.124), and particularly 'The Morning of the Dead' (p.126) clearly demonstrate Wright's supposed shift to a more abstract consideration of nature and a more socially engaged style of writing. It would be more apt to say that she achieves in these pieces a new integration of a more complex constellation of the worlds of emotion, nature and society. These poems go beyond the experientially based, immediate images of her earlier work while retaining stylistic and thematic continuity.

Wright's next collection *The Other Half* (1966) expands the complexity and scope of the latter poems in *Birds: Poems* (1962), particularly in terms of her writing about gender. 'To Another Housewife' (p.132) examines the savagery inherent in civilisation, while 'The Trap' (p.133) explicitly outlines the imprisonment implicit in a supposed free society. The satirical 'Eve to Her Daughters' (p.134) rewrites the Adamic myth and the historical myth of 'progress' from a female perspective, in the process questioning patriarchal formulations of religion and culture.

Wright also turns her focus upon the human ambivalence to the physical world. 'Typists in the Phoenix Building' (p.137) questions civilisation's attempts to understand and control nature and the body. In more intimate terms, 'Naked Girl and Mirror' (p.138) outlines the politics of the female body and sexual desire, and the associated ironic tension between animal being and the human mind arising from self-awareness. This paradoxical sense is extended in poems such as 'Turning Fifty' (p.141) and 'Snakeskin on a Gate' (p.140) where the narrator is caught 'between two realities' – not only of life and death, but also by implication, between nature and society, the material and the abstract.

Wright returns to a supposedly more elevated style in *This Time Alone* (p.146), written after Jack McKinney's death. A solitary climb up a mountain interweaves the world of emotion and relationships with the natural landscape - very similarly to Wright's initial writing. Here the focus and imagery is extended to encompass metaphysical notions in an attempt to transcend death. The masterly poem 'Shadow' (p. 153) explores this fusion between life and death within nature, and also between nature and human consciousness in metaphysical terms reminiscent of the poem 'The Moving Image' (p. 14).

Wright presents her most biting social satire in the poems 'Advice to a Young Poet' (p. 149) and 'Australia 1970' (p. 152). Her contempt for consumerism and its effects on nature and society is here most explicitly voiced. Here she 'praise(s) the scoring drought, the flying dust,/'

the drying creek, the furious animal,/ that they oppose us still;/ that we are ruined by the thing we kill.'

The poem 'Habitat' (p. 156) shares a similar deprecating view of the human contingent presence on earth. Equally, the poem 'Two Dreamtimes' (p. 166), written in conversational mode to her friend the Aboriginal activist Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), is extremely critical of white Australia's attitudes and actions towards Australian Aboriginals. Like in 'Habitat' (p. 156), Wright extends this satire in self-deprecating terms to herself in 'Some Words' (p.162), demonstrating a growing ironic capacity.

Judith Wright's final self-contained collection *Fourth Quarter* (1976) is characterised by this ironic, often satirical treatment of a wide range of subjects, ranging from herself and her own poetry in 'Tightropes' (p. 186) to Australian society in 'Canberra: City and Mirage' (p. 193) and 'The Eucalypt and the National Character' (p. 197). This satire is extended to questions of gender politics, as in 'Eve Scolds' (p.194) and 'Eve Sings' (p. 195). At other times Wright treats familiar themes of racial relations and environmental concerns in a more serious manner, taking on a demagogic tone. The poem 'The Dark Ones' (p. 193) pinpoints how white Australia is haunted by the Aboriginal presence, examining the consequences of overlooking its guilt.

Similarly, the iconic 'Platypus' (p. 201) undercuts complacency towards environmental degradation: 'I sit and write/ a poem for your sake/ that follows a word -/ platypus, paradox-/ like the ripples of your wake.' At times, in line with her own growing sense of mortality, Wright seems overcome by despair for the environment, as in 'At Cedar Creek' (p. 204): 'How shall I remember the formula for poetry?/ This morning I have abandoned the garden./ Too overgrown to recall the shapes we planned/ it flourishes with weeds not native to this country'.

This sense of retreat and elegy is also reflected in 'Moving South' (p. 211) and 'For a Pastoral Family' (p. 226), while other poems such as 'Smalltown Dance' (p. 219) and 'Victims' (p. 223) continue Wright's examination of the social dimensions of captivity and limitation. Wright's final personal and nature poems such as 'Brevity' (p. 231) and 'Rainforest' (p. 230) again integrate the private emotions of loss, grief and protest with the passions and vitality of nature. Nature which transcends Wright will outlive her and potentially surpass its degradation at human hands. Judith Wright's final selection from her own work: 'The Shadow of Fire: Ghazals' (p.234) not only outlines these tensions, but offers a characteristically ambivalent consolation.

A PERSPECTIVE ON THE TEXT

Judith Wright's poetry has been said to tell the story of twentieth century Australia. It might be more accurate to say that her poetry and its many interpretations tell the story of how the Antipodean physical and political landscape has been, and continues to be reinterpreted. Wright's Australian landscape is a shifting multitude of layered images seen through many different, changing lenses.

In initially being seen to represent many 'essential' Australian experiences from an 'Australian' point of view, and calling on a 'local' framework of reference and use of language and imagery to do so, Wright was seen to be evoking traditional conservative national themes in new, local terms. She was seen by many as a popular representative of Australian nationhood, voicing uniquely Antipodean experiences. Her imagined landscape was understood to be the national landscape. She was seen to be an authentic national personal, female emotional voice speaking of the Australian town and bush and way of life in a new public way which expressed the private experiences of all.

While Wright was initially understood to talk of the Australian landscape in conventional Australian terms and to represent iconic Australian experiences of the bush and of social and more personal events, her representations were seen to fit into the main narrative of her time. Many understood her to be one of the first contemporary Australian poets to speak of contemporary national experiences in a contemporary Australian way - in opposition to a European-based viewpoint on Australia. It could even be said that she was seen to be part of creating a unique, Australian national narrative and sense of identity by representing the Australian physical, social and emotional landscape in her uniquely Australian aesthetic.

This perspective overlooked the degree to which her poetry may actually have been questioning this primary national narrative. Wright's initial poetry could actually be said to have expressed her misgivings with this assumed national narrative and its associated values. While apparently contributing to the romantic discourse of Australian nationhood, she may be said to have been interrogating this discourse – that is, de-romanticising it.

It could be suggested that Wright was in fact repainting the conventional landscape, examining the flaws in this kind of conservative representation by stripping away common falsehoods. In effect, she could be said to have questioned the conventional imagined landscape of her time and to have been more concerned with revealing a more truthful, less attractive picture which took account of those social factors such as the exploitation of land and people which had been painted over by previous conventional writers.

This initial perspective of Wright's poetry as aesthetically fresh while thematically conventional, changed as her later writing more explicitly challenged mainstream values. Wright gave voice to a reconsideration of the experiences of Australian women, as well as the interplay between the personal and the political. Much of her later writing is centrally concerned with the questions of Aboriginal dispossession and the need for national restitution. Wright's work integrated these concerns equally with an exploration of environmental and social degradation, and the need for ecological activism.

To many, Wright's work seemed to move from a romantic celebration of the bush and its iconic figures to a focus on environmental degradation and a questioning of those figures on the grounds of social injustice. For many, her writing also seemed to move from a celebration of relationships to an interrogation of the power imbalances and conflict within relationships.

From a certain perspective Wright the activist poet seemed to have supplanted Wright the poet, campaigning against the Australian way of life, rather than celebrating it. From a particular point of view it appeared that Wright had betrayed her poetic public; while from another she may have seemed to have sacrificed her private poetic voice for the common public good, winning a hearing with those more concerned with public matters of social and ecological justice than nature, personal relationships, private emotion and poetry.

However, as much as this first rather superficial point of view is questionable, in that Wright's poetry is critically concerned with social and ecological issues from the start, the second perspective is also somewhat flawed. It must be said that Wright's later poetry remains as concerned with nature and humanity in its more irrational sense as did her early work. The more complex nature of Wright's life and writing resists these kinds of simplifications. In effect, competing strands of thought and apparently conflicting images and values are simultaneously and continually present in her poetry, early and late.

Wright can be said to represent a complex landscape and a conflicted society in tension in her poetry. She can be said to explore underlying contradictions explicitly via ambiguous images in a deliberately unrequited search for resolution rather than presenting simplistic images which gloss over complexity and incongruities. It has been said that Wright's core images deliberately cast a shadow which form part of her representation, that she is as much concerned with the repressed and the censored as the self-evident and the widely accepted.

Judith Wright certainly attempted to resolve social and ecological tensions through her poetry. She tried poetically to balance that which was unbalanced in reality - pursuing her personal goals via 'The Moving Image' - the world of poetry. It has been claimed that her poetry abandoned this pursuit as she increasingly pursued social and ecological goals in more direct personal, social and political terms. If anything, her imagined landscape conformed more closely with the real landscape of Australian society as it actually was and is - inherently fraught with contradictions, inequalities, conflicts and tensions.

