

The Calligrapher

Try grasping a piece of wood
between your thumb, middle
& ring finger – as if the drip-
dripping of ink was a typhoon
5 you could play in. Loosen the
right wrist, scrape the weight
of too-much from brush/heart
across ink bowl; let its round
rim reassure. Sculpt the brush-
10 tip till shrill: sharp as papercut.
Let ink seep: a dot, a line, then
a mad dash to the last stroke till
interlocking arms form terraced
paddies bursting with meaning:
15 the character fortune made up of
the shirt on your back, the roof
over your head & the promise
of a stomach satisfied with rice.

Mary Jean Chan

When people ask why, reply:
20 my mother wished I would
write with the grace of those
ancient Chinese poets whose
tapestry now slips easily from
my ten-year-old tongue into a
25 diptych of shapes. Hour upon
hour, my wrist aches as the ink
dries to a crust. My eyes blink
back water, but this is precisely
the moment to continue. Once
30 more the fingers dip, slide, lift.
I am not a dancer, but this is a
dance. Hours spill into a pot of
tea leaves as my mother tells me:
See how Chinese characters are
35 sunflowers that seek out the eyes.
Seeds of ink unfurl suddenly from
your wrist, blooming into time –

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Suggested Questions and Answers

- (a) Identify the speakers in Stanza 1 and Stanza 2 of the poem.

(b) Comment on the relationship between the two speakers as shown in the poem.

(c) How does the poet's choice of form and language help to present the relationship between the two speakers?
- Why does the mother make "I" practise calligraphy?
- Do you think "I" enjoys practising calligraphy? Support your view with lines from the poem.
- What comparison is made to show that "I" does not have a gift for calligraphy? Is the comparison effective?

Suggested Questions and Answers

1. (a) Identify the speakers in Stanza 1 and Stanza 2 of the poem.

The speaker in Stanza 1 is the mother who instructs “I” to practise calligraphy. The speaker in the Stanza 2 is the 10-year-old child who is made to practise calligraphy.

- (b) Comment on the relationship between the two speakers as shown in the poem.

There is some tension in the relationship between the two speakers. The mother and “I” have divided views on practising calligraphy and fail to communicate with each other for better understanding.

- (c) How does the poet’s choice of form and language help to present the relationship between the two speakers?

- The arrangement of the poem in two isolated blocks shows the clear separation of the two voices. With the mother’s voice coming first, her precedence over the daughter in terms of rank and order is implied.
- The use of imperative sentences in Stanza 1 highlights the authoritative tone of the mother and the submissive role of “I”, who follows instructions and commands to practise calligraphy.

2. Why does the mother make “I” practise calligraphy?

The mother wants “I” to write with grace and memorise the words of ancient Chinese poets.

3. Do you think “I” enjoys practising calligraphy? Support your view with lines from the poem.

The child doesn’t seem to enjoy the calligraphy practice because she finds it repetitive and tiring (e.g. “Hour upon hour, my wrist aches...My eyes blink back water”, lines 25-28).

4. What comparison is made to show that “I” does not have a gift for calligraphy? Is the comparison effective?

- “I” feels that she is a hopeless calligrapher and not cut out for it, as expressed in lines 31-32 – “I am not a dancer, but this is a dance.”
- The comparison is effective as both “calligraphy” and “dance” involve nimble, controlled and skilful body movements.