“The Past”(1996) is a reflective poem written by Ha Jin that is about how he and other people deal with their past which creates who they are now. The play is written from Ha Jin’s perspective, he is reflecting on how he has seen people deal with their past and how he plans to deal with his past. Ha Jin uses similes and metaphors to describe the way one deals with the past and how that affects who one is.

“The Past” has five stanzas of four lines each with no rhyme scheme or meter to it with every stanza having a simile or metaphor. The poem is divided into three sections; the first section introduces what the poem is about, the middle section gives examples, and the final section gives the speakers’ conclusion.

In the first stanza of the first section of “The Past,” Ha Jin sets the meaning of the poem.

I have supposed my past is part of myself.

As my shadow appears whenever I’m in the sun

The past cannot be thrown off and its weight

must be borne, or I will become another man.

In the first line when he says the “past is a part of myself,” this immediately lets the readers know that the subject of the poem is the past and it is integral to one’s being. In the next sentence, Ha Jin talks about how a person cannot leave his past behind without becoming a different person. Thus, the first section lets the reader know what the poem is going to be about.

The middle section is made up of three stanzas, two through four. In this section, Ha Jin describes how three different people have dealt with their past.

But I saw someone wall his past into a garden

whose produce is always in fashion.

If you enter his property without permission

he will welcome you with a watchdog or a gun.

I saw someone set up his past as a harbor.

Wherever it sails, his boat is safe—

If a storm comes, he can always head for home.

His voyage is the adventure of a kite.

I saw someone drop his past like trash.

He buried it and shed it altogether.

He has shown me that without the past

one can also move ahead and get somewhere.

The first person described protects their past by hiding it from people. This is shown when the author says he saw the person “wall his past into a garden.” The second person deals with their past by finding comfort in it whenever they are troubled. This is described when the person “set up his past as a harbor.” The third person has left their past behind, as if it never happened, to create a life free of past encumbrances. This is illustrated when the person is said to “drop his past like trash.” From this section, Jin has described three different ways people can deal with their past.

The last section of the poem is made up of the fifth and last stanza. In this section, Ha Jin describes how he is going to deal with his past.

Like a shroud my past surrounds me

but I will cut it and stitch it,

to make good shoes with it,

shoes that fit my feet.

He has decided that he will shape his past to fit his needs as he shows when he states that he will create his past as “shoes that fit my feet.” In the final section, we see that Ha Jin has learned from his observations of other people and has used that knowledge to shape how he deals with his past.

In the poem “The Past,” Ha Jin’s attitude about the past is negative . He believes that it is a burden and is passive about what can be done to it. This attitude can be seen in the words and phrases in the first stanza when Jin states “The past cannot be thrown off and its weight must be borne” (The Past, 3). After exploring how others have dealt with their past, Ha Jin’s attitude shifts to become more positive. He decides that he can shape his past to fit his needs. This can be seen in the last stanza where he is talking about what he will do with the pasts he states “I will cut it and stitch it, to make good shoes with it” (The Past, 15-16). As we read the poem, we can see that when Jin learned that a person can shape his past to fit his needs, his attitude becomes more positive and proactive.

Ha Jin uses symbols and a motifs to describe how he and other people can shape their pasts. The symbol appears in the first stanza when Ha Jin uses a metaphor to describe the past as a shadow, “As my shadow appears whenever I’m in the sun. The past cannot be thrown off…” (The Past, 2-3) The word shadow is used symbolically to represent how the past can overshadow the present. In the middle section of the poem, stanzas two through four, Ha Jin uses metaphors and similes to create a motif to portray how he saw people deal with their past and who they are now. This motif is created in second stanza when Jin uses a metaphor stating “wall his past into a garden” (The Past, ) to demonstrate how only certain people are allowed to know that person’s past. In the third stanza, Jin uses the simile of “set up his past as a harbor” to show how a person’s past is used as a safe-haven when trouble appears. In the fourth stanza, Jin creates a simile stating “drop his past like trash” to show how a person can through away their past to create a new life. This motif of using similes and metaphors to demonstrate how people deal with their past is used a final time when Jin creates his final simile stating “Like a shroud my past surrounds me” to demonstrate how he would use the material from the shroud to recreate his past to fit his purposes. It is this motif of using metaphors and similes about how people deal with their past that creates the structure of the poem.

Ha Jin’s poem “The Past”(1996) is a reflective piece that discusses how the author observes people dealing with their past and how that makes who they are today. The speaker of the poem is the Author, and he seems to be addressing himself. This poem is about ideas and does not have a physical location, though Ha Jin uses metaphors to make the ideas into various physical objects. Within this poem there is tension between how people deal with their past and who they are now.

The subject matter of “The Past” is about how one deals with their past and the way it affects who they are now. The same subject is explored in many other poems, such as in “The Nice Thing About Counting Stars“ by Dwight Okita. This poem is about the author’s parents being sent to an American Internment camp during World War II and how it impacts who they are today. “The Nice Thing About Counting Stars” is a powerful poem about the past that invites the audience to share a portion of the author’s life which has defined who he is. “The Nice Thing About Counting Stars” and “The Past” both demonstrate how important the past is and how the way we deal with the past affects who we are today.