

SPM LITERATURE COMPONENT

Introduction

1. The following poems are learnt in Form 4:
 - (a) *The Living Photograph* by Jackie Kay
 - (b) *Charge of the Light Brigade* by Alfred Tennyson
2. The following short stories are studied in Form 4:
 - (a) *Leaving* by M.G. Vasanthi
 - (b) *Tanjong Rhu* by Minfong Ho
3. The play *The Right Thing to Do* by Martyn Ford is studied in Form 4.

What is Poetry?

Poetry is a creative literary piece made up of specially-arranged words in metre or free verse. It is often written with rhyme and rhythm in a group of lines called stanza or verse.

Key Elements of a Poetry

Theme

The theme is the idea, point of view or perception expanded upon in the poem. It expresses a message, issue or feeling that the poet wishes to highlight.

Moral Value

These are lessons that can be learnt from the poem.

Persona or Speaker

The persona is the speaker or 'voice' in the poem. This is a person created by the poet to convey his message.

Setting

The setting is the place where the poem takes place and the time when it is written. It also denotes the social environment of the time.

Tone and Mood

The tone is the poet's/speaker's attitude towards the subject, audience, or towards himself/herself. Mood refers to the general feeling created in the poem. It is connected with inner feelings and state of mind.

Point of View

This refers to the person who is speaking in the poem. It may mean the persona or someone else. It can be conveyed in the first person point of view where the words 'I' or 'We' are used. This means the persona and the poet are the same person. It can also be written in the third person point of view where the words 'She', 'He', 'It' or 'They' are used. The persona is someone else other than the poet.

Language and Style

Style refers to the way a poet uses language to express his ideas. The following literary devices are commonly used:

- (a) **Imagery**
Through the poet's words, we perceive an idea or image that can appeal to our five senses: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste.
- (b) **Metaphor**
A figurative comparison that does not use 'like' or 'as' between two unlike things. It describes one thing as being another.
- (c) **Simile**
A figurative comparison that uses the words 'like' or 'as' to join two ideas.
- (d) **Personification**
Personification is a technique of giving human qualities or traits to an animal, object or a concept.
- (e) **Sound Device**
 - i. Rhythm can be defined as the flow of stressed and unstressed syllables to create oral patterns. It is the pattern or the 'beat' of sound in the poem.
 - ii. Rhyme is a regular recurrence of corresponding sounds usually at the end of a line. Words with the same end sounds are placed at the end of lines or at certain fixed points of the poem. Rhyme makes the poem sound 'musical or 'lyrical'.
- (f) **Alliteration**
The repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words
Example: The fair breeze blew; the white foam flew,
The furrow followed free;
- (g) **Assonance**
The repetition of similar vowel sounds especially in stressed syllables. The vowel sound in two or more words is repeated.
- (h) **Onomatopoeia**
Words containing sounds which are similar to the noise they make
Example: The buzzing of the bees
- (i) **Symbolism**
An object or thing that represents something else. It can be an object, a person an action or a situation that represents many things at one time.
- (j) **Repetition**
This is used to stress an idea or concept. The repetition of certain words emphasises the idea in the reader's mind.

POEMS



POEM 1: *The Living Photograph*

by Jackie Kay

About the Poet

Jackie Kay was born November 9 1961 in Edinburgh, Scotland, to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father. Her biological parents gave her away for adoption to white Scottish parents (John and Helen Kay) who brought her up in Glasgow with great affection. The grandmother described in the poem was her adoptive grandmother, not her biological grandmother. Thus, from an early age, Jackie Kay was often baffled by her ethnic identity as she looked “coloured” compared to her adoptive “white” grandmother and adoptive parents. This poem, like many others by Jackie Kay, reflects her generally happy childhood as well as her concerns about her true ‘biracial’ ethnic identity.

Jackie Kay earned an honours degree in English from Stirling University and is now a Professor in Creative Writing at Newcastle University. She has written many poems, short stories and a few famous novels. She has also won many literary awards and was conferred the MBE award by Queen Elizabeth II in June 2006.

About the Poem

The persona compares two images of her adoptive grandmother – one seen in the photograph when the persona was three years old and another image of her grandmother as the lady became older and finally passed away. The persona seems to say that the earlier image of her grandmother is the one that will live on. This poem resonates with the memories of many young people who have lost their beloved grandparents. It seems to tell us that memories of the people we love will live on.

Themes

- Appreciation and affection for a grandparent
The poem highlights the child’s affection for a grandmother who used to be a tower of strength to her as embodied in the photograph. The grandmother’s physical decline in later years does not reduce the admiration the child has for her even after the old lady’s death.
- Search for the persona’s identity
The persona’s biracial identity surfaces in the line “white hand in black hand”. There is no sign that the persona is greatly troubled by any identity crisis. This is because there is full acceptance by the grandmother of the child as she is. This is another measure of the greatness of this grandmother. She is able to give the persona the assurance that there is no colour distinction in this family.
- The mystery of ageing and death
In this poem, we also sense a child coming to terms with the facts of old age and death. She notes how the “tall grandmother became small”. She became “hunched” and her absentmindedness is depicted in the words “ Her soup

forgot to boil”. The persona shows no anger or disapproval at this physical and mental decline. There is an undercurrent of sympathy for her grandmother. There is also the child’s incomprehension about death as reflected in the words “somewhere unknown, unthinkable”.

