

Murray: Collected Poems

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITIES

TAPPING INTO PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES

Murray is a major figure in Australian literature. Share his **biographical information** with the students. Draw out the following major points:

1. grew up in the bush, farm life;
2. poverty;
3. only child;
4. had to support father after death of mother when he was only 12;
5. teased at school;
6. academic life in the 1960s at University of Sydney and Australian National University – ‘radicalism’ – protesting against the Vietnam War, emerging consciousness about the rights of Indigenous Australians (following civil rights movement of America).

Activity: Prediction brainstorm

Students discuss and brainstorm in small groups their impressions of what themes his poetry may cover, what subjects/topics they might expect to find in Murray’s poems, what tone of expression. Encourage students to add information they have previously learned about Murray and other Australian writers such as: **Judith Wright, A. D. Hope, Kenneth Slessor, Bob Ellis, Bruce Dawe**, etc. Have small groups present their brainstorm to the class, drawing out similarities in their predictions.

Activity: Values line

Place ‘agree’ and ‘disagree’ signs at two opposite sides of the room, where students can stand along the continuum to physically represent their opinions on key statements to do with themes in Murray’s poetry. After reading out each statement, and allowing time for students to move and place themselves on the continuum, ask individual students to state why they are standing where they are – and after a few student explanations, invite students to change their spots if they feel their opinion has changed upon hearing others’ points of view. Those who change spots, ask them to articulate why/how their opinion has changed. From **Cope & Kalantzis**.

Possible key statements:

- Indigenous Australians’ connection to, and knowledge of, the land is not valued by mainstream Australia.
- The Australian bush is special and sacred and must be protected.
- Those with money have all the power and oppress the poor and working-class Australians, deliberately keeping them down and perpetuating the class system.
- We should create a new Australian flag.
- Australia should become a republic.

As these are contentious issues it would be important to set ground rules around how students express their opinions and the expectation of appropriate language: no insults, etc. You may choose to revisit this activity at the end of the unit to see if students’ opinions have further developed.

To revise knowledge of poetic forms, techniques and functions while introducing Murray’s work, ‘The Tin Wash Dish’ (p. 308) can be used. Using a range of literary devices, it can be used easily for a short close reading and reinforces the lens through which Murray sees the world – coming from poverty, feeling oppressed, which then provides the basis for developing an affinity with Indigenous Australians in the 1960s–1980s, and for the desire to see Australia break away from the United Kingdom and the classed culture he associates with it.

Students may find the following website useful to revise **poetry forms and techniques**.

Also highlight that Murray himself has suggested there may be several interpretations of a poem – “there is no Great Golden Interpretation” – and the question to keep asking is whether the poem “will bear that reading” being suggested, and what in the text supports this reading? (Murray, ‘**On Being Subject Matter**’, p. 8)

The purpose of poetry according to Les Murray

Activity: Quote analysis

Students work in groups to look at key quotes from Murray’s dissertations on poetry. Students are to discuss what each shows about Murray and his poetry, and how this adds to what they had discussed in their prediction brainstorms. There are six quotes but it is good to double up and see if different groups come up with different interpretations of the same quote.

Les Murray on poetry:

1. “A true poem is dreamed and danced as well as thought.” (from the **Poetry Archive**)
2. “Religions are big slow poems, while most poems are short, fast religions.” (from the **Poetry Archive**)

3. "It's my mission to irritate the hell out of the eloquent who would oppress my people, by being a paradox that their categories can't assimilate: the Subhuman Redneck who writes poems." (from *The Guardian*)

4. "The continent on which I live was ruled by poetry for tens of thousands of years, and I mean it was ruled openly and overtly by poetry. Only since European settlement in 1788 has it been substantially ruled by prose. The sacred law which still governs the lives of traditional Aborigines is carried by a vast map of song-poetry attached to innumerable mythic sites. Each group 'sings' the tract of country it occupies, just as each initiated person sings the ceremonial songs of the holy places for which he or she is responsible within that territory...Aborigines resent the use of the term 'mythology' for their traditions, preferring to speak of Creation-songs and Dreamings and the Law. In its richness, its psychological depth and the dream-like shockingness of its stories, the Law is a match for the mythologies of Greece or Rome or any other ancient culture. And it is interesting as a particularly pure example of rule by poetry alone..." (from the *Les Murray* website)

5. "Every undamaged human being has two minds and a body. One mind is that of waking consciousness, the other is the occult mind of dreams, which we live in fully during sleep but which is also present as reverie when we're awake. Neither mind is superior to the other outright; each rules in its own mode of consciousness... Looking inside myself, I detect that when I write a poem, I do so in a kind of trance which integrates my two minds with each other and with their master-servant my body." (from the *Les Murray* website)

6. "Realising that all subject matter is coloured by the poem or poems through which it is seen, and that perhaps nothing is ever seen except through some poem or other..." (from the *Les Murray* website)

Student groups share with the class, with the teacher synthesising key ideas, guiding the discussion to consider Murray's understandings of:

- Poetry as Dreaming, dance, trance: as law, as another form of consciousness that connects with/processes the waking consciousness and is embodied.
- Poetry as magnifying glass/mirror – nothing is ever seen except through a poem.
- Poetry as religion (and inextricable from religion).
- Poetry as provocation – irritating those who would oppress.

