

Evoking Our Shared Memories: Preserving our Heritage through Singaporean Poetry

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Poetry, Language and Culture

- Although it appears most commonly in its written form, poetry was originally **transmitted orally and in a communal setting**
- Powerful way in which cultures pass on important aspects of their heritages
- Epic poetry and its relation to cultural values → Homer's *Iliad*, Virgil's *Aeneid*

Singaporean Poetry and Sites of Social Memory

- Sites of Social Memory → not a static and simplistic locale, but a **nexus** of cultural associations and tensions
- Rather than consigning it to the past, poetry **evokes** a vivid and concrete sense of space and time
- Sites are enriched by the **different mini-narratives** that the reader is urged to pursue imaginatively

'Void Deck' by Alfian Bin Sa'at



Where the neighbourhood wives,
After a morning at the wet market,
Sit facing the breeze
To catch snatches of gossip
About leery shopkeepers,
[...]
And children orbit around them
Laugh without diction --

'Wet Markets Drying' by Desmond Sim



There were drains narrow
and dramatic like arteries
Flowing vividly with blood
of new slaughtered
chickens
And the unruly clawing
roots of vegetables carried
Soil with worms to remind
us the source from where
The fruit was picked to fill
our daily hungers.
Colours clashed unplanned –
yellowing lumpy fat on
Dead white chicken skin,
brinjals swollen shiny as
Water-plump amethysts ...

'Old House at Ang Siang Hill' by Arthur Yap

an unusual house this is
dreams are here before you sleep
tread softly
into the **three-storeyed gloom**
sit gently
on the **straits-born furniture**
[...]
your family **past** is
superannuated grime
which increases in time

What does the house represent?

- Filled with artifacts and items that seem obsolete and have no intrinsic use-value, but have a wealth of cultural associations
- The phrase 'superannuated grime' is representative of our attitude towards the past and the need for constant renewal
- 'eyes not tradition tell you this' → poem provokes a moral response by criticizing our loss of attachment to cultural heritage

The importance of poetry

- Language evokes the **messiness and complexity** of everyday life → imbues culture with vitality, and resists easy compartmentalization
- Evocation and examination of feelings of nostalgia and loss → what do these emotions tell us about our attitudes towards the past?

Conclusion

- Writing is a powerful way in which we connect and create
- Our sense of 'home' can be revitalized through language and its power to evoke and question
- Issues of cultural heritage can thus always remain relevant and an important part of our national discourse