From most perspectives it is more difficult to acknowledge that Wright's poetry, and the world she imagined and represented, stands beyond simplification to fit into something neither easily accepted nor rejected. One must acknowledge that her writing, like her own life, and like the interpretation of both, remains continually in tension between the rational and irrational, simultaneously mythologising and de-romanticising the human in personal and social, and environmental terms.

In particular, in contemporary Australian society, where many of the values that Wright espoused, are now broadly accepted as being 'quintessentially Australian', one should be careful to baptise Judith Wright herself and her poetry as equally 'quintessentially Australian'. A careful consideration of her poetry may demonstrate that her landscape and her imagery confound our desire to embrace her as a representative voice of a more progressive contemporary Australia. Wright's focus on flux and impermanence means that her ambiguous images will continue to throw shadows which cannot be resolved into convenient interpretations in line with a univocal external social perspective.

Many may believe we live in a social context which sees as mainstream many of Wright's core concerns - including the pursuit of personal integrity, equality within relationships, questions of national reconciliation and restitution, environmental responsibility and the quest for a new world order. However, if we claim Judith Wright as a voice of our own time, we may be repeating the mistake of those who previously saw her as a voice for earlier mainstream Australia.

CHARACTERS

Each poem of Judith Wright's has its own distinct style and voice, and it is mistaken to assume a consistent implied or underlying persona throughout Wright's oeuvre. As such, the speaker, the associated tone and language use may vary within a poem, and within a particular collection.

While one may often choose to identify the speaker in a particular poem as Wright herself, it may not be appropriate to assume this in each instance. Even if one does choose to identify the speaker as the poet herself, one must account for the many changes in Wright's work as a consequence of the shift in Wright's situation and also in herself.

Wright herself comments as follows:

'Judith Wright: I think through life you change all the time. Sometimes you know you're changing; sometimes you don't. Sometimes you just find that something isn't there any longer that was there. It isn't sad. It's just right. It wasn't worrying me at all. I realise I've been several different people in the course of my life, as we all are. And you've got to give in to that.

Ramona Koval: Who are those several different Judith Wrights?

Judith Wright: Well we all know how different we were when we were a child, and then when we were a teenager. There's all that tremendous drama of change in becoming grown-up.

And then after that you gradually accommodate yourself to enjoy the sweeter aspects of life as you go. I don't think that all those Judith Wrights are surviving, but I do know I remember them.'¹

Given Wright's comments here, it would be advisable to ground one's understanding about narrative voice, and the contribution of the status of the poetic 'narrator' to the meaning of a poem from within the specific poem itself, rather than depend on extraneous biographical material.

Besides the more obvious clues about the status of a narrative voice in Wright's poetry and the degree to which Wright works with a biographical 'mask' that keeps shifting in nature, one should be careful not to identify too closely with Wright herself, other factors should also be considered.

Wright's poems are often discursive or melodramatic in nature, presenting a particular persona speaking to another particular persona in a given situation. In this sense, many of Wright's poems are like vignettes - self-contained dramatic situations with a defined space, a certain dramatis personae, and an associated set of events. It is easier, for example, to make sense of poems like 'The Company of Lovers' (p. 2) or 'The World and the Child' (p. 27) in this way.

By taking this kind of approach one is able to talk of certain central 'characters' – including specific central figures which return throughout her oeuvre. Some critics may be tempted to

¹ Source: Koval, Ramona, Ramona Koval interviews Judith Wright age 84; <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s143393.htm>

identify a particular type of speaker with a certain set of topics or themes or even tone; for instance, of the 'nostalgic' or the 'nature-oriented' or the 'strident, activist' Wright.

It would be inaccurate, however, to distinguish between an 'environmental' or 'political' or 'feminist' Wright as the poems concerned particularly focus on the integrated nature of these perspectives, rather than place them in opposition.

Equally, it would be fallacious to generate an overly simplistic categorisation of Judith Wright as narrative voice in crude biographical terms; that is, to simply talk of Wright the 'lover' 'daughter' or 'mother' or 'widow' or 'friend' or 'activist'. Nonetheless, these characterisations are often relevant, as they sometimes arise directly from the subject matter of a poem itself. Wright as narrator may occasionally speak about herself as character in establishing a self-portrait, as is discussed later.

Similarly, while it is tempting to seek some continuity in Wright's characterisation of other personae in a text, it may be equally misleading and even prejudiced to assume some consistency in the identity or characteristics of 'aunts' or 'farmers' or 'settlers' or 'aboriginals' or 'daughters' or 'lovers' or even the 'audience' or animals and places.

In many instances, however, characters and places and other points of reference are explicitly identified, and some such stereotypical characterisation is clearly intended for the sake of a particular metaphor. In poems such as 'Age to Youth' (p. 113), for example, or 'Woman to Man' (p. 20), or 'Woman to Child' (p. 21), the narrative situation clearly outlines the *dramatis personae*.

The narrator of 'Woman to Man' (p. 20) is for instance, a clear example of the biographical mask of Judith Wright herself metaphorised – where the poet has become a trope or image for the sake of achieving the required personal, intimate tone of the poem. However, as the title itself implies, one is concerned here with an 'Everywoman' and 'Everyman', rather than only the biographical Wright herself. With the speaker of *Woman to Man* clearly identifying the intended 'rhetorical' audience - the beloved in this instance - and the situation being one of sexual intimacy, the theme of the poem is fundamentally built around the particular relationship between speaker and audience. The entire meaning of the poem centres around the tension between speaker and hearer, and the rhetorical effect of the reader being placed in a position to 'take part' in this intimate conversation enables the poem to present its subject matter in a unique way. While a contemporary readership may not recognise the significance of this kind of positioning of an audience, much of the impact of Wright's poetry on her initial readership depended on this type of 'overhearing'. This was novel for her audience in its frankness and its treatment of sexual and emotional intimacy.

Wright frequently draws on this approach to achieve an intimate tone when discussing material of a personal matter or themes of a sensitive nature. She is able to heighten the dramatic effect of a poem like 'For a Pastoral Family' (p. 226), - which is clearly written for publication, rather than only for her family – by creating this effect of intimacy through evoking the illusion for readers that they are part of this intimate circle, that they are privileged participants in a private space 'overhearing' something personal.

Something of this effect is also created in poems like 'For M.R.' (p. 206), and particularly 'Two Dreamtimes', (p. 166) which, while ostensibly a conversation between Judith Wright and Kath Walker (Oodgeroo Noonuccal), is actually also a very public protest.

The rhetorical effect, however, of phrasing the message of 'Two Dreamtimes' in the context of a personal conversation is to remove from the poem a sense of political activism and

posturing, and lend the poem a personal tone which carries the full import of its message. In effect the medium of the poem - a personal conversation between people of different backgrounds - is in tension with its message which addresses the lack of and difficulties of conversation between people of different backgrounds. The entire poem is dependent on the credibility of its message being created through a personal conversation between two people who know each other. The poem is as much a story of its own making as it is an invitation of its broader 'audience' - the readership 'listening in' to engage in a similar conversation.

Another common approach of Wright's besides engaging her audience indirectly via a nominated third party, is to use an iconic figure - either as narrative mask or as a central persona within her text. Often such a figure may re-occur across her oeuvre'. One such figure is 'Eve', who appears as speaker in poems such as 'Eve to her Daughters' (p. 134) (*The Other Half*, 1966) and 'Eve Scolds' (p. 194) and 'Eve Sings' (p. 195) (*Fourth Quarter*, 1976) and as figure in 'The Garden' (*Woman to Man*, 1949) and 'Brennan' (p. 221). In each instance 'Eve' is the spokesperson for and representative of all women – an archetype, rather than historical figure or mythical reference.

Wright frequently draws her central characters in archetypal terms - working in the Jungian sense with a representative cultural substrate of the human psyche. Traces of the Jungian Shadow, Self, Anima and are evident in poems such as: the 'Shadow' figure (p. 153) in the poem of the same name; the holy image in the poem 'A Child's Nightmare' (p. 109); the Moses of 'Bullocky' (p. 9); and the alter-egos of 'Double Image' (p. 114), 'Woman in Orchard' (p. 203), 'Naked Girl and Mirror' (p. 138); the male lover in 'Woman to Man' (p. 20); the figure of 'The Lost Man' (p. 63); and Tom Snow in 'Learning a Word' (p. 208).

On occasion Judith Wright makes mention of or addresses her own family members – lover/husband, child/daughter, father and grandfather, uncles, aunts – or speaks of family figures more generally in her poetry. In each instance the full import of her reference derives not only from the individual, biographical character, but from the symbol she builds from and around them, as well as the connotative power of the reference for her readership who understand family relations more generally.

Wright's treatment of immediate family figures in her poetry all relate in some way to a particular broader theme she wishes to address: the omnipresent child in potentia in 'Woman to Man' (p. 20); the uncertain nature of the changing relationship between herself and her daughter as in 'For my Daughter' (p. 120); and the future of humanity under nuclear threat as in 'Two Songs for the World's End' (p. 62).