- Filial piety
This poem also teaches us the meaning of filial piety. The persona always thinks the highest and best of her grandmother. She does not judge her grandmother by what became of her in her last years. She decides that her grandmother must be remembered when she was in her prime as seen in the “living photograph”.

Moral Values

- Filial piety
We must be filial to our elders. The persona remembers her grandmother with great affection. As her grandmother declines physically and mentally with growing age, the persona is determined to remember her in her better times.
- Inter-racial harmony
We must accept people of different race or colour. The persona is of coloured (mixed) race while her adoptive grandmother is white. The poem shows the grandmother’s acceptance of her grandchild without any racial prejudice.

Tone/Mood of Poem

- The persona’s voice is childlike but confident and optimistic despite the reference to the grandmother’s death.
- This childlike voice is captured in contradictions like the opening line: “My small grandmother is tall there”.
- Confidence and optimism are conveyed especially in the third stanza where the persona says:
“There she is still
in the photograph with me at three”
- Although there is a reference to death, the poem is cheerful and happy in tone. It is a poem of sweet dignified remembrance.

Persona or Speaker

The persona in the poem is a child who grows from the age of three in the photograph to a more mature age.

Point of View

The poem is narrated by the persona in the first person.

Language and Style

Persona & Child Talk

- The poet employs the persona of a child to explore a growing child’s feelings about her ageing grandmother. The poet uses sentences and observations which show a child’s mind at work.

Contrasting Imagery

- The poet uses two contrasting images of the grandmother. In the photograph, the grandmother is shown in her prime as a source of strength to the persona.
- In the second stanza, we see a different image of her in her later years of physical decline. She became hunched and grew smaller.

Descriptive Details

- Vivid descriptions are given of the grandmother in stanza 1 and stanza 2. They not only describe the physical details about the grandmother but also express her spirit and character.
- In Stanza 1, for example, we sense that the grandmother was a working class person who was very loving and protective of her grandchild.



POEM 2: *The Charge of the Light Brigade* by Alfred Lord Tennyson

About the Poet

Alfred, Lord Tennyson was born on 6 August 1809 in Somersby, Lincolnshire, England. He was Poet Laureate of Great Britain and Ireland from 1850 till his death at the age of 83.

In his poems, Tennyson used a wide range of subject matter, ranging from medieval legends to classical myths and from domestic situations to observations of nature, as source material for his poetry. His poems are noted for the richness of his imagery and descriptive writing. He also handled rhythm masterfully.

In 1855, Tennyson produced one of his best-known poems "The Charge of the Light Brigade", a tribute to the heroic British cavalymen involved in an ill-advised charge on 25 October 1854, during the Crimean War.

Alfred, Lord Tennyson is acclaimed as one of the greatest poets in English literature. He died on 3rd October 1892 at Aldworth. He was buried at Westminster Abbey.

About the Poem

This poem is about the heroism and courage of a brigade of 600 British soldiers, many of whom died in battle during the Crimean War (1854-56). The soldiers belonged to a light brigade which means they were on horseback and armed only with sabres and batons (light arms). By some mistake, they were ordered into a valley which had heavily armed Russian enemy battalions on three sides – front, right and left. These armoured battalions had powerful cannons aimed at the light brigade. When the light brigade charged into this "valley of death", they were massacred by the cannon fire. Nevertheless, the British soldiers fought the Russians till the bitter end. Although most of them died, the Light Brigade had shown great heroism and patriotism in battle. This poem is not simply one that praises heroism in war. It makes us think about the unnecessary human cost of war. It also challenges our ideas about obedience, patriotism and nationalism.

Themes

- Heroism and courage
The soldiers knew that they were battling against a better armed enemy, yet they charged into battle with great courage. The poem praises their heroism and selflessness. This idea is also open to debate and challenge. Is this courage or sheer madness? Should they have waited for better circumstances to do battle on more equal terms?
- Patriotism
The poem was written in the heyday of extreme nationalism and patriotism. During the time of the Crimean War, people believed in blind, unthinking patriotism. Yet, we feel sad for the young lives sacrificed for the sake of patriotism. Today, people are more questioning and critical in their concept of patriotism.
- Duty
The soldiers of the Light Brigade had a strong sense of duty. For them, the success of their brigade demanded total obedience even in the face of personal danger. None of them thought of deserting or retreating when the order to charge was given. Should we today adopt this attitude to duty?
- The tragedy of war
Although Lord Tennyson praises the fighting spirit of the British soldiers, it is also possible to see this poem as a hidden attack on war. This is because war creates situations where human lives are sacrificed unnecessarily. The poem shows the human cost of war on one side – the British side. However, we the readers can guess that many lives were also lost on the Russian side.
- Leadership failure
Was there a mistake in the command given? We know the soldiers realised something was wrong with the order given. We know this from the line "Someone had blundered". The wrong decisions of leaders can very often cause great suffering among innocent people. The poem tells us that leadership is a serious responsibility which should be exercised with care and sensitivity.