Students then individually complete a 'before and after wheel', outlining their original predictions and then adding new understandings from the quote analysis to the outer circle.

Further information to discuss with students:

What others say about Murray:

- **Ruth Padel:** His poems "slither between tenderness (for human beings and the natural world) and rage."

"Stubbornly, unglamorously, the poems identify with nature of all kinds, from landscape and animals to human nature."

- **J. M. Coetzee** called him "The Angry Genius"
- **Dennis O'Driscoll:** "A poet with a panoptic vision of – and for – Australia, he has not only enhanced the literary standing of his country but has also contributed to the shaping of its destiny: influencing its arts policy, proposing a design for its flag, drafting its vote of allegiance, celebrating its indigenous plants and creatures, urging fellow Australians to shake off what he regards as their colonial mind-set and to allow their country to mature into a republic."

Key ideas:

- Vision of and for Australia
- Indigenous celebration
- Destiny, republic

Note: the NSW theme of 'discovery' could be brought into this unit, in terms of seeing discovery as provocative and confronting – "they can lead us to new worlds and values, stimulate new ideas, and enable us to speculate about future possibilities. Discoveries and discovering can offer new understandings and renewed perceptions of ourselves and others".

PERSONAL RESPONSE ON READING THE TEXT

The following are some of the simpler poems so this is a good introductory exercise for students to work on independently in order to get more of a feel for Murray's style.

"The Widower in the Country" p. 3

"Evening alone at Bunyah" p. 12

"Flowering Eucalypt in Autumn" p. 204

"Cumulus" p. 224

"Poetry and Religion" p. 265

"Where humans can't leave and mustn't complain" p. 389

"The last hellos" p. 430

Students select one of the poems to read, annotate and analyse. If possible, provide poems on A3 paper and provide highlighters of different colours for students to identify different features (alternatively this could be done using Microsoft

Word). Ask students to make a key for their annotation colours and to annotate around the sides of the poem with notes explaining what they are identifying.

Text annotations to include the following:

- questions and comments while reading the text;
- personal connections with students' own experiences or identification with characters, places, events and issues;
- language and structural features, including imagery;
- contextual influences (biographical, historical, literary);
- exploration of themes, ideas.

After being given the opportunity to do this individually, students who have annotated the same poem can compare observations, ideas and responses. Finally, students can be instructed to write about their annotations in a short analysis.

SYNTHESISING TASK/ACTIVITY

Students undertake a close reading of the poem, 'Late Summer Fires' (p. 395), and compare it to 'Inside Ayers Rock' (p. 417). Explain that the term now is 'Uluru' after the title for the rock and surrounding land was handed back to the Anangu people by the Hawke government in 1985. Both texts deal with the interaction of European settlers and Aboriginal people, and from this comparison students should be asked to:

- identify Murray's attitude toward Australian history and settler–Aboriginal relations;
- consider literary techniques used in these poems and, particularly, the use of colour as symbolism and the significance of this in poetry about race relations;
- articulate how these poems achieve Murray's aim to hold up a mirror and help people really 'see' the subject through the poems.

Students can make notes on their [retrieval chart](#) (PDF, 8KB) before composing a two page written discussion explaining their comparison.

(ACELR019) (ACELR022) (ACELR023) (ACELR027) (ACELR029) (ACELR030) (ACELR031)

READING LES MURRAY

Activity: Comparative study

(NB: This comparative study is closely modelled on that in the [Close Study Section of the Reading Australia teaching unit on Judith Wright's Collected Poems](#).)

By exploring multiple poems within a theme, teachers can address the [Literature, Unit 2](#) outcome: Students compare and evaluate the form, language and content of literary texts, including the ways in which text structures, language features and stylistic choices provide a framework for audience's expectations, responses and interpretations.

(ACELR023)

Teachers can select poems based on themes or subject matter appropriate for their unit of study or cohort. Below are suggested themed sets. Close reading is recommended for all selected poems, identifying the subject matter and ideas expressed or alluded to, as well as the tone and mood conveyed. How these aspects are conveyed and/or represented are also focused on through analysis of poetic elements such as structure, language choices, imagery, rhythm and sound.

A framework for students' analysis as used in the previous synthesising activity is the SPECS and SLIMS model, with the 'summary' in SPECS moving to last after SLIMS:

SPECS (subject, purpose, emotion, craftsmanship, summary)

SLIMS (structure, language, imagery, movement, sounds)

Summary

Also, encourage students to think about the purpose of the poem in terms of the four purposes Murray suggests – poetry as dreaming, dance, trance; poetry as magnifying glass/mirror; poetry as provocation; poetry as (and inextricable from) religion.

