

Poetry Remake Competition
List of Poems and Learning and Teaching Materials for
Senior Secondary Division

Hero Tree

Kit Fan

From the classroom window,
the summer's aorta revives in the dark
hero tree. Bark ideogram,
ember-tinted, no trace of leaves.

- 5 A family of four cicadas homes in
on its tall ebony nakedness:
something for a long summer song.

The white chalk stub U-turns
on the wide blackboard, hissing out
10 a map of Confucian morphemes:
stone-classics that were chiselled
for *the eye looking straight into the heart*.

- Fans spin overhead, ripe dozy hours.
Our heads bow, fishing for cancelled
15 valleys lost to the Yangtze River Dam.

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Suggested Questions and Answers

1. What is the setting of the poem?

The poem is set on a school campus in early summer.

2. Comment on the imagery used in Stanza 1? What effect does it create?

- Rich visual imagery is used to present the leafless hero tree with budding red flowers. While the tree is described with dull-colour adjectives such as “dark”, “ember-tinted” and “ebony”, which creates a lifeless picture and dull mood, the red flowers, described in lines 2-3 as “the summer’s aorta revives in the dark hero tree” enlivens the hero tree. Aorta is the main artery or arterial trunk that carries blood from the heart to the body. The metaphor is used to suggest new life being injected into the plant.
- The imagery in Stanza 1 provides a contrast, suggesting both a sense of emptiness with words like “no trace of leaves” and “nakedness” as well as a sense of life with words like “revives” and four cicadas ready for a long summer song.

3. What lesson do you think the speaker is having? Give supporting evidence.

The poet is probably having a lesson related to Chinese language, history or culture.

Related names and terms can be found all over the poem:

- In Stanza 1, the word “ideogram”, which is related to the early Chinese writing system, is used.
- In Stanza 2, the word “Confucian”, which is related to the great Chinese philosopher, Confucius and the word “stone-classics”, which may refer to the classical Chinese works carved on stones, are used.
- In Stanza 3, “Yangtze River Dam”, which is a well-known dam in China, is mentioned.

4. What has happened to the speaker in Stanza 3?

- The speaker has probably fallen asleep and started dreaming because of the hot weather, as suggested by the words “ripe dozy hours”. The spinning fans overhead create an air of dizziness and drowsiness.

5. How does the title relate to the poem?

The “Hero Tree” is commonly known as the “cotton tree”. The former is often used by the Chinese because of a Chinese legend. The title is aptly related to the poem as the lesson the speaker is having is probably related to Chinese language, history or literature.

- No fingers claw at the bronze gauze
Of a Hong Kong December dusk,
Only a maze of criss-crossing feet
That enmeshes the city
5 In a merciless grid.
- Between many lanes
Of traffic, the street-sleeper
Carves out his island home.
Or under the thundering fly-over,
10 Another makes his own peace of mind.
- Under the staircase,
By the public lavatory,
A man entirely unto himself
Lifts his hand
15 And opens his palm.
His digits
Do not rend the air,
They merely touch
As pain does, effortlessly.

“City” was published in *Incense Tree: Collected Poems of Louise Ho* by Louise Ho, p.45.
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Suggested Questions and Answers

- What is the setting of the poem?

The poem is set in the city area of Hong Kong in a winter evening.

- What is the poem about?

The poem is about street-sleepers who make themselves a makeshift home somewhere in a hectic city.

- What is the mood in Stanza 1? How is the mood created?

A sense of despair, loss and disorientation is conveyed in Stanza 1. It is achieved with the following means:

- The setting – the poem is set in the dark hours of the day in a desolate winter, which creates a gloomy and depressing atmosphere.
- The imagery of captivity – the bustling city is presented with words such as “gauze”, “maze”, “enmeshes”, “criss-crossing” and “grid”, which carry the idea of captivity and entrapment. With the use of words like “claw”, “enmeshes” and “merciless”, a sense of cruelty is added. The descriptions in Stanza 1 prepare the reader for understanding the helplessness of the street sleeper, who is entangled and lost in the callous city, in Stanzas 2-3.

- Contrast is used in the poem to show the solitude of the homeless in Stanzas 2 and 3.

- Identity 3 pairs of contrasts. Two examples are provided.

| | Contrasts | |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Stanza 2 | many lanes of traffic | island home |
| Stanza 2 | thundering fly-over | own peace of mind |
| Stanza 3 | public lavatory | a man entirely unto himself |

- What effects do these contrasts create?

