

We Are Going by Oodgeroo Noonuccal

They came in to the little town
A semi-naked band subdued and silent
All that remained of their tribe.
They came here to the place of their old bora ground
Where now the many white men hurry about like ants.
Notice of the estate agent reads: 'Rubbish May Be Tipped Here'.
Now it half covers the traces of the old bora ring.
'We are as strangers here now, but the white tribe are the strangers.
We belong here, we are of the old ways.
We are the corroboree and the bora ground,
We are the old ceremonies, the laws of the elders.
We are the wonder tales of Dream Time, the tribal legends told.
We are the past, the hunts and the laughing games, the wandering camp fires.

We are the lightening bolt over Gaphembah Hill
Quick and terrible,
And the Thunderer after him, that loud fellow.
We are the quiet daybreak paling the dark lagoon.
We are the shadow-ghosts creeping back as the camp fires burn low.
We are nature and the past, all the old ways
Gone now and scattered.
The scrubs are gone, the hunting and the laughter.
The eagle is gone, the emu and the kangaroo are gone from this place.
The bora ring is gone.
The corroboree is gone.
And we are going.'

1920 - 1993

Nation: Noonuccal

Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Oodgeroo Noonuccal was born on North Stradbroke Island, country of the Noonuccal nation. She attended Dulwich Primary; left school and became a domestic in Brisbane at the age of 13. As an Aboriginal person, she said, 'there wasn't the slightest possibility of getting "a better job" [even] if you stayed on at school' (Murawina, 1993).

"Dad always said to me 'you're Black, you're Aboriginal, always be proud of it, but always know this, that if you're going to do anything in this world you've not only got to be as good as the white person, you've got to be better'."

Oodgeroo served in the Australian Women's Army Service (1942-1944). She published her first book of poetry, *We Are Going*, in 1964, going on to become a trailblazer in published Aboriginal writing in Australia. Oodgeroo was Queensland State Secretary of FCAATSI for ten years in the 1960s and from 1972 was managing director of the Noonuccal-Nughie Education Cultural Centre on Stradbroke Island. Throughout her life, she was a renowned and admired campaigner for Aboriginal rights, promoter of Aboriginal cultural survival, educator and environmentalist. (Australian Women's Archive Project, Claire Land)

Her work includes *We are Going* (1964), which was the first book ever to be published by an Aboriginal person, *My People* (1970) and *Stradbroke Dreaming* (1972). For more info see *'Oodgeroo: a tribute'* (Shoemaker (ed), 1994

Appreciating "We are Going" by Oodgeroo Noonuccal

Read Oodgeroo's "We are going" (p. 32) and answer these questions on it:

1. Explain why they are "silent and subdued".
2. How are white men represented? Why?
3. What is a bora ring and explain why it is so central to this poem.
4. Explain their reaction in line 8.
5. Lines 9-17 begin a 'litany'. What is the effect produced?
6. Comment on the significance of metaphors used in the poem.
7. Comment on the structure and form of this poem.
8. Why does Thunder have a capital letter?
9. Comment on the mood and atmosphere created here.
10. Combine comments on its theme, title and conclusion.

STOP! READ NO FURTHER! DO THE EXERCISE before reading the answers.

Some suggested answers....

1. The aborigines entering the town are "silent and subdued" probably because they are naturally quiet but more likely, are feeling rejected as foreigners entering white society.
2. "Many white men" emphasises the majority who overwhelm black and "like ants" conveys the horror of organised purposeful activity which is not supporting them; it is even exploiting them and their land.
3. The bora ring is a religious and cultural symbol in the black society; the ceremonial ground is now totally rejected as nothing. Neglect might have been a understandable but rejection seems more deliberate.
4. Such total rejection cannot be communicated either in English (the foreigner's tongue) nor in their own. Being so utterly confused and in emotional turmoil, they can do nothing. Oodgeroo does here seems to reply to white accusations that blacks are "lazy".
5. Repetition reinforces the point and focuses our attention on it.
6. The metaphors "thunder . . daybreak ...shadow ghosts" are from Nature, typically the natural element of these people. The lightning bolt is the most powerful act of nature and it is local "over Gaphembah Hill" so there may be an ultimate rescue to undo injustice.
7. The varying lengths of lines in the poem's form add to the substance of their meaning. The short electric lines contrast with the timeless long lines just like weather cycles. The punch of the last three lines drives home its central message. The title is ironic for to whites "going away" sounds pleasing (hide the irritant) but to the blacks it is a challenge to action and not to fade away in the face of such injustice and rejection.
8. Just as in the Dreamtime stories, the elements have personality. Thunder is "that loud fellow."
9. This mood is nostalgic and assertive too. Reading it, whites may feel guilt and blacks would feel anger.
10. The first verse of 14 lines is description and the second of 12 is reflection on it. In its form, it echoes the Petrarchan love sonnet of Western literature. But in its substance it dramatises hate.