| Poem set | Theme | Purpose | Notes |
|---|---|--|--|
| "At Min-Min Camp" p. 258 "Gun-e-darr" p. 327 "Thinking about Aboriginal land rights, I visit the farm I will not inherit" p. 93 "The Conquest" p. 44 | Interactions between Aboriginal Australians and settlers. | Poetry as dreaming, dance, trance: as law, as another form of consciousness that connects with/processes the waking consciousness and is embodied. Poetry as magnifying glass/mirror – nothing is ever seen except through a poem. | Min Min supernatural mystery The Min Min are seen as unexplained phenomena by Anglo Australians and scientists, and some explain them as UFOs. They appear in Aboriginal dreamings as spirits – the Arrante people of Northern Territory say that a group of women were dancing in the sky and a baby fell out of one of their coolamons. The mother, the evening star, and baby's father, the morning star come to earth searching for the baby – so they tell all children to be careful, and don't look at the stars. The Kalkadoon people of QLD warn that if the lights catch you, you will disappear, so don't follow them (warning to children). Min Min Lights Collection (artwork) Compare 'Gun-e-darr' to Oodgeroo Noonuccal's poem 'We are Going' and Judith Wright's 'Bora Ring' – consider the sense of loss, the sense of 'replacement' of Anglo culture for Aboriginal. Compare 'Thinking about Aboriginal land rights...' to Spiritual song of the Aborigine by Hyllus Maris, and the quote "we don't own the land, the land owns us..." from S. Knight, |

1996, *Our Land Our Life*, card, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Canberra – consider the notion that no-one owns the land, and it continues past our days – is Murray suggesting this in his poem? Compare 'The Conquest' to 'Wild Flowers' by Ali Cobby Eckermann, referring to the Myall Creek massacre. Discuss the notion of 'attack' and 'reprisal', a disproportionate response by the stronger party.

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| <p>"Nocturne" p. 256 "Recourse to the wilderness" p. 24 "Mirror-glass skyscrapers" p. 324 "Slip" p. 333 "The flight from Manhattan" p. 172 "Noonday axeman" p. 3</p> | <p>'Contemporary Pastoralism' Rural landscapes juxtaposed against cityscapes. Technology Consumerism</p> | <p>Poetry as dreaming, dance, trance: as law, as another form of consciousness that connects with/processes the waking consciousness and is embodied. Poetry as Magnifying glass/mirror – nothing is ever seen except through a poem.</p> | <p>'Recourse...' is like his own song cycle, singing the land he travels through and identifying its features. Oodgeroo Noonuccal, "Municipal Gum". David McCooney on Les Murray – explains features of contemporary pastoralism.</p> |
| <p>"A brief history" p. 388 "A deployment of fashion" p. 466 "The suspension of knock" p. 411</p> | <p>Australian identity – race, gender politics.</p> | <p>Poetry as provocation – irritate those who would oppress. Poetry as magnifying glass/mirror – nothing is ever seen except through a poem.</p> | <p>Compare 'A brief history' to Jack Davis' 'Aboriginal Australia': "in a lively, frequently polemic prose style he promotes republicanism, patronage, Gaelic bardic poetry, warrior virtue, mysticism, and Aboriginal models, and attacks modernism and feminism" (Bourke, Lawrence, 1992. <i>A vivid steady state: Les Murray and Australian Poetry</i>)</p> |
| <p>"The Broad Bean Sermon" p. 112 "An immortal" p. 200 "Each morning once more seamless" p. 418 "The fishermen at South Head" p. 167</p> | <p>Salvation, religion</p> | <p>Poetry as Religion (and inextricable from religion). Religion as ritual.</p> | <p>Reviewer Peter Porter compared Murray to John Donne/Baroque – abrupt openings, paradoxes, argumentative and tough eloquence, formal satire, wrote about the permanence of God and spiritual values. Refer to Les Murray's biography. Murray "explores social questions through a celebration of common objects from the natural world"</p> |
| <p>Extension: "The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle" p. 137. Based on a translation of Wonguri-Mandjiagai people of North-Eastern Arnhem Land. "Aspects of language and war on the Gloucester road" p. 275</p> | <p>Rural landscapes and their history in Aboriginal Australia.</p> | <p>Dreaming, dance, trance: as law, as another form of consciousness that connects with/processes the waking consciousness and is embodied. Poetry as magnifying glass/mirror – nothing is ever seen except through a poem. Poetry as religion – the Dreaming.</p> | <p>Buladelah – based on a translation of Wonguri-Mandjiagai people of North-Eastern Arnhem Land – song cycle of the moon bone, translated by anthropologist R.M. Berndt. Aspects – like his own song cycle singing the land around Bunyah, weaving English and Aboriginal language. Albert Mobilio writes that Murray has revived the traditional ballad form ("Down home down under", Review of Learning Human: Selected Poems in <i>The New York Times Book Review</i> 12 March 2000).</p> |

The literary traditions from which Murray gained inspiration and which contributed to the central concerns of his poetry:

Reviewer [Peter Porter](#) compared Murray to John Donne/Baroque – abrupt openings, paradoxes, argumentative and tough eloquence, formal satire, wrote about the permanence of God and spiritual values.

[Murray](#) has described himself as "the last of the Jindyworobaks", an Australian movement of Anglo artists seeking to promote Aboriginal ideas and customs, mainly through poetry. He was not officially a member, but was influenced by their work.

According to [John Kinsella](#), Murray's work is steeped in the traditional values of the bush, rural life and ballads. He believes in a particular Australian identity, unifying Anglo and Aboriginal cultures, and arguing for cultural sovereignty and separation from Britain.