While “many lanes of traffic”, “thundering fly-over” and “public lavatory” portray a picture of a hectic and crowded city, “island home”, “own peace of mind” and “a man entirely unto himself” convey a sense of isolation and loneliness. These stark contrasts create an irony, pointing out that although street sleepers are living in a bustling and seemingly prosperous city, they are often neglected or almost

“invisible”. The use of contrasts is thought-provoking, urging readers to ponder on this social issue.

5. What is the theme of the poem?

The themes are helplessness, isolation and indifference. Throughout the poem, street sleepers are portrayed as weak (as suggested in “They merely touch as pain does, effortlessly”) and unimportant (as implied in the mentioning of isolated body parts such as “hand”, “palm”). They live alone in a cold and indifferent city. The poem can be seen as a silent cry of the homeless.

Mama

Akin Jeje

The horned glasses –
tortoise-shell, bright and gleaming,
were all that remained
constant;
5 a shuffle rather than stride;
smooth cheeks caressed
into distant lands'
unknown planes, deep an' wizened;
warm silica grin conceals
10 the barbs in back; the
varicose veins
brightly garbed
in *uhuru* caftan.

Of course, much has changed
15 for the one whose
baked cashew hue
resembles mine.

When I was a child, just before dark, she would
read baby Yemi and me
20 ancient tales of the mighty sun, the endless
earth, the brilliance of sky.

Now it is I
who sends these tales
in electronic blips
25 to an old woman

separated from i
by
the setting sun
an endless ocean
30 and the vastness
of the sky.

"Mama" was published in *Smoked Pearl: Poems of Hong Kong* by Akin Jeje, pp.21-22.
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Suggested Questions and Answers

1. Where do you think the speaker's mother is from?

The baked cashew-like dark skin and the costume (e.g. "uhuru caftan") she wears suggest that she is from Africa.
2. What is the main theme of the poem?

The poem is about family love. The speaker expresses his love to his mother who lives in another country by reminiscing how she looked like and took care of him and what they usually do now.
3. What kind of person is the speaker's mother? Support your answers with textual evidence.
 - She is a gentle, cheerful and caring woman as she smiles warmly. She also read her child stories when he was small.
 - She is a traditional woman as her outfits and accessories have remained the same over the years. Moreover, she wears African traditional costumes, i.e. "uhuru caftan".
4. In Stanza 2, the speaker mentions "much has changed" (line 14). Identify the change(s) the speaker refers to.
 - The changes in the physical appearance of his aging mother – the words "deep an' wizened" (line 9) suggests that she is now having wrinkles and dry skin because of her old age. The "barbs in back" and "varicose veins" (lines 11-12) are signs of aging. Her walking slowly ("a shuffle rather than stride" in line 5) also suggests her deteriorating physical strength.
 - The changing roles between the speaker and his/her mother – the speaker's mother would read him bedtime stories in the past but now it is the speaker's turn to send his stories and updates through the Internet.
5. Why is "i" in small letter (line 26) in the last stanza?

The use of a small "i" shows the speaker's smallness as compared with the "endless ocean" and the "vastness of the sky". The small letter "i" suggests that separation from "Mama" causes a reduction of the speaker.
6. How does the speaker highlight the distance between him and his mother?

The last two stanzas, which consist of only one sentence, are closely related. However, the poet breaks the sentence by using run-on lines, starting a new stanza with the word "separated" and using the only word "by" in line 27. The deliberate line breaks create distance and highlight the fact that they are far apart.

When I was a child,
I used to gaze at the stars above

- our garden of roses, jasmine and *lingzhi* by the sea,
wondering how far away they really were,
5 whether they were shining still at the source
by the time their light reached me ...

- I was told that everyone was born with a star
which glowed or dimmed with the fortunes of each.
I also heard people destined to be close
10 were at first fragments of the same star

and from birth went searching for each other.
Such parting, seeking, reuniting might take
three lifetimes with centuries in between.
I had thought all these were but myths ...

- 15 Now decades later, I read about the life of stars,
how their cores burn for ten billion years,
how towards the end, just before oblivion,
they atomize into nebulae of fragile brilliance –

ultra violet, infra red, luminous white, neon green or blue,
20 astronomical butterflies of gaseous light
afloat in a last waltz choreographed by relativity,
scattering their heated ashes into the void of the universe ...

- Some of this cosmic dust falls onto our little earth
carrying hydrocarbon compounds, organic matter
25 able to mutate into plant and animal life,
a spectrum of elemental fragrances ...

Perhaps on the dust emanating from one ancient star
were borne the first molecules of a *pandan* leaf,

- a sprig of mint or basil, a vanilla pod, a vine tomato,
30 a morning frangipani, an evening rose, a lily of the night ...

Perhaps our parents or grandparents or ancestors further back
strolling through a garden or a field had breathed in the scents
effusing from some of these plants born of the same star
and passed them on as DNA in the genes of which we were made ...