Moral Values

- Patriotism
We must be patriotic and ready to make sacrifices for our country. The poem tells of the spirit of self-sacrifice shown by the soldiers even though they knew they might not survive this battle.
- Duty
We must have a sense of duty and obligation in our work. The soldiers remained faithful and true to their officer's command even though they knew someone might have blundered.
- Anti-war sentiment
We should not go to war as war costs unnecessary loss of lives. The poem can also be seen as a subtle attack on the wastage of lives in war.

The Persona

The poem is narrated by an omniscient (all-seeing) narrator who reports not only the action but the thoughts and spirit of the 600 men as a collective unit. There is also a reference that “someone had blundered”.

Tone/Mood

- The poem has a war battle tone which reflects the movement and sound of the charge.
- The overall mood is one of collective action, rather than individual impulse.
- The poem has a rolling, hypnotic sound, like the sound of a military march.
- There is also a feeling of exhaustion, as one feels at the end of a race, just trying to force oneself through the last few laps.

Language and Style

Repetition

- The poet makes intensive use of repetition (refrains) to create a hypnotic effect. Examples of such refrains are *half a league* (repeated thrice) and *Rode the six hundred* (repeated four times). The refrains also give us the impression of an army marching forward.

Anaphora and Rhyme

Anaphora means ‘backward reference’. One example is the repeated use of ‘Theirs’ in the opening lines.

- One of the common patterns used is the sequence of three lines linked by anaphora and rhyme as seen below:
“ *Theirs not to make reply,*
Theirs not to reason why,
Theirs but to do and die.”

The rhyme effect is seen at the end of each line. We see this pattern again in the following lines:

“ *Cannon to the left of them,*
Cannon to the right of them.
Cannon in front of them.”

Imagery

- The poet describes the battle scene as the ‘valley of Death’. This is later described as the ‘jaws of Death’ and ‘the mouth of Hell’. With these images, we sense the poet’s underlying unease about war even though he glorifies the heroism of the soldiers. The equation of war with the ‘jaws of Death’ suggests that war is a predator that feeds on human lives.

Point of View

The poem is narrated by an omniscient (third person) narrator.

What are Short Stories?

Short stories are creative forms of fiction written in prose. They usually have the following characteristics:

1. A single dramatic event
2. One main plot
3. One main character
4. A few characters
5. Clear and defined theme
6. No sub-plots

7. Plot built-up and actions are fast
8. A ‘twist’ in the ending

Key Elements of a Short Story

Plot

The plot is a chain or linked series of events that make up a short story. It is a description of what happens and why. The events are inter-connected. Plot shows us the cause of an event and how that event affects the entire story. They usually have the following structure:

Exposition (Introduction)	This is the beginning of the story. The characters and their situations are presented to the reader against the setting.
Rising action	The build-up to the story or main event. It builds suspense within the story. Problems and conflicts of the characters, and their reactions create tension in the story.
Climax	The height or most exciting part of the story. It is also the main event of the story. Here, the conflicts may take a twist and become more complicated.
Falling action	Events arising from the climax. The solutions to the problems are made known. At this point, the story becomes less exciting.
Resolution	The story concludes. The answers to the conflict are provided as the problem is resolved. It describes what happens to the characters after the conflict is solved.

Setting

The setting refers to the backdrop of the story. The physical details of the setting are linked with the cultural values, ideals and attitudes of that place in different times. Setting also establishes the time and place of the event, and social class of the main characters. Time covers past, present, future or historical periods. The place can be real or imaginary.

Character

These are the people in the story. Characters are either main or minor and either static (unchanging) or dynamic (changing). The character who dominates the story is the main character. The main character is the most important character and is known as the protagonist. Characters are important elements because often, there is little plot development and the story relates around a single event. The characters often ‘tell their stories’ through dialogue using a dialect. They are revealed to us through the:

- physical descriptions
- words, thoughts and actions
- narrator's view
- opinions of the author
- views of the characters

Theme

The theme of a story is its view about life and how people behave. The central idea, belief or moral value of a story is its theme. It is the underlying or philosophical idea and message that the story conveys.

Moral Value

These are the lessons that the story teaches us. They may be a general or specific lessons on life.

Point of View

This refers to the angle from which a story is told. It could be the first person point of view which uses 'I' or 'We'. The narrator is a character in the story. The narrator tells the story according to his point of view. It could also be the third person (omniscient) point of view which uses 'He', 'She', 'It' or 'They'. The narrator is someone outside the story. He describes everything that is taking place in the story and also the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters. The narrator tells the story using an objective point of view.

Tone and Mood

Tone influences the mood and atmosphere of a story. Mood and atmosphere capture the general feel of the story. Mood is the general feeling created in the story.