[Murray](#) cites his favourite poets as:

- Hesiod of Boeotia – Boeotia representing "imagination, dream... inspiration, ritualism and ancestral inheritance";
- Latin poets Catallus and Virgil;
- George Herbert (Welsh-born poet, Anglican priest);

- Alexander Pope (known for his mastery of the heroic couplet);
- Gerard Manley Hopkins (taught him baroque diction);
- Australian poets James McAuley (anti-modernism) and Andrew Lansdowne (Christian influence).

He prefers the lyrical to satiric mode.

(A conversation with Les Murray by J. Mark Smith)

The formal and stylistic traits of the work:

- Murray uses a variety of forms, from traditional forms such as ballads and formal sonnets to more 'contemporary' free verse forms. His recurring symbols celebrate the natural world and he explores complex social questions through simple and common natural objects. His identification with the underprivileged is reflected in his preference for language as it is spoken by common people, though many of his poems, nonetheless, have layers of complexity and demanding language. He has a deep affinity with Aboriginal culture and admires and honours Aboriginal poetry (song traditions) in his work. He has a love of the land and an understanding of its spiritual value and promotes this in naturalistic poems admired for their fecundity.
- Murray favours a concern for rhythm over rhyme, and often begins a poem with a regular rhyme scheme but varies it as the poem progresses. Masculine/feminine rhyme is a particularly well-used device in Murray's work.

THE WRITER'S CRAFT

Poem set: Interactions between Aboriginal Australians and settlers

"At Min-Min Camp" p. 258

- Discuss the appropriateness of the use of **enjambment** to present a circular story representing the dreaming, colonisation and its effects, the cycle of experience.
- Look at similes – 'like a loose mansail behind us', 'like a star with land behind it', 'like the boys who'd slept on that verandah' – each simile contains an echo of the past/history – behind, before.
- Examine the presentation of the sacred – sacred lore for Aboriginal people, the Min-Min lights; the sacred in religion brought by the colonisers – it saved some but "it is still scattered" and many Aboriginal people long for the former lore, the former sacredness. "Holiness is harder to inhale" (than petrol) – an image of scattered people, caught between old religion and new, finding comfort in the tangible quick fix of alcohol/petrol/drugs.
- Look closely at the use of extended metaphor: the house as the Aboriginal race or culture/lifestyle. There stands only "the verandah that had lost its house", it had been there a long time, "it was a lingering house. Millions had lived there on their way to the modern world", the tourists/explorers left the house ruined: "we left that verandah next day, and its ruined garden of wire and daylilies, its grassy fringe of ancient pee scalds".
- What is the meaning of last line? Truck that lost its body – a nation that has lost its way, a loss of conscience in regard to treatment of Aboriginal people?
- Look at the effect of colonisation – discussion of "two kinds of fear", "sacred cultures of fright"; key words/phrases – "but they are unfixed now, and recede, and suddenly turn pale as an escaped wife dying of a dread poem. Or, her child who sniffs his petrol, and reels like a shot kangaroo..."
- And of course, the language – harsh effect of hyphenations "lake-submerged no-colour" "solar-coloured" "sheet-iron".

"Gun-e-darr" p. 327

- Once more discuss the appropriateness of the use of **enjambment** to present a circular story representing the dreaming, colonisation and its effects, the cycle of experience.
- Look at the notion of the rainbow serpent creator – from Aboriginal dreamings – the new serpent of cattle introduced by colonisers which has "eclipsed" the original serpent, writing a new dreaming story into the land. The colonisers have deceived the first inhabitants, presenting their engine or rotational network of 'official roads' as the serpent. The surging, the unstoppable force of colonisation is captured in phrases such as "smoking high and raw with dust as it curved and lengthened in its first days" and "amid the bellowing, the scattering whipcrack undulations and sleepy flooding onward". The significance of the cattle serpent being "blood-red" – representing bloodshed as colonisers and colonised battled each other, "then there were brave men on both sides" – but ultimately the serpent is the "destroyer of sacred dance circles".
- Interestingly, the cattle serpent not only destroys dance circles but also "little hoed farms" – could that represent his position in a poor family with a small leasehold? Or is he referring to Aboriginal agriculture which left minimal footprint on the land?
- Observe the sibilance in "grassed sea-floor" "dissimulation" and "see it now, smoking" – mimicking the serpent/snake hissing.

"Thinking about Aboriginal land rights, I visit the farm I will not inherit" p. 93

Discuss the following features.

- The appropriateness of the use of **enjambment** to present a circular story representing life cycle.
- Sibilance – "grass coming...sod-bunching, are issuant, with dusts".
- The hard sound of hyphenated words – "sod-bunching", "wind-lap", "pollen-concurred", "noon-thin", "day-tides".
- Renewal – "contains every mouldering and oil that the bush would need to come back right this day", "the creek a hung gallery again" (metaphor), "the bee trees unrolled".
- Why are "the only lines bearing consistent strain" the "straight ones: fence, house corner, outermost furrows" – a struggle to apportion and contain land.
- Renewal, cycle, tradition, the notion that we belong to the earth: "I go into the earth near the feed shed for thousands of years", which rings true when you consider the poem's title – we cannot inherit land, it inherits us.
- Who is the 'I'? The poet? Is he omniscient?