- 35 Could that be why, on our early encounters, we already sensed
in each other a whiff of something familiar, why, when we are near,
there is in the air some spark which seems to have always been there,
prompting us to connect our pasts, share our stories even as they evolve ...

- ... till the day when we too burn away into dust
40 and the aromas of our essence dissipate
into the same kaleidoscope of ether light
to be drawn into solar space by astral winds ...

... perhaps to make vanilla in a star to be
before the next lifetime of three?

Agnes Lam, 9 May 2008, Rodrigues Court, with reference to Sun Kwok's book, 'Cosmic butterflies'

“Vanilla in the Stars” was first published as:
Lam, Agnes. (2009). Vanilla in the stars. In P. Amato & M. J. Salfran (Eds.), *Nosside 2008: XXIVth Poetry Prize anthology* (pp. 89-92). Reggio Calabria: Centro Studi Bosio, Italy.
(Published in English and Italian.)

Suggested Questions and Answers

1. Based on the gist of the given stanzas and the development of ideas in the poem, match the two columns and put the letters in the brackets provided.

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Stanzas 3 - 4 (b) | a) The speaker's imaginative and creative expansion of the myths and facts |
| Stanzas 5 - 7 (c) | b) Myths about stars the speaker heard as a child |
| Stanzas 8-10 (a) | c) Facts about stars the speaker finds out as a grown-up |

2. What are some of the myths and beliefs about stars the speaker came across when she was a child?
- Everyone was born with a star which glowed and dimmed with their fortunes.
 - People who were close were fragments of the same stars that went searching for each other from birth.
3. As the speaker grows up, what does she understand about the life of stars? Explain two facts about stars she finds out in your own words.
- Stars' cores burn for long years and they turn into colourful gaseous light before they cease burning and fall like dust.
 - The stardust and ashes fall into the earth to nourish plants and animals.
4. Why are scientific terms used in the poem? What effects does this create?
- Science-related terms and concepts, such as "atomise", "nebulae", "gaseous light", "relativity", "hydrocarbon compounds", "mutate", "elemental" are widely used in Stanzas 5-7 of the poem. Such sophisticated and technical terms create a more academic and impersonal tone, providing a sharp contrast with the more personal tone used in the previous stanzas, where the speaker talks about the stories and myths about stars she heard as a child.
 - In Stanzas 8 and 9, the use of scientific terms (e.g. "molecules" and "DNA") is intertwined with the speaker's romantic and philosophical imagination, which presents a surreal mix of fact and fantasy and adds a magical touch to the poem.
 - With the creative use of science diction in the poem, the poet extends and blurs the boundaries between science, astronomy, mythology and literature, challenging readers to make wider associations and connect different nuances of meaning to form a fresh understanding of stars.
5. (a) Comment on form and use of language in the last stanza.
- Form – the last stanza is two-lined, which resembles the beginning stanza and

contrasts with the 4-lined body stanzas, creating a sense of closure with a return to the beginning. This matches the theme of this poem (i.e. cyclical nature of life in the universe). While the beginning two-lined stanza addresses the past (i.e. “When I was a child”), the ending two-lined stanza points to the future (i.e. before the next lifetime of three).

- Use of language
 - Repetition is used in the last stanza. The opening word “perhaps” creates resonances with Stanzas 8 and 9, which also start with “Perhaps” and capture the speaker’s romantic and philosophical imagination of how the dust of an ancient star enters different plants and runs into her family gene. “Vanilla in a star” repeats the title of the poem, while “next lifetime of three” further alludes to the myths about people who lose their close ones and go searching for them for three lifetimes in Stanza 4. The repetition of words in the last stanza provides intra-textual references and strengthens the cohesion of the poem.
 - A rhetorical question is used in the ending to connect and involve the readers, encouraging them to ponder on the meaning of the open ending.
- (b) What do you think “to make vanilla in a star to be before the next lifetime of three” means?
- To seize this lifetime to build nourishing and fruitful relationships (like planting vanilla seeds) for the next three.
- 6. What is the theme and message of this poem?
 - The special affinity / connection / bonding between people (as if they were descendants or fragments of the same star)
 - The intricate links between the cosmic and the earthly/human worlds
 - The cyclical nature of the cosmos / the endless cycle of creation and destruction in the universe
 - The regeneration and reincarnation of life in the cosmic cycle

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-
tip till shrill: sharp as papercut.
10 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 –

“The Calligrapher” was published in *Flèche* by Mary Jean Chan, pp.28-29. Copyrights © 2019 by Faber & Faber Ltd. Reprinted by permission of Faber & Faber Ltd, Bloomsbury House.

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.