The poem 'Wedding Photograph, 1913' (p. 174), addressed indirectly to her parents, for example, is as much a broader meditation on society and life, loss and death, as it is a portrait of her own parents. The more general treatment of distant family members such as 'Bachelor Uncle' (p. 110), and 'Remembering an Aunt' (p. 136) are broader considerations of themes such as limited opportunity and loss of vitality and connectedness due to age which, though they achieve some particularity due to the a more detailed picture remain dispassionate. Poems such as 'Eroded Hills '(p. 49) and 'Old House' (p. 49), and the elegiac 'For a Pastoral Family' (p. 226) are driven as much by a broader concern with history, the environment, social justice or social change as by a particular treatment of Wright's own family.

Judith Wright also draws on historical or biblical characters such as Judas in 'Judas in Modern Dress' (p. 115), Moses in 'Bullocky' (p. 9), Jesus in 'Eli Eli' (p. 30), King Saul and David ('The Harp and the King') (p. 95) and Jacob in 'The Traveller and the Angel' (p. 64). In poems such as these Wright draws in each instance on the commonly understood connotations of these

characters and their situations to develop an extended image. Wright occasionally engages an historical figure in conversation as in the poems 'Reading Thomas Traherne' (p. 125), 'The Man Beneath the Tree' (p. 72 - the Buddha?) and 'Brennan' (p. 221); or reflects on a mythical character such as Lao Tsu as in 'Eight Panel Screen' (p. 147), thereby treating more general life themes such as the search for truth and meaning, and the consolation of poetry and philosophy.

Wright also concerns herself with folk history, treating the stories of representative figures in diverse terms. Figures from poems such as 'Metho Drinker' (p. 34) or 'The Bind Man' (p. 38) may tell the story of an entire community. Other figures such as 'Remittance Man' (p. 4) and Mr Ferrit from 'and Mr Ferrit' (p. 84) are readily recognisable stereotypes of a more Australian nature treated in a fresh way. In 'They' (p. 192), 'Victims' (p. 223), 'Learning a Word' (p. 208), 'Smalltown Dance' (p. 219), 'Two Dreamtimes' (p. 166), 'Jacky Jacky' (p. 144) and 'Builders' (p. 196), Wright engages in a form of oral history, constructing alternate Australian myths. These are consonant with her own later stated values, rather than the apparently more iconic portrayals of recognisable types such as 'Bullocky' (p. 9) for which she earlier achieved wide appreciation from mainstream Australians.

Besides these iconic anonymous characters, Judith Wright primarily generates anonymous figures or imaginary characters for allegorical purposes, to metaphorise an idea such as time in a poem like 'At Cedar Creek' (p. 204) or represent an imaginary listener, as in 'Woman in Orchard' (p. 203). Characters in poems such as 'Brother and Sisters' (p. 10), 'The Prospector' (p. 79), 'The Diver' (p. 124) and 'The Poet' (p. 124) are types that represent a certain relationship or approach to life. The abstract divine is often present in her earlier poems, either as an echo of a platonic essence as in 'The Moving Image' (p. 14) or as a heightened representation of nature or history. This approach can be seen in poems such as 'Myth' (p. 48), 'Lion' (p. 53), 'The Two Fires' (p. 70) and 'Fire at Murdering Hut' (p. 44). When Wright presupposes an audience as in 'Falls Country' (p. 175), by dedicating it to a person, she in turn creates an image of that person. Where the audience is anonymous, as in 'Dialogue' (p. 164), or 'Poem and Audience' (p. 129) a specific character or group of characters linked to the poem's message nonetheless emerges.

Finally, Wright's many self-portraits throughout her oeuvre track her own changing public persona. Wright's latter representations of self are objectively pleasing in aesthetic terms. This is seen in the satirical and oblique association of Wright with the 'national character' (admittedly a contestable interpretation) in 'The Eucalypt and the National Character' (p. 197), or in the more direct self-scrutiny associated with 'Turning Fifty' (p. 141) or the somewhat earlier 'Cleaning Day' (p. 133) or 'Naked Girl and Mirror' (p. 138).

Readers gain a full sense of Wright the person from her ironic portraits in her latter work such as 'Tightropes' (p. 186) 'Growing Point' (p. 199), 'Encounter' (p. 200), 'Envy' (p. 207), 'Counting Sevens' (p. 210), 'Moving South' (p. 211), and 'Unpacking Books' (p. 212). In these poems in particular, Wright depends on her triple status as character, image and narrator to transmute herself via the poetic process into something beyond the immediate biographical person.

At this point she is integrated as muse and image within her own field of reference, a symbolic matrix of meaning - akin to 'Mother Earth' herself.

Finally, one must consider that 'Nature' commonly appears as a character or, more properly, as a cast of characters throughout Judith Wright's poetry. A particular plant, animal, place or force may be personified in acquiring emotion, reason or intention. While one would more

conservatively treat these personifications solely as images, they themselves acquire a distinct personality in certain instances. Ultimately, Wright's own essential nature is integrated with the landscape in giving nature a voice.

ISSUES AND THEMES

Judith Wright reached beyond poetry as she grew in public stature. Her prose, speeches and letters all built her capacity to influence her growing audience. Her opinions as an environmental campaigner and public figure holding prominent positions in civil society were mostly consonant with her poetry. As her interaction with the public widened, and her private life extended, her poetry changed. Wright gradually set poetry aside to voice concerns more directly and possibly protect herself. Wright had almost stopped writing poetry altogether in the last fifteen years of her life, partly due to her need to campaign rather than reflect, and also due to a loss of inner drive and a growing despair with society.

Judith Wright's focus is clearly concerned with voicing the less heard inner thoughts and feelings of post-colonial Australian society from a 'naturally' grounded, 'female' perspective, uttering concern for and awe of the Australian social and natural landscape. Wright expressed these concerns in a language that was simultaneously down to earth and mystical. She raised issues which were of equal mythical, subjective and objective social significance. She gave common voice to her 'mob's dreaming', drawing on her embedded sense of belonging to the land and its people.

However, as her understanding of land and people shifted, Judith Wright came to question existing natural, historical and social narratives, concerned with the dispossession of Aborigines, the despoliation of the land and the growing materialism of Australian society. Wright's earlier poetry is in the voice of a 'lover' of land and people. Her later poetry, again voicing less heard concerns for Australia's land and soul, is now voiced in a 'maternal' way - expressing concern and approbation.

These concerns are easy to determine. What is less easy to identify fully is exactly what Wright said about them. Wright mainly relates her concerns in less quantifiable terms - pursued via implied language and explained through indirect, symbolic means. In addition, the scope of Wright's thought ranged from the direct and the concrete to the abstract - both philosophical and mystical.

We find it easy to quantify Wright's more concrete, personal writing. We can also easily identify the events or the issues related to political concerns. However, we may struggle to understand Wright's poetic examination of such issues fully. We see this even where Wright uses straightforward language and a familiar setting, given the symbolism that attends her work.

Given Judith Wright's engagement with Jack McKinney's philosophy of irrationalism and Eastern philosophy, and her cynicism of twentieth century positivism, her poetry cannot be reduced to a couple of basic, self-evident themes. A classification of Wright's poetry based on core concerns such as the environment, intimate human relations and social justice should thus be treated with due caution. What Wright also said about these issues may not be the same as what is broadly believed today.

Many people believe that politically engaged poetry can be easily 'decoded'. However, Judith Wright's verse is less easily reduced to a simple set of messages as it is often of a more symbolic nature, dominated by mythical and allegorical elements. Judith Wright attempts to unify the cosmic, political and personal in a holistic aesthetic vision; like Leopold Senghor, Manley Hopkins, Yeats, William Blake, or Tang era Chinese landscape poets such as Wang Wei, or Japanese Zen poets like Bashō.

Wright pursues a similar struggle for integration in her writing. Her poetry is also in continual tension between the symbolic and the concrete. Therefore one cannot condense her poetry to a set of stories or messages by reducing the symbolic to the concrete, or vice versa.

Central to Wright's thinking is the interplay within and between the natural, social and personal, to the degree that they become indivisible by being made to appear as one. This process of integration through symbolic representation - the role of aesthetics in facilitating a union between otherwise potentially separate domains - is what Wright pursues in her poetry. Separating out Wright's poetry into the domains of the personal, the natural and the social, is in effect therefore to negate its central message - that these are one and the same domain - created, accessed and represented by and through poetry. Poetry is essentially for Wright then, the unified domain of the personal, the natural and the social. As such, a major theme of Wright's work is poetry itself, and the world she is trying to recreate through it - the broken 'real' world she is trying to put back together again. Wright's poetry is simultaneously allegorical and actual - 'realistic' in the greater Platonic sense.

While it has become fashionable to reduce Judith Wright's poetry to her activism and the core messages she brought into the public spotlight, such an analysis of Wright's work would be too materialistic in nature - displaying the reductionist positivism that Wright resisted in writing poetry.