"The Conquest" p. 44

Consider the following aspects.

- Rhythm switches depending on the point of view presented – in the verses from the colonisers' point of view there is a rhythm resembling (but not always perfect) iambic pentameter; in the verses outlining the impact of colonisation on the First Australians there is more of a resemblance of enjambment. This indicates change in point of view but also juxtaposes the unrelenting pushing forth of the colonisers in the rigid rhythmic verses against the far-reaching, all-encompassing devastation in the looser, flowing verses.
- What is the significance of the capitalisation of Friendship, Trust, Respond, Natives (once), Amity and Reason? Are abstract concepts like friendship, trust, amity being personified? Or is this simply a way to demarcate key words and concepts?
- Imagery depicting the colonisers: "lieutenants hawked and spat", "dank nightmares", "small floating England", "harsh dead swarmed", "hard clouds", "alien", "man-shapes", "striped men".
- Imagery depicting Aboriginal people – "warriors, trembling", "known warriors bite their beards", "naked Indians circle them like birds" (simile), "the thoughtful savage with Athenian flanks fades from the old books here. The sketchers draw pipe-smoking cretins jiggling on thin shanks" – a change from helpless/noble savage to enemy, point of ridicule.
- Reference to language: "tribesmen defy him in good Dhuruwal", "the age of unnoticed languages begins".
- Powerful lines – "no one recalls what month the first striped men mounted a clawing child, then slit her throat", "the sketchers draw pipe-smoking cretins jiggling on thin shanks poor for the first time" "this quandong of wrath ferments in slaughters for a hundred years" (quandong – native Australian fruit – significance of this choice of metaphor – fruit fermenting, drunk on power, slaughter; ferment – a state of agitation or change – the native way of life agitated, irrevocably changed).
- The significance of the image at the end of Governor Phillip, "before he recoiled into his century" – recoil – to shrink back disgusted, upset or afraid – does this imply guilt? Shame? Does this mark a difference between his time, "his century", and ours?
- Figurative language and imagery – "as the sickness of the earth bites into flesh/trees moan like women, striplings collapse like trees – /fever of Portsmouth hulks, the Deptford cough."
- "learning the Crown Lands tune" – a new song line the English imposed on the land.
- Alliteration, repetition of 'f' – "it makes dogs furtive, what they find to eat/but the noonday forest will not feed white men."

Poem set: "Contemporary Pastoralism"

"Nocturne" p. 256

Features to be considered.

- Vocabulary: ranginess – tall with few leaves (an unhealthy plant); rotogravure – type of engraving, etching; incantatory – reciting verbal charms to produce magic/spell.
- Repetition of 'of' to begin phrases, listing descriptions of Brisbane.
- References to 'story', 'dictionary' – the Storey Bridge over the Brisbane River.
- Negative imagery "brothel-humid", "rum river", "bubbled tar of day", "bottle-tops spat in Vulture Street", "web lines of coke and grit by sleepers racked in corridor trains".
- Positive imagery: "timber duchess", "crab moon, rising".
- The imagery of flood – "choked the dictionary with silt and hung a navy in the tropic gardens".
- The sensory – "mango bombings", "rum river", "incantatory city".
- A preference for Brisbane at night – possibly because it is quieter, more reflective.

"Recourse to the wilderness" p. 24

Features to be considered.

- A recount of travel into Australia's spiritual and geographical centre. South Australia – frost; countryside outside of Adelaide – German migrants; into the desert – "entered the waterless kingdom"; Port Augusta – "iron-brown and limitless"; Lake Eyre – kiln-dry lake country; mirage – in the desert, red centre; spirits of sea-cliffs (Uluru).
- Imagery: "cars dipped below the world's edge on unknown roads".
- Personification – "at dawn, the sun would roll up from his lair".
- The peace of being in nature – simple living – "but they sustained me like water, they, and the is-ful ah!nesses of things.
- A slowness, a relaxed life – "in the silent lands time broadens into space", "yarn about jobs in the North which I meant not to get", "chewing quietly", "routines we had invented for putting spine into shapeless days".

"Mirror-glass skyscrapers" p. 324

Features to be considered.

- Colour – the green of glass buildings, "jade suits pitched frameless up the sky", "talc-green scintillant towers" – contrasting with the brightness of their lights at night – "dusk's lightswitches reveal yellow Business branching kilotall and haloed with stellar geometry"; also imagery – "Diurnal float-glass apparitions" – in the daytime the buildings are like ghosts, don't stand out, reflect and blend in with what surrounds them, contrasted against the harsh imagery of the building at night.
- Sound devices – "annexed cubes ascend and blend", "Perfect borrower's rococo!" "Business branching".
- Reference to corporate world – "suits", "Business".
- Look at stanza three – the tide comes in at the end of the day, but "inside yearning out isn't seen" – nature is transparent, easy to understand, the human world, the corporate world is not.
- Compared to the admiration of land in "Recourse to the Wilderness", this seems to be a less flattering depiction, less sympathetic imagery is used; the distaste for cities, skyscrapers, business and consumerism is continued in, "The Flight from Manhattan", p. 172, in a much more forceful way, with harsh hyphenated words such as "hot-are money-driers", "much-washed glass", "fire-ladder high"; and describing Sydney as "England's buried Gulag".