Language and Style

This refers to the level of language and choice of vocabulary used. The following literary devices are often used:

- personification – awarding human qualities to inanimate objects
- symbolism – using symbols to represent abstract ideas or things
- irony – using words to mean the opposite of what is said to show sarcasm or humour.
- imagery – using descriptive words that portray vivid images and injects life to the story
- foreshadowing – using words to show that something will happen in the future
- flashback – a technique used to explain certain events that happened earlier in the story
- contrast – comparison of two or more opposite things, ideas or characters

SHORT STORIES



SHORT STORY 1: *Leaving*

by M.G. Vassanji

Synopsis

Leaving, set in Tanzania is about a young man's dream to go abroad to study. His mother is reluctant to let him

go for various reasons. Her husband's early death had made life difficult but she had managed to bring up five children by herself. Two of the older girls are married and Firoz the older brother is working in a big shop. She wants the younger two to do well in their studies and thus, sells the store to move to Upanga, a smaller and quieter town.

An ex-teacher from America, Mr. Datoos inspires Aloo and he decides to apply to the universities there. To his great joy, Aloo obtains a scholarship to study medicine in America and thus, wishes to reject the offer to study agriculture locally.

His mother, however, is unhappy to let him go so far away. She tells him that they will still need some money to pay for the air ticket and other expenses. She also feels that it will be hard to let him go from home. She is dismayed and feels betrayed that he wishes to go without considering her feelings.

Seeing his eagerness, she decides to talk to the school officer to get some advice. Mr. Velji, the officer tells her that Aloo will get a good education abroad but that she may lose her son. Aloo states firmly that children going abroad do not get lost.

Aloo's mother advises him not to give up his values and beliefs before she can allow him to go. Aloo is thrilled to be in a foreign land and writes home excitedly on seeing London where he stopped over on the way to America. But his mother wonders sadly if he will ever return to the family again.

Plot

- The narrator's mother is sad when the older daughters get married and leave home. Her older brother doesn't finish school. He takes a job in a big shop. Now the mother wants the youngest two children to do well in their studies and thus sells their store. She moves to a smaller town so that they can concentrate on their studies.
- Mr. Datoos, an ex-teacher comes from America to visit and inspires Aloo to apply to study at an American university. To Aloo's delight, Aloo is accepted by the California Institution of Technology with a scholarship. He can now reject the offer to study agriculture at a local university. However, his mother is unhappy as she has to find some money for the airfare and other expenses. She is also angry that he wishes to go so far away from the family. Aloo is sadly disappointed with his mother's attitude.
- Knowing Aloo's feelings, she decides to meet one of the school officers, Mr. Velji to ask for advice. Mr. Velji is impressed with Aloo's results and says that he should accept the offer but also says that she will lose her son as he is going very far away from the home. Aloo protests to his mother that many parents send their children overseas and do not lose them.
- Aloo's mother relents and decides to let him go overseas for his education. Aloo is delighted but his mother is sad. The narrator looks at her mother and realises all the hardships her mother had gone through in bringing up the five children. Her mother had sacrificed much so that the children can be together and have a bright future.

- Aloo goes off to study after promising that he will not get into bad ways or give up his values and beliefs. Aloo writes excitedly from London where he stops over before proceeding to America. He is thrilled with all the wonderful things he sees there. He is very happy with the new opportunities presented to him while his mother wonders bleakly if she will see him again.

Setting

Physical setting

It is set in Upanga, Tanzania, a place where they can hear the sounds of insects and small animals. They are close to the wild land. It is a lonely, frightening place, the narrator says.

Social setting

Aloo's family is interested in education and self-improvement. The mother is very hard-working and wants the best for her children. The people are generally poor. The mother is keen to break out of the poverty cycle through education.

Time

It is set in the present times.

Characters

Aloo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The youngest in the family. Gifted student, gets straight A's in his results; inspired by an ex-teacher to apply to go to an American university. Wants to study medicine, not agriculture as required by the local university. Wins scholarship in America but is disappointed when his mother is reluctant to let him go. • A loving son. Cries when his mother expresses her fear that she may lose her son. • Happy when his mother relents and allows him to go to America. Loves his family; he is not defiant and wants everyone's love and support. • Delighted to see London, thrilled with everything new. Thirsting for knowledge. Very eager to better himself and reach for the stars, has a great potential to do well. Promises to uphold the principles of his culture and traditions and not take up bad habits.
The Mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lost her husband at 33, had to look after 5 children. Refuses to re-marry as she does not want the children to be sent to a children's home. • Very hard-working, raises 5 children, gets 2 daughters married off, elder son takes a job, concentrates on improving the lives of the younger two.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moves town so that they can do better at school. • Loves her children so much that she finds it hard to let them go. • Sensitive to their needs, so relents finally to Aloo going abroad • A very good mother, if she is selfish, it is out of love for her children. • A proud, independent woman, she is a woman of substance.
Mehroon	Lives with her husband in town.
Razia	Rich housewife, lives in Tanga on the coast north of Dar es Salaam
Firoz	The older brother, drops out of school. Works in the office of a big shop.
Mr. Datto	Ex-teacher, returns from America to visit. A favourite of the boys, inspires Aloo to apply to an American university.
Mr. Velji	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A school officer, with a large head and small neat body, wears black glasses and looks clever. • He is impressed with Aloo's results and advises him to take up the offer to study in America. Warns the mother that she may lose him.
The Narrator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The youngest daughter in the family. It is from her point of view that we see the family. Smart, studying at the university. • Caring, sees her mother's pain and understands what she has gone through. Supportive and loving too. • Observant and sensitive, knows that her brother really wants to go overseas and is not keen on studying locally.

