

Topic: Poetry in context

Understanding poetry in context

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples are warned that resources in this unit may contain images, voices and names of persons who may now be deceased.

Today you will:

- ▶ develop knowledge of theme in poetry
- ▶ understand how knowledge of context affects interpretations of theme.

Resources

Find and prepare

Sheet 7 — Coolungar thieves

Key terms

context, disempowerment, empowerment, poetic voice, representation, subject matter, theme

For definitions and explanations of terms, please see the **Glossary**.

Lesson

Understand theme in poetry

Poetry, like other forms of literature, is written around a subject or topic, but can also have an underlying theme. Theme is a broader concept than 'subject matter'.

subject matter: In poetry, 'subject matter' refers to the subject or topics that are literally mentioned in the poem. For example, the subject matter of a poem may be teenagers.

theme: In poetry, 'theme' refers to the dominant social, moral or ethical messages a poet communicates about the subject matter of a poem. For example, the theme of a poem whose subject matter is teenagers, may actually be 'respect'. Respect is a broader concept than the subject matter 'teenagers'. The poem might talk about respect in a number of different ways, for example: respect for self, respect for parents.

In Lesson 1 you looked at the poem 'Whispers, songs and shrieks'. The **subject matter** is forests, suburbs, oceans and oil spills, beneath the earth and mining. The **theme** is humanity's negative impact on the natural environment.

Knowledge of social, historical and cultural context is necessary to correctly interpret the theme of a poem.

You will now consider a poem that reflects on a culturally sensitive issue of social and historical importance.



It is okay if you do not understand fully what a poem is about. You do not need to understand each word in a poem to appreciate what the poet is trying to say. Apparently, people have spent years trying to work out what my poetry is about. That is, no doubt, half the fun.

1. Open **Sheet 7** — [Coolungar thieves](#) and read the poem. The author, Graeme Dixon, was a poet, an author, music student and occasional lecturer on Aboriginal history and social justice issues.

Complete the following steps as you read the poems in this unit:

Before reading: Read the title and skim over the poem, predict what the poem may be about.

During reading: Underline words, phrases or descriptions you are unsure of.

After reading: First, summarise the sequence of events represented in the poem in dot points; and then provide an interpretation of the theme or message of the poem.

2. Respond to the following questions about the poem 'Coolungar thieves'.
 - a. What is the subject matter of the poem? Who are the people mentioned? What actions are undertaken? What places are mentioned? (Write in note form.)

- b. The text is written from the point of view of a witness to a moment in Australian history. It details a sequence of events in the voice of someone who was there. Summarise the sequence of events represented in the poem. (Write in note form.)
- c. Great Uncle is described as having a 'wound that cut deep to his soul'. What double injustice is Great Uncle experiencing in this poem? (4–5 sentences)
- d. Would the author, Geoff Dixon, have agreed or disagreed with the statement: *Sometimes in order to do a big good, it is necessary to cause some small harm*? Use evidence from the poem to justify your answer. (4–5 sentences)
- e. Now read the poem again, and record words, phrases or descriptions you are unsure of. (Write in note form.)
- f. Provide your interpretation of the subject matter and theme of the poem. (1–2 sentences)

- g. The poet, Graeme Dixon, was raised among the Noongar people, who traditionally inhabit the south-west region of Western Australia. Do you think this has bearing on the poem's theme? Explain what difference this may make. (3–4 sentences)
- h. Look at the list of Noongar words below. You are not expected to know the exact English translation of these words, but you should be able to gain a good idea of their meaning by looking at the words in the context of the poem. Re-read the poem and write in the right-hand column what you think the English translation might be.

Noongar word	English translation
Coolungar	
Nigh	
Wajella	
Bellai	
Manatji	
Yonga	
Nyorn	
Briddea	

3. Social, cultural and contextual factors contribute heavily to show how subject matter is represented and how a theme may be interpreted. You must now synthesise these understandings.
 - a. What evidence do the Noongar words add to the poem? (3–4 sentences)
 - b. How are the Noongar words in the poem used to empower or disempower particular groups or behaviours? (2–3 sentences)
 - c. What purpose might the poet have had in writing this poem? (1–2 sentences)
 - d. What could the theme of the poem be? Has your interpretation changed? (2–3 sentences)

It certainly helps you to better understand the meaning of a poem when you know the context and theme.