Wright frequently explores the emotional, psychological, symbolic and philosophical dimensions of the physical world. Her poetry looks at what is suggested by people, places, objects and events, rather than only at the historical and physical dimensions of the world. This applies equally to Wright's more socially engaged poems as to the rest of her poetry.

Judith Wright says the following in her foreword to *A Human Pattern* (1990): 'Poems, like all literature, are written from within a social, historical and personal context and bearing. The poems in this selection emerged from my own life, from the early days of World War II when fear, loss, displacement and destruction filled lives in Australia as elsewhere, to day when we are in even greater peril of losing the very world we live in, through the results of ignorance, greed and immensely increased power. These poems were written in these times, and, along with my own search for wholeness, their themes are dominated by the way I saw those influences.'

Wright clearly describes her work as a 'human pattern' itself deriving from her personal, physical I and social circumstances. Her poetry could be said to be determined by her material circumstances, almost in Marxist terms. In effect, her themes 'chose' her.

As her biographer, Veronica Brady, observes: 'Essentially Judith Wright's self has been oppositional. She has played a match against the current of the times, against technology and the destruction of the environment, against war and its violations of our common humanity and against the historical amnesia that condemns the past and the original inhabitants of this country to oblivion. These, of course, are the central concerns of Wright's work ...

... They underlie all its other activities, especially, I think, her political activities, the committees, lobbying, public meetings and public statements, defending the environment, opposing war, most especially the horrors of nuclear war, and demanding justice, respect and admiration for Aboriginal people. However, these activities come, I believe, from a sense of

reality which is essentially contemplative, an intuition that the really important events are those observable by some 'inner eye' which nevertheless looks onwards as well as inwards.'²

Brady's comments clearly outline the continuities between the contemplative and the active, the poetic and the activist which underlie Wright's work. When one considers more 'personal' themes of love and loss, for instance, one must consider its social context, just as when one considers the theme of reconciliation one must consider its more intimate, natural and spiritual dimensions.

When Judith Wright writes of the private emotion that accompanies individual experience, she simultaneously links this to tension with the cosmic and the social. We see exactly this in the epic 'The Moving Image' (p. 14) where 'We are caught in the endless circle of time and star/ that never chime with the blood; we weary, we grow lame,/ stumbling after their incessant pace/ that slackens for us only when we are/ caught deep in sleep, or music, or a lover's face.'

Reflecting near the end of her life on modern society's attitudes to inner experience and how people are often at a loss in the face of profoundly emotional experiences, Wright says the following in conversation with Ramona Koval of the ABC:

'Judith Wright: Poetry can help ... and I think it's very important to realise that the emotions, while not always welcome in schools, are themselves a major part of life. Emotion is something that we all suffer from – or endure, as the case may be. I think that the whole question of what the teaching of poetry does is a personal one.'

Ramona Koval: You often wrote about emotion. Even the way you described a flower or a tract of land was imbued with emotional meaning. How have these emotions been tempered by getting older?

Judith Wright: Oh, I think it's most important that the natural life is available to everybody. I worry very much about cities. I think that cities are — well, I'd better not say it to a city-dweller — but certainly if I weren't to have any external stimulus from things of which I was fond emotionally, I'd feel most deprived. And I think some people never get that sense of being in tune with the natural. They've never been introduced to it. And cities are not helpful at all in that respect.'³

Wright here clearly locates the capacity to make sense of the social and personal domains within an understanding and exposure to the natural world. Yet, one must consider that Wright's 'natural' world is populated by personal passion, reflection, and also by the stamp of human culture and history upon it. Wright observes this unity, for instance, in the poem 'For New England' (p. 13). 'Your trees, the homesick and swarthy native,/ blow all one way to me, this southern weather/ that smell of early snow. And I remember/ the house closed in with sycamore and chestnut/ fighting the foreign wind./ Here I will stay, she said; be done with the black north,/ the harsh horizon rimmed with drought-/ planted the island there and drew it around her./Therefore I find in me the double tree.' The environment here is clearly the surrounding world internalised, just as the surrounding world is enculturated, just as the culture is grounded by the environment. There is clearly a continuum, as much as there is a series of tensions between the world of self, society and nature – all encompassed, unified

² Brady, Veronica, 'Brief Biographical Notes Judith Wright', <http://www.nla.gov.au/events/docliffe/brady.html>

³ Koval, Ramona, Ramona Koval interviews Judith Wright age 84; <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwritng/stories/s143393.htm>

and expressed within the single domain of the poem. Wright's self is the poetic landscape of her language which verbalises the Australian (here New England) continuity between place and person.

As Wright's world changes and fragments – in line with the core idea of *The Moving Image* – all its component aspects change too. The shifting faultlines, rather than the songlines of Wright's social and natural landscape, results in a changed sense of society and self. Trivikrama Kumari Jamwal writes: 'Re-drawing the map of Australian nationhood was one consequence of the intense feeling for the land'. Jenny Kohn comments similarly: 'Reading her poems alert to the sense of haunting they contain gives us an opportunity to examine the answering feelings of unease that arise in us – to examine, as the speaker is forced to in 'At Cooloolah', the fear in our own hearts. Only then can the poems which have been called 'negative' or 'too political' have their full effect. For in them, Wright is constantly striving not only for a connection with the land, but a better, more moral world, and the chance that we will someday, in Wright's own words, 'know ourselves no longer exiles, but at home here in a proper sense of the term.'⁴

Wright's poetic relocation of herself in a changing landscape enabled her to embrace the Australian landscape altered by a growing political awareness that the battle over the land was being renewed rather than settled via the adoption of 'terra nullius'. This shapes Wright's earliest consideration of this question in a poem like 'Bora Ring' (p. 2) through to her later understanding of the contingency of human presence within the natural order as expressed in 'The Shadow of Fire: Ghazals' (p. 234): 'When I look up at the start I don't try counting, but I know that the lights I see can pass right through me./ What mind could weave such a complicated web?/ Systems analysis might make angels giggle./ a child I buried the key of a sardine tin./ Resurrected, I thought, it might unlock the universe./ Picking up shells on the beach, said Isaac Newton./ Catch a modern physicist using such a comparison.'

Wright's positioning of the human within the natural is centrally linked to her understanding of how the human understanding of nature is socially determined, as outlined in her comment about the shift in cosmic awareness from Newton to the present. This also underlies Wright's acceptance of the political dimension of the meaning of the land and the representation of the natural within her poetry. Gig Ryan comments as follows: 'For Judith Wright, whose chief theme as a poet is human relationship to nature, the prior occupancy of Australia is a dilemma she must of necessity confront. That is, questions of ownership, the legality or otherwise of that ownership, the usage to which the land is put and the results of that usage must be of utmost importance to any landscape poet in Australia. These are questions Wordsworth, who sought a similar communion with nature, need never have framed.'⁵

Wright's poetry implicitly derives social awareness from an understanding of people's sense of place. Social activism flows naturally from her appreciation of the environment and its social nature. Her late elegy, 'For a Pastoral Family' (p. 226) for example, critically examines the romance of the Australian experience of the land: 'If now there are landslides, if our field of reference/ is much eroded, our hands show little blood.' Wright herself explains this reformulation of the changing social landscape:

⁴ Kumawari, Jamwal, 'Judith Wright in Jammu', *Cordite Poetry Review*, (07/12/2004)

<http://www.cordite.org.au/features/trivikrama-kumari-jamwal-judith-wright-in-jammu>

⁵ Ryan, Gig, <http://www.thylazine.org/archives/thyla2/thyla2b.html>

'Ramona Koval: You've devoted a lot of time and thinking to causes like the environment movement, nuclear proliferation; and of course the relationship between Aboriginal people and the land; reconciliation. Your book offers an apology for trespass. What are your thoughts about these issues and how we stand in relation to them at the end of the century under the present government? Are you optimistic?

Judith Wright [laughs]: There's something very deep in our reaction to Aborigines. It isn't — it's a sort of shame mixed with misunderstanding. Until I met Kath Walker, as she was then, and she became my greatest friend, I had always had this problem myself. We were all brought up, I think, with the feeling that anyone who wasn't our colour was in some way inferior. A ridiculous idea from the very beginning. And we all ought to have known, but it was a very deep-seated reaction. And I think that being able to relate to Kath, as she was then, in the way I did was a most important part of my life. It changed my whole reaction to other people and it made a great difference in many other ways.