Themes

- Grab the opportunity.
Aloo has a chance to improve himself, if he fails to take it, such an opportunity may not come again.
- Making sacrifices for the family.
Aloo's mother sacrifices her chances of a second marriage and a better life for the sake of the children. She sacrifices again by letting Aloo go to America out of love for him and because she wants him to do well in life. Aloo promises not to marry a white girl or take up bad habits because he loves his mother. He is also willing to make some sacrifices.
- Not losing one's values and beliefs.
Aloo promises not to marry a white girl or take up smoking and drinking. Migrating in search of greener pastures will always remain an option.
- Family, heritage and traditions matter in every home.

Aloo belongs to a warm and loving family. His mother cares for his well-being and he cares about her. Moving from one continent to another does not mean that one should give up traditions and customs followed for centuries.

- Conflicts arise but can be overcome with rational thinking and consideration.

Aloo wants to study in America and his mother is unwilling to let him go. However, rational thinking prevails and she agrees to let him go as it is for his good. She cares for his happiness and knows that he is an intelligent person who will use the opportunities well. Aloo too will not go against his mother but is disappointed that he cannot go overseas and there lies his personal conflict. He wants to make something of himself but obstacles are there.

Moral Values

- Rational thinking is important.
Aloo's mother has to stop being emotional and think rationally to bring happiness and peace back into the home. She is shown as being balanced and rational as she even sells her store and moves house to ensure that the children concentrate on their studies. She is willing to discuss Aloo's future with a school officer before making a decision.
- Diligence is what brings success to Aloo.
He is hard-working and smart. He does well in his studies and passes exams with distinctions. While applying to the American universities, Aloo reads up on the strange and interesting courses that are available and about the exciting new world that is waiting for him.
- Responsibility can bring success in life.
Aloo's mother is a responsible mother. She makes sacrifices for the sake of her children. Aloo is a responsible student as he does well in school and obtains a place in the university. He also wants to study medicine and is accepted by an American university purely on the basis of his results. He is very responsible. He even promises his mother that he will not do anything to upset her values and beliefs. He does not think selfishly or act defiantly. He only shouts at her on one occasion when he feels very disappointed that she gave him hope and then dashed it.

Point of View

The story is told in the first person point of view. In this case, it is the sister who is studying at the university. We see the relationship of the various members of the family through her eyes.

Tone and Mood

The tone is heartwarming and generally, reflects the love and care the family members have for each other. There is a caring sensitivity that runs through the story. The mood is positive and optimistic. There is a sense of hope because the main character wants to better himself and seek his fortune in the great wide world.

Language and Style

The language used is basically simple and direct. The interest in the story is sustained well and the reader gets caught in the conflict between the mother and the son. The reader wants to know if the son will go to America and if so, will he return as a filial son or will he forget his traditions and become Americanised? The simple descriptions develop the storyline well.

Literary Devices

Imagery

Descriptive words create interesting and vivid images in the reader's mind.

Leaves rustling in the wind (page 32); **Wild land, with tall trees** and at night it felt a **lonely, frightening place** (page 32); An **exciting new world** was waiting for him (page 33); Not **made of stone** (page 36); Wind...bringing some **welcome cool air** into the hot room (page 37); **Worried, unsmiling face, a face with deep lines...** (page 38); Even the **mountains are clean and tidy** (page 40)

Simile

Mr. Velji ...like a clever man (page 36); *Walked in like a soldier* (page 36)

Irony

Aloo's mother refers to uncles in America who will pay money to send him to college!

(page 32, 34)

Aloo has no such uncles and if he did have them, they may not pay for his education either! The mother is sarcastic as she herself is painfully aware that the family has no money to educate Aloo.



SHORT STORY 2: *Tanjung Rhu* by MinFong Ho

Synopsis

Respect for the elders and traditional practices matter in Tanjung Rhu, the short story by Minfong Ho. Times can change, people can change but some things stay. Mr. Li who had lost his mother is nostalgic as he looks at the ships in the harbour. He uses the binoculars that he had bought for his mother to look at the ships and count them.

When he had given them to her, his mother had told him that she had everything she needs. However, she had been excited to think that she could see her husband's old shipyard with the binoculars. Mr. Li had reminded her that it had been torn down years ago. But she tells him that she can always see Tanjung Rhu 'behind my eyes.' He invites her to his office so that she can see Tanjung Rhu from there. It was their home when they were not rich; a place where there was the smell of delicious food and the comfort of holding someone's hand.