"Slip" p. 333

Features to be considered.

- A description of Australia in flood, 1989.
- The rhyme scheme – five line stanzas: the second and last lines rhyme and lines 1, 3, 4 half-rhyme (Rhyming quintains, ABAAB).
- Words describing the human/animal reaction – “mesmerised”, “shock-tranced”, “scraped owner”.
- Sound devices – “helicopter’s stutter”, “bare and bush-mossed water”, “crumbling cays”, “and when all the shapes and shallows of the inland ocean”, “whooshing pencil strokes”, “his bronze oilskin adrip, the scraped owner surveys the extent of death-slog when the red-ware continent glistens next week in its slip” (sibilance).
- Imagery – “a realised mirage reaches into tack-sheds and yards and laps undreamed-of beaches”, “the whooshing pencil strokes that kink where a crushing car rolls, and turns on like a tap”.

“Noonday axeman” p. 3

Features to be considered.

- The juxtaposition of city and country. A description of the reluctant move to cities in order to keep up with modernity, but the need to go back and reconnect with the land and nature in the country. City – “cars”, “bitumen”, “powerlines”, “cities you have built against silence, dumbly trudging through noise”, “railway stations”, “traffic”, “smoky halls”, “run”, “this metropolitan century” “talk and dazzle”, “belonging for months and years at a time to the twentieth century”. Country – repetition of “silence”, “axe-fall, echo”, “noonday silence”, “stillness”, “sky”, “wordless”; as well as images of trees, mountains, grass.
- Favouring of the the country – connection to land, stillness, silence – what is the significance of silence? Meditative, focused, calm, reflective, introspective – or for some, too confronting?
- Imagery – “the two opposing scarves I have cut in my red-gum squeeze out jewels of sap and stare”, “A stone cracks in the heat. Through the still twigs, radiance stings at my eyes”.
- Personification – “the tree will grow troubled, tremble, shift its crown”.
- Sound devices – “The great mast murmurs now. The scarves in its trunk/ crackle and squeak now, crack and increase as he hushing/ weight of high branches heels outward, and commences/ tearing and falling, and he collapse is tremendous.”; “leaves puff and subside”.
- Reference to people connected to the land, Aboriginal people – “men with gentle broad hands, who would die if removed from these unpeopled places...bemused and shy in the cities...dumbly trudging through noise...dreaming of journeys”.
- Reference to Australians’ discomfort with the land, an inability to form connection to land and people (First Australians) – “It will be centuries before many men are truly at home in this country, /and yet, there have always been some, in each generation,/ there have always been some who could live in the presence of silence”.

Poem set: Australian identity – race, gender politics

“A brief history” p. 388

Features to be considered.

- Rhyme scheme changes throughout – all five line stanzas but some have AAAAB and some ABAAB, some have rhyming couplets at the end of the stanzas, which assists with the tongue-in-cheek tone; the poet is delivering a satirical and humorous reflection on Australia’s confused identity.
- Provocations – we receive imperial scorn from Britain and the Empire after they left us high and dry, “shaped and exiled us”; we have been mistreated by Britain, set up as a convict colony and then called to war, “left men’s bodies torn with the lash, then with shrapnel”; the convicts and free settlers alike are referred to as “unspeakable Whites, the only cause of earthly plights”; when we’ve finished persecuting Aboriginal people and Catholics/Protestants, then we are “trawling fresh victims to set on the poor”; and finally that Australians won’t read the poem or think about it as “literature turned on them” (suggesting a culture of anti-intellectualism).

“A deployment of fashion” p. 466

Features to be considered.

- A critique of how the media and political worlds treat women: “crucified by the Press”; “cast out into Aboriginal space” (the fringes, the discriminated against); “it’s always for a defect in weeping: she hasn’t wept on cue or she won’t weep correctly”; “rogue property”.
- A comment on how women perpetuate such discrimination, join in to turn on a target, “Press women who’ve moved from being owned by men to being owned by fashion, these are more deeply merciless”; “sometimes the millions join in with jokes”.
- The press and its followers are described in a metaphor as sharks: “when the sharks are butting her, testing her protection”; “feasting grins”, “after the feeding frenzy”.
- There is a sense that this behaviour is cyclical, beginning with “a lone woman is being crucified by the Press at any given moment”, and ending with “a ruefully balanced last lick precedes the next selection”.
- The title suggests it is the fashion to target women in these ways.
- Reference to famous cases – Azaria Chamberlain (baby missing in Northern Territory); Helen Demidenko (wrote a book pretending to be the daughter of a Ukrainian family who became embroiled in WW2 Nazism and committed war crimes); Pauline Hanson (right-wing politician in the seat of Oxley with openly racist views who made several errors putting her intelligence under question).