Most people when they really become reconciled to that split between peoples and find themselves able to relate on a deep level to people who aren't like them—you will always have a big dream somewhere; or more than that: more big dreams.⁶

However, as Gig Ryan concludes, not everyone has accepted Wright's changing perspectives and views: 'Having had a continuous relationship with rural Australia and being told by her father, also a conservationist, of the history behind 'Nigger's Leap' (Darkie's Head), she has been privileged to know the original and bloody foundations of white Australian history. From the 1960s on, her political awareness and activism have gnawed at governments and into her poetry. These poems and her prose works on these themes have predictably been less well-received.'⁵

⁶ Koval, Ramona, Ramona Koval interviews Judith Wright age 84; <http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s143393.htm>

LANGUAGE AND STYLE

Judith Wright's poetry has been said to integrate a more elevated rhetorical tone with a personal, intimate mode. It displays a surprising breadth of poetic technique and poetic diction. Given Wright's long poetic career and broad-ranging interests, a wide range of poetic language is to be expected. An adequate characterisation of Wright's poetic voice is thus difficult to achieve, unless one is dealing with a single poem in isolation. Wright's early, middle and late work shows a reasonable degree of continuity and variation in language, making it difficult to demarcate specific shifts.

Many critics divide Judith Wright's work into early, middle and late phases. Others try to 'lock in' a supposed aspect of Wright's style with a single theme or phase of her life. Such reductive 'close reading' of Wright's poetry can mislead if it does not take consideration of the 'background sounds' of poetic and regular Australian idiom of any particular 'era'. Versification has also changed considerably during Wright's lifetime and the individual language of any poem must be assessed within this social and literary background, rather than just be compared with other poems by Judith Wright from different eras. While there may also be some grounds for distinction between certain phases and an associated writing style, it would be wise to exercise caution in making sweeping statements of this nature.

Many commentators point to Judith Wright's use of ordinary Australian English and imagery from the Australian natural and social landscape. There does seem to be an ongoing tension in Wright's poetry between the feel of language deriving from ordinary, particularly colloquial Australian speech, and the language cadence deriving from the use - or deviation from - standard conventions of English language poetry in terms of rhyme, metre and literary allusions.

Many have assumed Wright to shift further away from convention; but in much of her later, supposedly less 'elevated and more contemporary' poetry her literary use of language and her frequent submission to the strict rules of conventional use of metre is often overlooked as much of her poetry 'sounds natural'. Upon closer examination it is clearly artificial, though very carefully constructed.

Others mention Wright's gendered 'female' language – her emotive, even 'intimate' tone, and reference to the social and physical world of femaleness. Wright's use of metaphor, lyrical and at times dramatic discourse to verbalise sexuality and female social experience was innovative in the Australia of the time. However, then as now, the classification of Wright's poetry in genderised terms says more about the critics than anything about Wright's poetry as such.

Many approach Wright's poetry bi-laterally, describing her initial poetry as being in a locative mood, as if she is speaking to an audience. To label her early poetry as only elevated and passionate is not entirely accurate, as it shows other key characteristics too; including discursive, ironic and critical elements. The ambiguity of naturally referenced images – evoking beauty and passion along with harshness, insecurity and darkness are already present. Wright's descriptions of people already incorporate grandeur and sham.

Labelling Wright's later poetry as newly speculative, rationalistic, demagogic and satirical is equally inadequate as much of her elevated, more impressionistic and emotive use of language remains. It is superficial to associate Wright's supposed adoption of a strident didactic tone with an associated shift from conventional rhyme and metre to free verse and a

more rhetorical use of language. Interestingly, such approaches particularly criticise the middle phase of her writing, bemoaning Wright's supposed shift from personal and natural themes elevated by emotive imagery and language. A further focus is the 'missing' conventional and 'fresh' elevation of Australian nature, society and language. This 'elevation' is actually applied anew to less parochial and nationalistic themes. Iconic images are 'redrawn' with greater chiaroscuro - showing more critical shadowed nuances.

Such commentators are particularly critical of Wright's 'newer' poetry which was seen to be more 'ideas-based' and abstract, rhetorical and political, rather than based on nature and emotion. Imagery and description is conventionally understood as more poetic than rational argument. Writers who have alternated between the lyrical, epic modes and demagogic or satirical modes are often harshly treated. It may be more related to ideological objections to Wright's widening choice of subject matter, and to a willingness to overlook apparently new stylistic tendencies in her earlier work, and ignore the elevated and the personal in her later middle period work.

In reality, however, the effective use of irony and sarcasm in poetry to achieve meaningful and aesthetically satisfying social critique is as difficult as the use of metaphor in a lyrical mode. Wright's work draws on all these modes equally - her ironic poetry evokes the Australian landscape and cadences of Australian colloquial language equally well as her more personally voiced reflections. Crucially, Wright combines these modes of speaking, just as she integrates the political and the personal. Her later work in particular integrates the social and the intimate, the strident and the lyrical, the metaphorical and the ironic in terms of theme and voice together.

Such commentators have been labelled 'sexist' and 'conservative' for admiring Wright's 'young lady's voice' and criticising Wright's later 'less cutesy' use of language. This criticism evidently praised Wright's 'womanly' way of writing about feelings evoked by nature and relationships. It linked her loss of poetic stature to her 'unwomanly' attack on the establishment. It was implied that she didn't 'know her place' and that her unorthodox experimentation was inappropriate to her gender. In assessing this debate one must consider that all of Wright's poetic personas and voices are equally constructs. There is no 'natural' voice of Wright's which is not conventional and constructed. Equally, all critical perspectives of Wright's poetry are similarly constructed and open to interrogation.

Rather than analyse Wright's style on this bi-lateral basis, it would be more accurate to describe multiple phases sharing similar stylistic characteristics. Wright's final phase of writing may in fact be more distinct – more free – less contrived and conventional - and yet also more controlled and deliberate. Wright's later work is self-evidently 'self-conscious' and poetic. While being more 'sparse' and less 'poetic' in diction, it depends heavily on form - from the haiku and the 'ghazal' - and equally on tradition.

Broadly speaking, Wright's work draws throughout on the felt impact of naturally and socially situated experiences. As her poetry matures she moves increasingly from the Indicative mood – stating ideas and telling stories – to the Locative mood - engaging her audience persuasively. She then shifts to the Interrogative mood – questioning the meaning of experience. This is followed by a transition to the Subjunctive Mood (the language of conditionality) – more accepting of life's contingencies. Wright journeys from statement to challenge to question to acceptance. Her initial tone is laudatory and whimsical, integrating feelings and experience. Later on she explores multiple oppositional tensions. Wright initially fluctuates between lament and celebration (focusing on nature). She highlights grief and joy

(human relationships). She then goes on to voice her anger, hope and despair (politics), and finally ends up musing in a more philosophical way on the relativity of it all.

Wright herself frequently comments on the voice, technique, language and style of her own writing, but these comments are in many respects quite general in nature, and should not be over-emphasised in characterising her poetry. If Wright, for instance, talks about the different challenges and difficulties of free verse ('Tightropes') (p. 186) as against rhyme and metre, she may not be disparaging the one or the other. Generally speaking her comments on aesthetics are more about the 'ars vivendi' (the art of living) than 'ars poetica' (aesthetics) - as demonstrated by her comments about haiku ('Brevity') (p. 231).

CLOSE STUDY

'Bora Ring', p.2

Judith Wright's early poem 'Bora Ring' from her first published collection *The Moving Image* (1946) presages the tension between beauty and dread which is present throughout her writing. Wright finds her voice within the echo of a prior song which is 'gone'. This echo comes to the fore as Wright listens to it, rather than suppresses it.

Wright deliberately works with implied meaning, absence and loss - that which is implicit - drawing on suggestion and connotation to flesh out her poem. Her poem is itself a Bora Ring, a magic sacred space of absence, suggestive of something which is lost or out of reach.

As in much of Wright's poetry the natural world, the world of emotion and the social dimension co-exist - with traces of the others present in each one. In this case, nature preserves, though very faintly, that which has been repressed, forgotten and lost. The personified grass 'stands up' in the absence of the long gone Aboriginal dancers, and the apple gums 'posture and mime a past corroboree'. Equally, nature here is enculturated nature showing the trace both of what is lost - the secret dance and its attendant culture - and that which has come to supplant it, the fear hidden in the 'rider's heart'.

Nature here mediates for that which is lost, even though it is inchoate and inaccessible. Although there is grief for what is gone, and the implied realisation that what has been lost was of great value, there is also the initial pragmatic understanding, based in the political reality of Australian society at the time that nothing can apparently be done about it.

Wright's poem is an elegy for lost Aboriginal culture, but it is also simultaneously an elegy for the European culture which has supplanted it; and implicitly too a protest poem of an explicitly political nature. There is the explicit acknowledgement that the society which has supplanted Aboriginal culture is complicit and guilty. The poem is very much about foregrounding that which has been repressed, bringing to the surface the guilt of the 'ancient curse'. The land on which blood has been spilt is cursed by this very act, and those who have taken it by this act of violence will suffer due to this curse. The awareness of this curse disrupts the colonial journey to own and master the land.

Wright here reformulates the dominant colonial myth of settlement, negating the myth of 'terra nullius' upon which modern Australian society is founded. She does not allow the silence of complicity to continue, focusing rather on the flaw in the myth which demonstrates its falsehood. The hero of the out back frontier, the pioneer on horseback, is confronted by a 'sightless shadow' which cannot be recognised consciously at this point - the significance of the situation and the true meaning of settler culture is as oblique as Aboriginal culture is. The rider - representative of Australian settler culture - wears the mark of Cain, the curse of being subject to persecution and, therefore, in perpetual exile.