The next morning, Li's mother tells Li that if something is to be done, it must be done right and carefully she follows the rituals at the altar while the granddaughter

comments that 'she always has to do just what she wants.' Mr. Li tells his daughter to be more respectful of his mother.

At the office, Li's mother sees the ships with the binoculars but remembers moments when she walked with a little boy who counted the ships. Mr. Li tries to communicate with her but it is too late. She is very ill. He wonders about those times and is sad that he never took the time to listen to her. His daughter seems to understand his mother better. After his mother's death, Mr. Li follows the same rituals at the altar as his mother did. He feels at peace.

Plot

- It was just after his mother died and Mr. Li feels an emptiness – as if he had not done something. He looks out of the office window with his binoculars and counts the ships in the harbour as he has always done.
- He remembers that he had bought the binoculars for his mother. However he told his wife that he had bought them for the children. His wife, Helen was busy with her tea parties.
- Li's mother tells Li that she does not need things one buys as she has all that she needs.
- But she is happy to think that she can probably see Tanjung Rhu with the binoculars. She wants to see her husband's old shipyard in Tanjung Rhu but Li reminds her that it was torn down 30 years ago. She says that she can still see the shipyard in her mind. She agrees to go with him to see his office.
- The next day, she prays at the family altar as she wants to tell her husband that she is visiting her son's workplace. Her granddaughter Ying tries to help her with the rituals to hurry her up but she will not be hurried. She must do it exactly as she did it before. Mr. Li makes his daughter listen to his mother's conversation with his late father.
- From the office windows, Mr Li's mother was not able to see the ships but she sees in her mind a small boy walking on the beach while counting the fishing boats. She sees their old hut and herself walking on the beach with the crabs they had caught.
- Mr. Li wishes he could go back to those times when he could smell the salt and fish and rice cooking over the wood fires. He remembers a time when he walked holding someone's hand. He wishes he had asked about it but she is dying and remembers little. His daughter Ying tries to help him reach her. But it is too late.
- Mr. Li realises that he has to do one more thing and that is to go home and take care of the altar. He goes home, pays his respects at the altar and finds comfort in praying at the altar as his mother had done before.

Setting

Physical Setting

It is set in Singapore. The family is fairly affluent as Mr. Li is a shipyard owner although at one time, he was living in a hut in Tanjung Rhu.

Social Setting

Mrs. Li has tea parties with her friends, a social practice of the rich where rich cakes and perfumes feature. The son is studying in Cambridge while the daughter is going to New York soon. The house, the altar and their lifestyle reflect their wealth and position in society.

Time

It is set in the recent past and could apply to the present times too.

Characters

Mr. Li	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 63 year-old, rich shipyard owner who has just lost his mother. He likes to count the ships at the harbour. • A caring man – bought binoculars for his mother so that she can see faraway things better. He advises his daughter Ying to listen to his mother as she prays. • Loves his mother and scolds the daughter for being rough with his mother. • Torn between believing in the age-old customs and modern ways. • He needs the blessings of his parents to find strength and comfort.
Li's mother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A gentle lady, who has come out of tough times and is now old and frail. • Her son loves her - takes her to the office so that she can see Tanjung Rhu through the binoculars • She has no need for things and wants love and care. • Has a good relationship with Ying, the granddaughter who is proud that she can do the right things for her. • Has a strong belief in age-old customs and does them carefully and respectfully. • A remarkable woman who holds the generations together.
Helen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She is Mr. Li's wife. • Enjoys tea parties with friends, much to the displeasure of Mr. Li.
Ying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She is Mr. Li's daughter • Young and modern but very kind and understanding • Shows sensitivity and gentleness beyond her years—loving to the grandmother; understands her needs better than others. • Tries to bridge the relationship between her father and his mother

Themes

- Traditions and rituals count in life.
Being modern does not mean that old customs and practices should be cast aside. Mr. Li's mother follows rites and rituals at the altar meticulously while the granddaughter wishes to hurry her. Her son allows her to do what she wishes but appreciates the real value of it only after she is gone. He then follows the practices too.
- Filial love is an important quality to uphold.
Mr. Li loves his mother and wants to please her. Just as she looked after him when he was small and held his hand, he wants to hold her hand and guide her now. There is a slight communication gap which the granddaughter tries to bridge. But the granddaughter loves her father and cares for his well-being. There is much love and understanding in this family despite temporary lapses.
- Material things do not really count
Li's mother says that she does not need the binoculars as she can always see the things that matter in her mind. She has what she needs and things don't matter. She does not need the things that can be bought. All the things that matter are in her mind. She remembers her late husband well. She still remembers the wonderful memories of Tanjung Rhu when Li was small and together they caught crabs. Li's wife is trapped in the social activities which are superficial and meaningless.

