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English 111

Paper 2 Poetry Analysis

An analysis of the poem “The Past” by Ha Jin

“The Past”(1996) is a reflective poem written by Ha Jin about the concept on the different ways people deal with their past which creates who they are now. The play is written in first person with the speaker being Ha Jin, he is reflecting on how he has seen people deal with their past and how he plans to deal with his past. Ha Jin does this by using 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 the poem with every stanza having a simile or metaphor. Ha Jin uses similes and metaphos to describe how people deal with their past and how the past affects who they are. 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 section of “The Past,” which is the first stanza, 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 his first line when he says “past is a part of myself,” this immediately lets the readers know that the subject of the poem is about the past and how the past is integral to who one is. 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, where 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 protects their precious past by hiding the past 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 the past whenever they are troubled, which is described when the person “set up his past as a harbor.” The third person has left their past behind, as if the past never happened, to create a life free of past encumbrances as Jin described seeing the person “drop his past like trash.” In the middle section Jin has described three different ways people can deal with their past.

In the last section of the poem, made up of the fifth and last stanza, here 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 will use that to shape how he deals with his past.

In the poem “The Past,” Ha Jin’s attitude about the past is negative and that the past is a burden and is passive about what can be done. 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, 3-4). After exploring how others have dealt with their past, Ha Jin’s attitude shifts to be more positive and responsive in deciding 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 when 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 with the words and language chosen by Jin, that as Jin has learned that a person can shape his past to fit his needs, his attitude becomes more positive and proactive.

The figurative language in the poem allows the reader to easily understand abstract ideas. Ha Jin does this by using similes and metaphors to turn abstract ideas into physical objects. First he turns the past into a shadow to describe how the past is always with us. Second, he turns dealing with the past into a walled garden to demonstrate how a person can choose who views their past. Third, he turns dealing with the past into harbor to demonstrate how a person can return to their past when they are troubled for comfort. Fourth, he turns the dealing with the past into trash to demonstrate how a person can leave there past behind and ignore it. Finally, Ha Jin turns the past into a shroud that he uses the material to create a pair of shoes, to demonstrate how he will shape his past to suit his needs.

Ha Jin is using a symbol and a motif 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 of 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 about 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, 5) to demonstrate how only certain people are allowed to know that person’s precious past. In the third stanza, Jin uses the simile of “set up his past as a harbor” (The Past, 9) to show how a person past is used as a place to go that is safe when trouble appears. In the fourth stanza, Jin created a simile stating “drop his past like trash” (The Past, 13) 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 in the final section of the poem to show how Jin has decided how to deal with his past. Jin created his final simile stating “Like a shroud my past surrounds me” (The Past, 17) 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” is a reflective piece that uses a motif to describe the author’s observation on the different ways people deal with their past which 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 the way one deals with their past affects who they are now. The same subject is explored in many other poems, one such example is “The Nice Thing About Counting Stars“ by Dwight Okita, about the author’s parents being sent to an American Internment camp during World War II and who they are today. “The Nice Thing About Counting Stars” is a powerful poem about the past and is the author’s attempt to invite the audience in to share a portion of his life which defines who he is. When comparing the two poems we see one Ha Jin’s of observation about how people deal with their past is demonstrated in the poem “The Nice Thing About Counting Stars.” These poems and many demonstrate how important the peoples past are to them and how we deal with the past affects who we are today.