If Aboriginal culture and ritual is conspicuously made present in its absence - evoked rather than immediately present - then the same is true here for Western culture in its mythical biblical origins and in its more recent settler myths. It too is inchoate, potentially meaningless and incomprehensible in being repressed.

By using implied meanings through references, rather than direct statements, Wright carefully interweaves the background myths of the Western culture which has supplanted the Aboriginal rituals with which she begins her poem into the poem's conclusion. By drawing on

the Biblical reference to Cain and Abel she frames a second historical context of distant absences with a similar connotation. Mythically speaking, pastoralist culture has the blood of the hunter-gatherer on its hands.

Wright's intention here is not only to grieve for a lost ritual and culture, but to make this culture and its rituals present again; that is, to undo the repression, to evoke the shocking realisation of the 'unsaid word' of murder, left unsaid in the poem but also in being implied via the story of Cain.

Guilt and murder is only indirectly mentioned in the poem. It is hinted at in the Biblical reference, rather than explicitly explained. This means that Wright's poem springs a surprise on its reader. It effectively ambushes a reader just as the rider in the poem is ambushed. A reader will be confronted emotionally by the 'fear as old as Cain' in coming to understand the hidden intention of the poem. The intention of the poem is to indicate that this landscape is not one of romantic beauty, but one marked by blood and guilt.

Wright effectively rewrites the dominant narrative of the Australian psyche, the predominant understanding of the Australian relationship to the land, and Australian society in this single early poem. As a poem about absent songs and unsaid words 'Bora Ring' represents in its own language and silences the union between the natural, psychological and social world that is made present in the poem. Wright's poem is itself a kind of Bora Ring - a space calling to mind a suggested presence which is gone. Wright has crafted a ring of sacred silence to entrance and shock her readers.

Preparatory Activity One:

Trace the core ideas of each of the four quatrains which make up the poem.

What significance can we attribute to the structure of the poem - made up of four sets of four lines?

How does the imaginative focus of each stanza move the reader backwards and forwards in time?

Preparatory Activity Two

What emotions are evoked by each stanza?

What specific words trigger the emotions in each instance?

Preparatory Activity Three:

What physical images are conjured up by each stanza in turn?

How do these physical images conjure up the different cultural and historical dimensions of Australian society as represented in the poem?

Which words trigger off these associations for readers?

'At Cooloolah', (p.83)

It is interesting to observe how Judith Wright maintains thematic and aesthetic continuity as her work develops. While Wright more dispassionately narrates the disjunctions within her observations of nature in 'Bora Ring', with her anger and grief implicit, the two poems 'At Cooloolah' and 'Landscapes' (p. 84) demonstrate something of her growth in personal awareness and an increasing attempt at wholeness despite loss. At Cooloolah it is Wright

herself who is challenged by 'a driftwood spear/ thrust from the water'. This time it is nature that sides against her and she herself who 'like my grandfather,/ must quiet a heart accused by its own fear'.

Wright's close connection to and understanding of nature is under threat here. She has come to understand that, unlike the blue crane 'fishing in Cooloolah's twilight' - integrated with the environment - she is 'a stranger, come of a conquering people.' This time too, the knowledge and acceptance of guilt and alienation is explicit, rather than repressed - 'being unloved by all my eyes delight in/ and made uneasy, for an old murder's sake.'

Wright extends awareness of this disjunction in addressing her audience. The growing alienation of Australian society from its natural bedrock and its authentic cultural substrate becomes her predominant poetic and personal concern. The abstract rider of 'Bora Ring' is now the poet's own grandfather and the accused is herself. Equally too, the disquiet here is that of the speaker herself - juxtaposed carefully with the 'calm' of the landscape's 'certain heir', the blue crane which is at one with nature and part of it, 'he will wear their colour till he dies.'

It is ironic that the nature poet is out of step with nature, that nature poetry here is de-romanticised. It is about the lack of connection to nature, the resistance of nature and society to the poet's gaze. In post-colonial terms the land and culture of settlement resists the domination of the renaming process of enculturation. The poem is here a religious and social confession: 'I know that we are justified only by love,/ but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.'

Wright's language inverts the standard colonial discourse here - it is the oppressor that is 'oppressed by arrogant guilt' - a colonised space that has 'room for none'. The internal, crowded, oppressed space of the oppressor is here contrasted with the free, 'clear heavenly levels' which is 'frequented', rather than dominated by crane and swan.

Preparatory Activity One:

Trace the rhyming pattern of the poem. Is the rhyme pattern consistent? Do you consider it to add to the poem or is it a distraction? How noticeable is the rhyming effect, and do you consider it at all important to the poem's feel and message?

Preparatory Activity Two

This poem essentially tells a story of two similar events, linked thematically and historically. Write up a brief prose summary of these events - this could take the form of a short story or a storyboard for a film script, with associated illustrations outlining 'core' camera shots.

Preparatory Activity Three:

Go through the poem and underline four key words from each stanza. Discuss how the poem changes in terms of rhyme, rhythm, imagery and message if one replaces those words with other, similar words? What may have influenced the poet's selection of these specific words, rather than the alternatives?

'Patterns', (p.241)

Judith Wright's explicitly anti-nuclear poem 'Patterns' (p.214) integrates the politics of the human and the natural in her examination of the ethical questions associated with life in the shadow of atomic warfare and the nuclear arms race. Wright draws on this poem to entitle her

collection of poems as a whole: 'Human eyes impose a human pattern,/ decipher constellations against a featureless dark.' Wright in essence returns here in ironic mode to the substance of the title poem of her first collection 'The Moving Image' (p.14) where human and natural patterning is in tension.

If it has become clear that the moving image is a person, then it too has become clearer that the human pattern itself is as ambiguous and incomprehensible as nature itself. On the one hand the human pattern seems to decipher the senseless flux of nature. On the other though, human evil and destructiveness makes meaningless any attempt to go beyond the banal and reach beyond death.

Wright's intention in 'The Moving Image' is to attempt to 'go farther with (you), clock and star,/ though the earth break under my feet and storm/ snatch at my breath and night ride over me.' (p. 15). She brings it here to conclusion. Akin with the Tom of Bedlam of 'The Moving Image' - the poor, crazy Tom on the stormy heath of Shakespeare's King Lear - Wright herself is almost consumed by natural, social and personal chaos. The looming nuclear 'end of the world' overlaps with her own looming death.

Wright is not reconciled to human evil, nor entirely accepting of the characteristics of nature as she has come to understand these more fully. Even so, she ironically accepts the unsure patterns of human life within the context of nature. Wright formulates this insight in paradoxical Heraclitean terms: 'We are born of ethereal fire and we return there' and also 'perhaps the dark itself is the source of meaning'.

Judith Wright clearly states the paradoxical interplay between good and evil, between growth and destruction. In a final intertwined reference to a Vedic song and the Katha Upanishad Wright links the Heraclitean fire of change and the ethical ambiguity of post-nuclear humanity. Essentially, she suggests that unavoidable human evil prevents us (her) from making the traditional Vedic sacrifice required to transcend death and suffering, as one must make such a sacrifice with a pure heart.

Wright seems to suggest that the Gordian knot of unethical uncertainty in a relativistic context, combined with human suffering and human wrongdoing leaves people caught in a situation where they cannot transcend their circumstances and escape darkness. Hence her final statement and her ultimate abandonment of poetry: 'We are all of us born of fire, possessed by darkness'.

However, ambiguous uncertainty should not automatically be read as despair, as Wright's prior poetry clearly suggests that the potentiality of silence and uncertainty is what gives rise not only to the poetic voice, but also to a new comprehension of reality - as seen in the poems discussed earlier - 'Bora Ring', and 'At Cooloolah'. Silence and uncertainty (darkness/ unknowing/ death/ evil) creates possibility (life/ light/ the good). This human and natural paradox can be seen to be a crucial message for our times.

Wright farewells poetry by revisiting the same issues that she has been addressing throughout her writing at a more complex level and in more universal terms. She outlines the poetic interplay between the natural, social and personal orders which gives access to a different mode of existence.

As Paul Kane suggests in his discussion of 'Patterns' in his survey of Australian poetry, the 'via negativa', or 'emptying' oneself, associated with darkness and silence, is an integrated in between space of significant potential.

Preparatory Activity One:

Underline all the references to fire and energy in the poem.

Which are mentioned positively, and which are mentioned in a more negative way?

Also list all the paradoxes (apparent contradictions) in the poem.

What do each of these sets of paradoxes centre around and what do they have in common?

Preparatory Activity Two:

A ghazal is made up of rhyming couplets and normally has a refrain. It links positive and negative feelings and experiences in tension.

What feelings are linked here?

In this poem there is no refrain, but the quotes from various texts function as a type of refrain.