Moral Values

- Respect
People should be respectful of their elders. Mr. Li reminds Ying to show respect to his mother. He himself does things to please her.
- Traditions should be maintained
Respect to the ancestors must be shown for they will bless the living.
- Kindness and consideration matter
Ying feels that what she does for her grandmother is more meaningful (she gives blood) than what the second aunt brought for her [burial clothes, page 31]. Some customs can be painful. Mr. Li remembers vaguely his mother holding his hand when he was a child while catching crabs. He wishes he had asked her more about that time. That he follows her rituals is his way of showing respect, love and consideration to her.

Point of View

It is written in the third person point of view. We see everything through Mr. Li's eyes and perspective.

Tone and Mood

Since the theme is serious and tugs at the heart strings, the tone is essentially reserved and sombre. Love and warmth are subtly woven into the story and there is a gentle sensitivity that seeps through. Even though there is death, it is dealt with in a delicate manner. One comes away with a sense of loss but with hope for a better future.

Language and Style

The language used is simple and brisk. The realistic descriptions deal with ordinary and commonplace things but are charming and touching. Li's mother's memories are 'behind her eyes' and she uses 'the see-far glasses' to see Tanjung Rhu. The writer's prose becomes almost poetic and is most suitable for the story of loss and nostalgia.

Imagery

Many passages deal with the descriptions of places which form a perfect backdrop for the emotions at play.

The wind catching their sails (page 30); *Feel of the sand between his toes* (page 30); *Coldness of seaweed around his ankles* (page 30); *Thin silver line...night and day, sea and sky...* (page 33); *Altar is the line between life and death* (page 35)

Simile

Similes make the descriptions more vivid.

She, fixed at their centre like a tree.... countless fruits had grown (page 22)
Eyes...as blank as office windows (page 28)
Her face.... like a fruit left to dry... (page 30)
Eyes like colourless stones (page 31-32)
Fingers looked like a piece of seaweed (page 33)

Flashback

Li's mother looks back on the old days and remembers Tanjung Rhu with much fondness. (page 23 – 28)
Li himself remembers the things that happened in Tanjung Rhu and wishes to go back in time. (page 30)

Proverb

Li uses a Chinese proverb to tell his daughter that his mother has lived long enough to have gone through many experiences and definitely knows more.
She has eaten more salt than you have eaten rice. (page 26)

What is a Play?

A play is essentially a story that is meant to be acted out [staged] in front of an audience. It can be in prose form or poetry but it is meant to be heard and seen, and will have to be staged in a theatre to be enjoyed. A play will have the following main characteristics:

- character
- plot
- theme
- dialogue
- audience
- stagecraft

Key Elements of a Play

Character

The *dramatis personae* refers to the persons in the play. These are the characters who will act out the plot. Most plays contain major characters and minor characters.

The most important character is the protagonist, the one around whom the whole plot moves. The development of the major characters is essential to the play as it allows the audience to make up their minds whether the character is

good or evil. They watch him speak and act, and decide whether he is honourable or detestable. The main characters are judged by their own words and actions and by what others say about them.

A minor character serves a specific function and once that is done, he exits. He may convey some messages, provide laughter or carry out a specific duty.

Plot

The plot tells the story and the story is structured in acts and scenes set in particular places. It revolves around a conflict in which the hero struggles against all odds to win the heroine or to achieve something or to prove a point.

Exposition	The characters appear to the audience in a particular setting. The main issue of the conflict may be introduced. It sets the background for the play to unfold.
Rising action	The characters give ominous hints of what is to come and the audience expects certain logical developments.
Climax	The highest point of the drama where there is a clash among the main characters or the main issue is exposed. The suspense creates the exciting moments. A sudden reversal of fortune and misunderstandings can occur and the audience wonders what is going to happen.
Falling action	The plan gets fulfilled or expectations of a surprising nature may be suggested.
Denouement	All mystery is cleared up and things are exposed to the audience. Everything falls into place in an expected manner or in a totally surprising way.

Theme

The theme tells the audience what the play or drama is all about. The plot refers to the body of a play and the theme has been called its soul. Most plays have a conflict of some kind between individuals, between man and society, man and some superior force or man and himself. The events that this conflict provokes make up the plot.

One of the first items of interest is the playwright's treatment of the plot and what theme he would draw from it. The same plot may be used many times but it is the treatment by the playwright that gives it its originality or artistic worth.

The same theme or story may be given a very serious or light touch. It may be a severe attack or a light-hearted treatment. It could teach a great lesson or show the same situation as a handicap to progress. The artistic temperament

of the playwright is responsible for the treatment that he gives to his story or theme. A play will convey through its theme, moral and universal values that have an enduring nature. Thus, a theme is essential to a play.

Dialogue

Dialogue, what the characters speak, carries the message of the play and therefore, is essential that it be presented in a language that is easily comprehended. If the audience fails to grasp the message, the play will cease to excite their minds or entertain them. The characters come to life through their dialogue. Dialogue provides the substance of a play and each word uttered by the character contributes to its effect as a whole. Therefore, what is said by the character must be appropriate to the role and situation of a character. The exposition of the play falls on the dialogue of the characters. The exposition establishes the relationships, tensions or conflicts from which later plot developments derive. An audience must be able to relate to the character in the play through his dialogue.