“The Suspension of knock” p. 411

- Discusses the place of Australian people: identity is a repeated question, “where” (“where will Australia be held?”; “where will we hold Australia?”). It raises the central question of place, and Australia’s uncomfortable relationship with the land and the spirit of the land, as touched on in “Noonday axeman”, p.3
- Suggests that Australians born here but not from Aboriginal ancestry are excluded, told they are “not Indigenous, merely born here”.
- Considers Australians at home and abroad: “ethnics who praise their home ground while on it are called jingo chauvinists. All’s permitted, though, when they migrate”.

- Considers that politicians and a new elite have left the average Australian behind, “but now the elite Revolution that rules unsullied by elections has no use for us”.
- Suggests we suffer from “the very uniqueness of a racism practised only against ourselves”.
- Suggests that the only identity we allow and are comfortable with is that of the battlers against nature – fighting bushfires “a salamander identity is permitted us in fire, in the tones that say Well we got the kids out; the house was only property”.
- Figurative language – describes the fire “glorious as an air raid, our recurrent Blitz, hideout of values”.
- Repetition of questions throughout: probing, provoking, in the same way that we grapple as a nation to define our identity.

Poem set: Salvation, religion

“An immortal” p. 200

“Each morning once more seamless” p. 418

“The fishermen at south head” p. 167

“The Broad Bean Sermon” p. 112

The religious themes in these poems are discussed in Smith, G, 2004, “Walking Knee Deep in Ferns”: Salvational Themes in the Poetry of Les Murray, Australian eJournal of Theology 3 (August 2004).

SYNTHESISING TASK/ACTIVITY

(NB: This task is the same as that developed for the [Close Study Section of the Reading Australia teaching unit on Judith Wright's Collected Poems](#) by Jo Jones and Matteo Pantalone.)

Following the close readings and comparisons of poems, students are given the opportunity to articulate their observations and interpretations in a series of paragraphs. These are intended to provide experience in referencing multiple texts to support a point. Modelling expectations is recommended and can be achieved by analysing a teacher-created model, then co-creating an example as a class, before setting students to write independently.

The topics for each of the paragraphs can be in terms of (for example):

- a comparison of poetic devices used in poems of related themes,
- a comparison of imagery dealing with similar subject matter,
- a comparison of language choices to convey mood and tone,
- comparing the ideas represented in poems with a related theme.

(ACELR029) (ACELR030) (ACELR031)

WAYS OF READING THE TEXT

Eco/environmental readings

Murray is particularly concerned with nature and places, preferring the bush to the city and providing close studies of particular locations and creatures. Such specific and fine analysis leads to the discovery of broader truths about human and natural existence. Related is Murray's eco-activism, and the clear sense that Australian settlers are ‘ruining’ the land that Aboriginal people preserved for so long.

Like his contemporary, Judith Wright, Murray “poeticises the innate and metaphysical value of the natural world”. (Quote from: the [Significance section of the Reading Australia teaching unit on Judith Wright's Collected Poems.](#))

In the spirit of critical inquiry, students can be asked to consider whether or not they think that Murray over-simplifies the processes of industrial development and environmental conservation, or whether they think he is romanticising the history of Aboriginal Australia pre-colonisation.

Compare Murray's representations of the natural world in his poetry to the work of poets [Judith Wright](#) (See the [Reading Australia teaching unit on Judith Wright](#)) and [John Kinsella](#).

Race readings

The profound empathy behind Murray's depiction of Indigenous Australians is clear in his often harshly critical representation of Anglo-Australians. Students could consider whether any of his poems infantilise Indigenous experience or sentimentalise/aestheticise their suffering, which was a common trap for writers of the era. Students may also critique Murray's positioning of himself as more on the ‘Aboriginal side’ than the ‘White Australian side’ – he seems to convey an affinity with Aboriginal people that comes from his poverty and (perceived or otherwise) exclusion by mainstream white society.

Gender readings

It is notable that Murray attacks sexism as a ‘dominant white male’; however he was writing poetry during a time of discriminatory and sexist values toward women. Rather than preoccupy himself with issues of child-bearing and the role of the wife/mother, as seen in his contemporary Judith Wright's poetry, Murray looks at what happens to women when they step out of these confines, for example in the press crucifixion he describes in ‘A deployment of fashion’.

Class readings

Murray very much positions himself as a 'poor white', not much farther up the social ladder of the time than Aboriginal people. His poetry ridicules the classes above him, whose preoccupation with cities, wealth and capitalism he scorns. Students could consider whether he positions himself and Aboriginal people as the omniscient, earthly folk who somehow know the secret or elixir of life through their close connection to nature; whereas the capitalist middle and upper classes are really 'empty', bereft of this connection and knowledge.

(ACELR019) (ACELR022) (ACELR023) (ACELR024)

EVALUATION OF THE TEXT

As representative of Australian culture

Les Murray's love for the land connects with many, but his poetry aims to push Australians past jingoistic worship of our 'sunburnt country' and into a consciousness of what this land means spiritually. He is concerned to re-connect with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and he believes that Australia cannot move forward until the unease between Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies is addressed.

The comparative text suggestions under the two headings below come directly from the the *Reading Australia unit on Wright: Collected Poems.*)

Australia's relationship with Indigenous Australians

Judith Wright's poems such as 'Bora Ring', 'Nigger's Leap', 'New England', 'The Ancestors', 'At Cooloolah' and 'The Dark Ones'.