Could the poem function without these quotes?

What essential feeling or message does each quote contain?

Are the quotes poetic in feel and sound?

Is it possible to rewrite each of the quotes to enhance the emotions expressed in the poem?

Each of these quotes is quite obscure in origin. Discuss which other famous quotes which could be used in the poem to achieve a similar effect?

FURTHER ACTIVITIES

- Set one of the poems listed below to music and turn it into a song. Select a specific set of phrases that can serve as a chorus you can repeat. You may have to adapt the poems.
 - 'Midnight' (p. 36)
 - 'Night' (p. 32)
 - 'Wildflower Plain', (p. 94)
 - 'Song' (p. 93)
 - 'Two Songs for the World's End' (p. 62)
 - 'Full Moon Rhyme' (p. 60)
 - 'Blind Man's Song' (p. 42).
- Select one of Judith Wright's listed poems and turn it into a short film or play. Consider which characters you would need on stage/screen, and who would get which lines. What music would you select to accompany your short piece? Record the piece on camera and burn it to DVD.
 - 'The Sisters' (p. 24)
 - 'Brothers and Sisters' (p. 100)
 - 'Smalltown Dance' (p. 219)
 - 'Builders' (p. 196)
 - 'The Dark Ones' (p. 193)
 - 'They' (p. 192)
 - 'Tightropes', (p. 186)
 - 'Two Dreamtimes' (p. 166)
 - '... and Mr Ferrit' (p. 84).
- Select one of Judith Wright's longer pieces listed below. Scan or photograph visuals to accompany the piece, along with appropriate music, and generate a PowerPoint slide show which links the visuals, the music, and the lines of poetry. Include contrasting 'natural' and 'urban' images to use in the PowerPoint.
 - 'Canberra: City and Mirage' (p. 193)
 - 'The Dark Ones' (p. 193)
 - 'At Cedar Creek' (p. 204)
 - 'Learning a Word' (p. 208)
 - 'The Eucalypt and the National Character' (p. 197)

- 'Some Words' (p. 162)
 - 'Habitat' (p. 156)
 - 'Australia 1970' (p. 152)
 - 'Eight Panel Screen' (p. 147)
 - 'Typists in the Phoenix Building' (p. 137)
 - 'The Moving Image' (p. 14)
 - 'South of My Days' (p. 11)
 - 'Eve to Her Daughters' (p. 134)
- Use Google Earth or a similar set of mapping software or atlas and draw up a map which traces the central locations mentioned in Wright's poetry. Some of the locations are listed below.
 Armidale; Brisbane; Sydney; Canberra; Charleville; Tamworth; 'Edge' Braidwood, A.C.T., Mt Tamborine, Queensland; New England, NSW; Hokitika NZ, Wellington NZ; Cedar Creek; Kyoto, Eastern Fall (Falls Country); Jerry's Plains; Hunter River; Mill Point; Endless Creek; Cooloolah; Mount Mary; Carnarvon Range; Brigalow Country; Mooni Creek; Murdering Hut; Hungry Hill; Nigger's Leap (Darkie's Head/ Darkie Point / Point Lookout); Wongwibinda.
 - Select one of the following poems to read to the class. Present a brief commentary, outlining your own response to the poem, and any ideas about its significance in natural, personal and social terms.
 - 'Nigger's Leap: New England' (p. 8)
 - 'The Company of Lovers' (p. 2)
 - 'Night after Bushfire' (p. 28)
 - 'Flame Tree in a Quarry' (p. 37)
 - 'Eroded Hills' (p. 49)
 - '... and Mr Ferrit' (p. 84)
 - 'Advice to a Young Poet' (p. 149).
 - Write a biographical outline of Judith Wright's life, quoting from the following poems to shape your story: 'Counting in Sevens' (p. 210); 'This Time Alone' (p. 146); 'Skins' (p. 239); 'Dust' (p. 239); 'For My Daughter' (p. 120); 'Age to Youth' (p. 113); 'Train journey' (p. 48); 'Woman to Child' (p. 21) 'Woman's Song' (p. 20); 'Woman to Man' (p. 20); 'South of My Days' (p. 11); 'The company of Lovers' (p. 2).
 - Write your own poem to present to the class. You could work individually or as a group to reflect on any social issues or issues related to the environment or Australian society which Judith Wright's poetry has made you reconsider.
 - Write a creative response to the recent Black Saturday fires - a story, poem or meditation. Write in the style of Judith Wright, working from traditional and free verse

examples: 'Good News' (p. 181); 'They' (p. 192); 'The Dark Ones' (p. 193); 'Growing-Point' (p. 199).

- Link to the URL for a discussion of 'Rockpool' (p.235) by Lyn Gallagher (mp3 or transcript):
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/bookshow/stories/2009/2452504.htm>
http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2009/01/bsw_20090106.mp3
- Read the transcript of Ramon Koval's interview with Judith Wright and discuss in groups what new insights you have gained about her poetry:
<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/bwriting/stories/s143393.htm>
- Write a creative response to Stradbroke Island's history (site of 'Nigger's Leap: New England', p 8). <http://www.straddieonline.com.au/AboutStraddie/StradbrokeIslandHistory.aspx>
- What signs of the tension between hope and despair are there in Judith Wright's later poetry? Consider her comment: 'The fact of the matter ... is that the world is in such a bloody awful state that I cannot find words for it. The whole situation that we've got ourselves into is too immense, too insane as it were, for verse to encompass ... I simply feel incapable of dealing poetically with what is happening now.' Judith Wright 1993 (Jenny Kohn) ⁷
- Discuss as a class whether Judith Wright was correct to prioritise political involvement over poetry. Respond to Tim Bonyhady's statement: 'Just a week before she died in 2000, Wright was even more extravagant in her deprecation of poetry, if not her applause for activism. Having just taken part in Canberra's Walk for Reconciliation, she declared: 'Anyone can write poetry, but to be an activist is far more important.' Tim Bonyhady.⁸
- Tim Bonyhady has the following to say about Judith Wright's unique situation. Do you agree that these traces of Judith Wright's personal history can be found in her poetry? Where is the evidence?

'She had some natural advantages. If she was 'born of the conquerors', as she first put it in the early 1970s, she was also bred to be a conservationist. Her father Phillip was a life member of Australia's first Wildlife Preservation Society, and was primarily responsible for the creation of New England National Park in 1931. He was also at the forefront of combating soil erosion—experimenting with a range of measures to stop erosion gullies destroying his property Wallamumbi outside Armidale in northern New South Wales.

Nature itself contributed to her activism – above all, the phenomenon we now know as El Niño, which was unusually intense in the early 1940s. When Wright returned to Wallamumbi from Sydney early in 1942, New England was drought-stricken. A year later, when she again went south, 'fire and erosion were more obvious than ever', heightening Wright's 'conscience over the treatment of the land'. Late in

⁷ Jenny Kohn, 'Longing to Belong: Judith Wright's Poetics of Place', <http://colloquy.monash.edu.au/issue012/kohn.pdf>

⁸ Bonyhady, Tim, 'Torn Between Art and Activism, Judith Wright', 27/04/2006,

<http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=446>

1944, she was in Brisbane when it was struck by one of Australia's worst series of dust storms.

Little wonder that, when Wright began writing seriously in 1942, dust became one of her key symbols and erosion one of her recurrent subjects. Little wonder, too, that, 20 years later, she played a key role in establishing the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland and then served as its president. By 1970 she was one of Australia's foremost environmental campaigners. With good reason, The Australian identified her as the person who had 'done more to arouse conservation anger in Australia than any other'⁸.

KEY QUOTES

'South of my days' circle, part of my blood's country,/ rises that tableland, high delicate outline/ of bony slopes wincing under the winter.' (From: 'South of My Days'), (p. 11)

The speaker identifies closely with New England in personal, physical and emotional terms.

'These hills my father's father stripped;/ and, beggars to the winter wind,/ they crouch like shoulders naked and whipped- / humble, abandoned, out of mind...//When the last leaf and bird go/ let my thoughts stand like trees here.' (From: 'Eroded Hills'), (p. 49)

The speaker reformulates her family history, poetically protesting against the degradation of nature.

'The song is gone; the dance/ is secret with the dancers in the earth,/ the ritual useless, and the tribal story/ lost in an alien tale.' (From: 'Bora Ring'), (p. 2) The speaker mourns the destruction of Aboriginal culture.

'Did we not know their blood channeled our rivers,/ and the black dust our crops ate was their dust?.../ ... Never from earth again the coolamon,/or thin black children dancing like the shadows/ of saplings in the wind.' (From: 'Nigger's Leap: New England'), (p. 8)

The speaker protests against Aboriginal displacement by settlers, voicing communal guilt and loss.