The language and style of the dialogue will reflect the period and the social background of the characters.

The tone and mood of the play will be apparent in the dialogue used and will show whether a theme is dealt with humour, anger, sarcasm or other feelings the playwright wishes to convey.

Audience

The audience is a vital part of a play as without an audience, a play can only be a hollow play of words. A play must be acted out in front of an audience for its full benefit to be realised.

No doubt a play can be read quietly at home, but the non-existence of the audience makes it only a text of words which do not come alive. There must be an interaction between the staged text and the audience.

Stagecraft

The setting of the scenes will vary depending on where the action takes place. Stage settings will be done according to the scenes and equipment, and stage props will be used to create scenes or the audience will be asked to use their imagination.

Technology and modern devices have added such a dynamic dimension to plays that it has taken stagecraft to a fantastic height of imagination and creativity.

PLAY



The Right Thing to Do by Martyn Ford

Synopsis

A man is lying in the street. He has a heart condition. Three passers-by encounter the man but they are not bothered about him. They all feel it is not their responsibility to help the man. Then the woman in blue arrives. She reprimands them for their inaction. She orders them to get help for the man. The three passers-by are stunned by her manner and orders. Yet, they do what she has told them to do. Then

when the ambulance arrives, the woman in blue walks away. The three learn that the fallen man is the famous TV chef, Michael Scott. The three congratulate themselves on having saved his life. As for the woman in blue, the three speak ill of her for having “done nothing”. Is this a fair judgement?

Plot

The play is a simple one with only one scene enacted in an open street. The play is patterned on the story of the Good Samaritan. It is superimposed with the mystery of the identity of the woman in blue. The audience is made to examine its conscience by evaluating the behaviour and actions of the protagonists. A man is lying on the street. First a woman, Rebecca walks past him and stops. She hesitates to help, walks off and goes back to the man again. Then another man, Patrick walks past and stops to look at the man. They argue over who should help the man first. Then, David walks past and asks about the man. All three of them argue over who should help him. They are reluctant to help as it is not their problem. A woman in blue comes and barks orders at the three of them to help. She tells David to call an ambulance. Next, she asks Rebecca to get some water from a nearby house. Then she tells Patrick to feel the man’s pulse. The man stirs and says ‘pills’. Patrick finds a bottle of pills in the man’s pocket. Rebecca comes back with water. The woman in blue tells Patrick to give the man his pills with water. The man finally wakes up and thanks Patrick for his help. Then, the woman in blue quietly goes away while David tells the rest the ambulance is on the way. The man identifies himself as a famous TV chef and thanks all of them for helping him. The three of them claim to have rescued the man. They speak ill of the woman in blue for not helping out. They feel they have helped the man and were there for him. They praise themselves for doing the right thing.

Setting

The play is set in modern times possibly in the 1960s to 1980s. There is no mention of handphones or computers. The urban setting of the play includes mention of cars and ambulances. The character names also suggest an English-speaking environment.

Theme

- Civic-mindedness
At first, Rebecca, Patrick and David take an uncaring attitude to the sick man. They did not want to help him as it was not their problem. It is the woman in blue who awakens them to take up their civic responsibility. This shows that we must be civic-minded and help people in need.
- Leadership/Initiative
The play shows that leadership/initiative can transform people. This is especially true of leadership by example. The woman in blue is the catalyst that sparks a change in the others who are apathetic towards the man in distress.
- Spirit of voluntarism

The play shows that prompt voluntary action by citizens is essential in society. Imagine what would have happened if no one had given the sick man his pills and water. What would have happened if no one had called for an ambulance? This shows that we must take action voluntarily when there is a crisis at hand.

Moral Values

- We should help the needy.
The man in distress was a famous TV chef. Does this mean we should only help the rich and famous? On the contrary, the woman in blue shows us that we should help all needy persons, regardless of whether they are rich or poor.
- We should not take undeserved credit.
Rebecca, Patrick and David begin to congratulate themselves on having saved the life of Michael Scott. They give no credit to the woman in blue. They even go so far as to accuse her of walking away from her responsibility.
- We should not speak ill of the absent.
Rebecca, Patrick and David criticise the woman in blue when she is gone from the scene. We do not know the real reason for her sudden disappearance. She may have gone away to help others in distress elsewhere.

Characters

<p>The woman in blue</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • She is the conscience of the play. Although she is nameless, she is firm and assertive in her demands. • She is the moral anchor of the play and embodies its central message that we must care for the needy in our midst.
<p>Rebecca, Patrick and David</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are all passers-by who at first do not want to get involved in helping the fallen man. They all try to escape responsibility until the woman in blue orders them to get things done. • However, after they discover that the fallen man is Michael Scott, they congratulate themselves on their good deed. • They also speak ill of the woman in blue and take credit for helping the man on the street. They agree it is the right thing to do.

Language and Style

The language of the play reflects the educational level of all the characters. The script consists mostly of an exchange of one-liners. The language turns sharp and heated when the woman in blue barks out her orders. It is also tense when Patrick, Rebecca and David refuse to help the sick man.