Contemporary explorations of Indigenous experience: for example, Philip Gwynne's *Deadly, Unna?*, Craig Silvey's *Jasper Jones*, the films *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, *The Tracker*, *Samson and Delilah*, Jack Davis's short stories and plays, Archie Roach's songs, Paul Kelly's song 'From little things big things grow', the ABC television dramas *Redfern Now* and *Gods of Wheat Street*.

Nature poetry and pastoral life

Judith Wright's poems such as 'The Killer', 'Hunting Snake', 'Trapped Dingo' or 'Magpies', 'Bullocky' and 'South of My Days'.

John Kinsella's poems such as 'Why they stripped the last trees from the banks of the creek', 'Night seeding and notions of property', 'Crane and Hawk', 'Wheatlands', 'An Irruption of Ibises'.

Activity: Brainstorm

What other Australian texts (novels, stories, films, songs) have dealt with similar themes?

Other suggested categories are:

- rural life;
- Australian environmental devastation;
- Australian womanhood;
- Reconciliation, repairing the loss, guilt, hurt and disconnection between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

SIGNIFICANCE TO LITERATURE/THE WORLD OF TEXTS

"Mind-map the various themes of Murray's work, linking them to non-Australian texts that deal with similar issues of environment (*Fern Gully, Baraka, An Inconvenient Truth, Crude*), Indigenous experience in the New World (*Pocahontas, Dances with Wolves, The New World, The Mission, Avatar*), women's experience of the 1950s and 1960s (*The Hours, Mona Lisa Smile, Far From Heaven*), and experiences of disillusion with one's own society or nation (*American Beauty, Cry Freedom, The Long Walk Home, Miss Saigon*)."

(Quoted from the the *Reading Australia unit on Wright: Collected Poems*)
(ACELR026) (ACELR021)

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK 1 (RECEPTIVE)

(NB: This assessment task is modelled on that for the same section of the *Reading Australia unit on Wright: Collected Poems.*)

Students are asked to select a Murray poem of their choice and respond to it with a visual representation of its key themes, mood and subject matter.

The full text of the poem is not to be presented anywhere on the visual piece beyond key words and phrases. The chosen images and colours must speak for themselves to represent the poem.

Students can complete the poem transformation with images presented via PowerPoint, Keynote or Prezi; students with skills and access to equipment may choose to compose a film.

Each representation must be accompanied with a reading of the poem by the student – it can either be recorded or read out directly to the class.

A 500 word rationale must also be submitted, explaining and justifying the creative decisions they have made (that is, they should explain their choice of images, the pace of visuals and reading of poem, choice of background music, tone of voice in reading, etc.).

(ACELR036) (ACELR035) (ACELR034)

SYNTHESISING CORE IDEAS

RICH ASSESSMENT TASK 2 (PRODUCTIVE)

Students will consider the representation of Australia and questions around Australian identity in two poems. They will select one Murray poem and compare the representations of Australian identity in a poem from the selection below.

(NB: This task is modelled on the Rich assessment task for *A. D. Hope's Selected Prose and Poetry*, for which the teaching resource was written by Ann Small.)

Pre-reading activity:

Students read the poems entitled "Australia" in the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature* and note their initial impressions. These poems include:

- "Australia" by Mary Gilmore
- "Australia" by Bernard O'Dowd
- "Australia" by Peter Goldsworthy
- "Australia" by Ania Walwicz
- "Australia" by A. D. Hope

Preparing for the essay:

Students prepare an analysis of their two poems of choice (one by Murray and one from the above list), using the SPECS and SLIMS model, with the 'summary' in SPECS moving to last after SLIMS:

SPECS (subject, purpose, emotion, craftsmanship, summary)

SLIMS (structure, language, imagery, movement, sounds)

Summary

Students undertake the following essay topic:

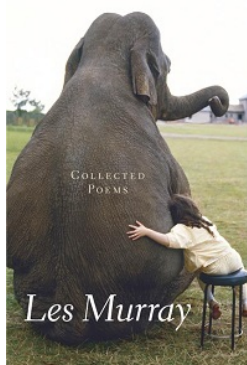
Exploring Australian identity through poetry can lead to (re)discovery of lost understandings, new meaning and renewed perceptions of ourselves. Discuss.

The essay must:

- include discussion of literary techniques as well as themes;
- be 1,500 words in length;
- cite critical sources and employ correct referencing conventions.

(ACELR023) (ACELR019) (ACELR022) (ACELR027) (ACELR029) (ACELR030) (ACELR031) (ACELR032)

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Unit Suitable For AC: Year 11 (Literature Unit 2)

Duration 4–6 weeks

Curriculum Summary

Find a [summary table](#) for Australian Curriculum: Literature content descriptions for this unit.

Themes

Aboriginality, Australian identity, death, History, natural world/environmentalism, overcoming adversity, prejudice, representation of history

General Capabilities

Digital Literacy, Ethical Understanding, Intercultural Understanding, Literacy, Personal and Social Capability

Cross-curriculum Priorities

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures, Sustainability

FURTHER DETAILS

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Unit writer

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