'This is the blood's wild tree that grows/ the intricate and folded rose'/This is the maker and the made;/ this is the question and reply;/ the blind head butting against the dark,/ the blaze of light along the blade./ Oh hold me, for I am afraid.' (From: 'Woman to Man'), (p. 20)

'... so move in me my darling,/ whose debt I cannot pay./ Pain and the dark must claim you,/ and passion and the day.(From: 'Woman's Song'), (p. 20)

The speaker frankly celebrates sexuality from a female perspective, exploring the complexity of sexual experience in combining pleasure, vulnerability, fecundity and risk.

'But now in terror overhead their day of dying breaks. The trumpet of the rising sun bursts into sound and the implacable unborn stir and reply.' (From: 'The Cicadas'), (p. 59)

The speaker interweaves natural phenomena with personal emotion and poetic and social significance.

'When I was a child I saw / a burning bird in a tree./ I see became I am,/ I am became I see' (From: 'To a Child'), (p. 60)

The speaker identifies in experiential terms with the ambiguous duality of nature.

'Bombs ripen on the leafless tree/ under which the children play,/ and there my darling all alone/ dances in the spying day.' (From: 'Two Songs for the World's End'), (p. 62)

The speaker interweaves contemporary political issues with the personal and natural world.

'And now, set free by the climate of man's hate,/ that seed sets time ablaze./ The leaves of fallen years, the forest of living days,/ have caught like matchwood. Look the whole world burns.'

(From: 'The Two Fires'), (p. 70)

The speaker describes her social climate in apocalyptic terms, by drawing on natural imagery.

'A knife's between us. My righteous kin/ still have cruel faces./ Neither you nor I can win them,/ though we meet in secret kindness.' (From: 'Two Dreamtimes'), (pp. 166-169)

The speaker, (Judith Wright addressing Oodgeroo Noonuccal) addresses her friend, acknowledging the difficulty of achieving personal reconciliation within a context of social animosity, alienation, and denials.

TEXT RESPONSE TOPICS

1. 'While poems such as 'Woman to Man', 'Eve to Her Daughters', and 'Naked Girl and Mirror' examine the world from a female perspective, Judith Wright cannot necessarily be identified as a feminist.' Do you agree?
2. 'Judith Wright's poems 'South of my Days' and 'Bullocky' express a typically Australian sense of the connection to the land.' Discuss.
3. 'The forest drips and glows with green./ The tree-frog croaks his far-off song./ His voice is stillness, moss and rain/ drunk from the forest ages long.' ('Rainforest')) 'It is untrue to say that Judith Wright presents an unromantic view of nature.' Discuss.
4. 'Yes, we do perceive her as sprawling and informal;/ even dishevelled, disorderly. That may be because we are still in two minds about militarism and class systems.' ('The Eucalypt and National Character', 'Judith Wright's nature poetry is primarily about herself and Australian society.' Do you agree?
5. 'It is correct to identify Judith Wright as the speaker in her poems and appropriate to interpret them with reference to her life and times.' Do you agree?
6. 'Lover, we've made between us/ one hell of a world. And yet - / still, at your touch, I melt.' ('Eve Scolds') 'Judith Wright's earlier and later poetry gives us an in depth understanding of all the phases of a woman's life.' Discuss.
7. 'Poems such as 'The Dark Ones' and 'Two Dreamtimes' show that the conflict between Australia's Aboriginal and settler populations can never truly be resolved.' Discuss.
8. 'Free verse is harder to bring off than rhyme, / liberty than slavery.' ('Tightropes') 'Most of Judith Wright's poetry is unconventional in message but conventional in form.' Do you agree?
9. 'Judith Wright's poetry shows how Australian society can only be properly understood if we are willing to question more simplistic historical narratives.' Discuss.
10. 'Judith Wright is pro-nature and is seen by some as anti-Australian. Many claim her campaigns for the environment and Aboriginal rights reduced the stature of her poetry.' How do later poems such as 'Canberra: City and Mirage' compare to earlier poems such as 'South of My Days'. Discuss.

TWO GUIDED TEXT RESPONSES

Guided Text Response One

Topic:

'Judith Wright's poetry is less concerned with the romantic aspects of nature than environmental questions.' Discuss.

Understanding the Question

This question asks us to compare two potentially different interpretations of Wright's poetry. Students have to identify whether Wright's poetry is romantic in any way and specify which environmental questions she poses. Then student has to decide what Wright emphasises: the political, environmental or the romantic.

Some may choose to answer that Wright's poetry is more romantic in nature, and provide evidence for this; others may choose to say that her work is more focused on environmental issues.

A more complex response would explain that Wright's poetry is simultaneously romantic and issues-based; and while the emphasis may shift, Wright primarily integrates these two approaches rather than setting one against the other.

An informed response would also consider whether Wright's poetry was sometimes neither romantic nor issues-based in its treatment of nature, the emphasis falling elsewhere – spiritually or personally for example. A more nuanced response would also consider how Wright's work may have changed over time; how the political is inherent in her initial more emotive work, and how traces of a romantic approach to nature remain in Wright's more politically and philosophically oriented work.

Brainstorming

In approaching the question one must integrate an argument supporting a contention with textual evidence. Students would first select key words from the question statement which 'unlock' the question. Then students would formulate their own contention by drawing on these words. In this instance, the words 'less concerned', along with 'environmental questions' and 'romantic' are the starting points.

Supporting Evidence

Students would then incorporate material from Judith Wright's poems, making sure they draw on examples which support their primary contention. In this case, a more 'romantic' poem such as 'The Flame Tree' (p. 57) would be juxtaposed with a more 'strident poem' such as 'Australia 1970' (p. 152) Students would similarly provide examples for statements about the integration of both tendencies.

Structure

Students might structure an essay in response to this question in three sections: firstly considering evidence for the romantic treatment of nature and then moving on to discuss Wright's more polemical poems. Students would close by discussing Wright's early and late poems which incorporate the personal and the natural, and sum with an examination of how Wright integrates perspectives in tension. Students might draw on earlier poems such as

'Soldier's Farm' (p. 5) and then look at later poems such as 'Late Meeting' (p. 220) and 'Rockpool' (p. 235)

Model Opening Paragraph

Judith Wright's poetry shifts to emphasise environmental questions which de-romanticise nature. Interestingly, Wright maintains nature's sacredness even when treating it in de-romanticised, political terms. These perspectives are not necessarily in opposition, as Wright frequently integrates them. Her poetry also presents a more personal, less political recoding of nature. Wright also addresses personal concerns in natural terms which are neither romantic nor polemical. Her poetry defies simplistic classification as it is inherently complex and diverse.

Guided Text Response Two

Topic:

'Judith Wright's poetry is essentially pessimistic. Her view of society and human nature is negative and critical, and she ultimately holds little hope for the environment or for national reconciliation.' Do you agree?

Understanding the Question

The question is a one-sided, sweeping statement about Wright's poetry. Four distinct areas of interest are specified: society, human nature, the environment, and national reconciliation. Students have a number of options in dealing with such a question. It would be wise to avoid a sweeping and generalised response - saying that the statement is true and that Wright's poetry is pessimistic in general terms. It would also be wise to avoid the converse generalisation - that Wright's poetry is fundamentally and overwhelmingly optimistic.

The question invites students to make a more nuanced response, to identify where and when Wright's poems express optimism, and where Wright's poems are pessimistic. Students should also take the opportunity to treat each area of specified interest separately. One could, for example talk about when Wright presents human nature in positive terms. This could be followed by an analysis of how Wright presents human nature in negative terms. One could also address the other areas of interest by looking at similar contrasts.

In reality, Wright's poetry offers students the opportunity to answer this question by agreeing and also by disagreeing with the question statement, as there is plenty of evidence to support either case.

The question also invites students to incorporate some commentary about how Wright's poetry changes over time. It would, for instance, be possible to say that Wright is initially quite pessimistic in many respects. One could say that she then becomes more upbeat, and that this is followed by a more ambivalent phase which ends in pessimistic terms.

One might say Wright's final position is more balanced - essentially neither optimistic or pessimistic - agnostic if one wishes. There is much evidence either way.

The intention of the question is obviously to generate a more nuanced response which considers different phases and categories of Wright's work, and addresses the many grey areas in the question itself, as well as Wright's own poetry.

Supporting Evidence

Students could explore Wright's ambivalent ghazals like 'Rockpool' (p. 235) and 'Patterns' (p. 241); her ambiguous love poetry such as 'Woman To Man' and 'Woman's Song' (p. 20); any of her more complex nature poems such as 'Flame Tree in a Quarry' (p. 37); and protest poems such as 'Platypus' (p. 201), 'At Cedar Creek' (p. 204). Students might also examine 'The Dark Ones' (p. 193) and 'Two Dreamtimes' (p. 166).

Structure

In constructing a response to the question students could take three fundamentally different possibilities into account. Students could deal with all the evidence outlining pessimistic perspectives together and then discuss optimistic perspectives. A simpler approach would be to deal with each of these categories in turn, considering the evidence for an optimistic and pessimistic position, and then to come to a general conclusion based on the prior discussion. A third, more challenging approach would centre on a discussion of specific poems which outline pessimism, optimism and ambivalence.

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