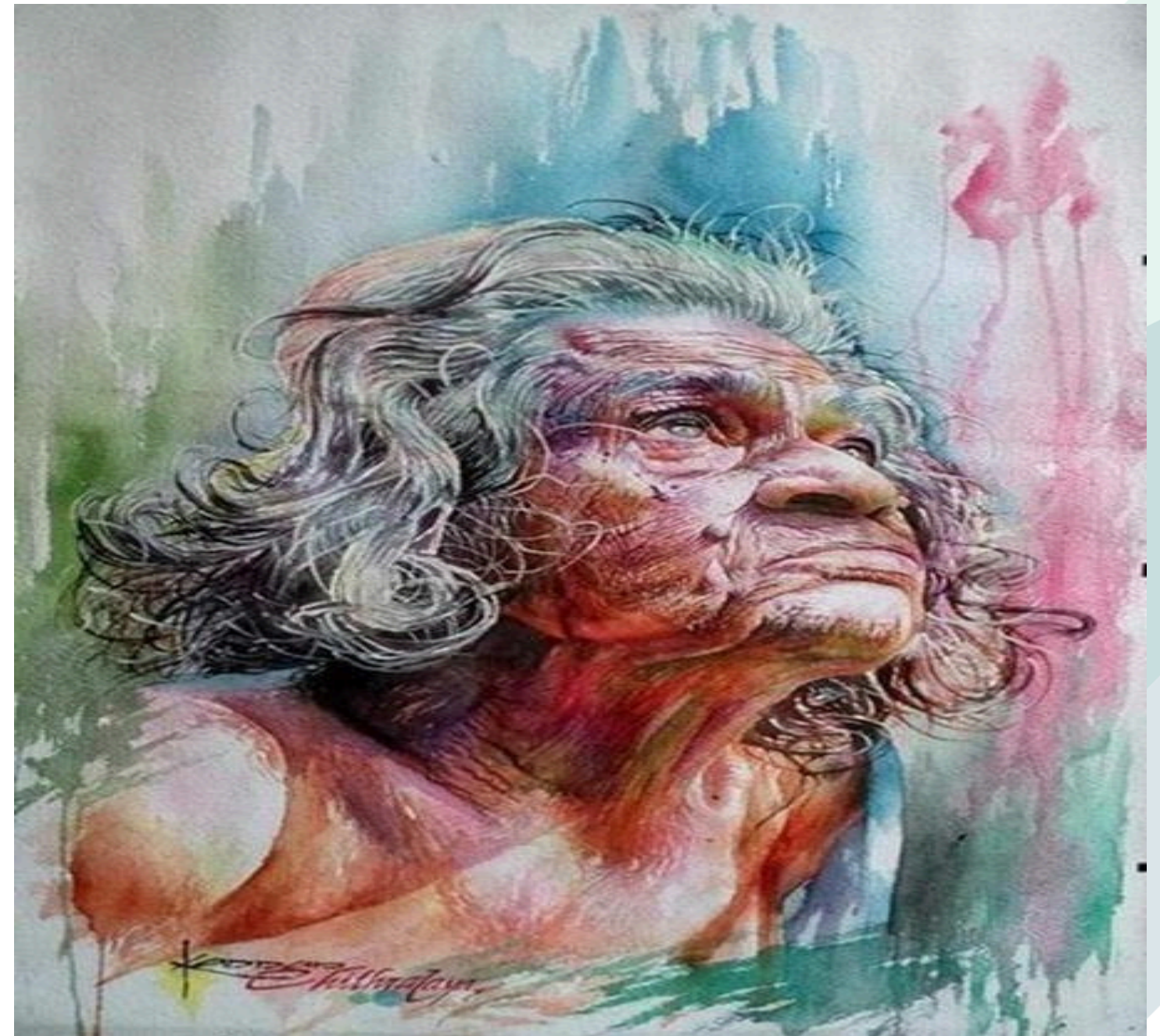


A Request to a Year

JUDITH WRIGHT



CONTENT

DESCRIPTION

1. POET

2. READING OF THE POEM

3. SUMMARY OF THE POEM

4. CONTEXT

- HISTORICAL
- LITERARY

JUDITH WRIGHT

Wright's poetry was inspired by the various regions in which she lived: the New England, New South Wales, the subtropical rainforests of Tamborine Mountain, Queensland, and the plains of the southern highlands near Braidwood. A new period in Wright's life started in the mid-1950s:

"The two threads of my life, the love of the land itself and the deep unease over the fate of its original people, were beginning to twine together, and the rest of my life would be influenced by that connection."

In *The Two Faces* (1955) she took Hiroshima as an example of man's power to destroy even the cycles of nature. Wright's activism on conservation issues led her to focus on the interaction between land and the language. According to Wright, "the true function of art and culture is to interpret us to ourselves, and to relate us to the country and the society in which we live."



JUDITH WRIGHT

She started to see that her mission was to find words and poetic forms to bridge the human experience and the natural world, man and earth.

"Poetry needs a background in which emotional, as well as material values are given their due weight; and the effect of this shallowness of roots is easily traceable in Australian writing, with its uneasy attempts to solve or to ignore the problem of its attitude to the country."

Alienation from the land meant for Wright a crisis of the language. She criticized the education system for failing to teach students the pleasures of poetry, and promoted the reading and writing of poetry in schools. Realistically, she also expressed doubts about the power of poetry to change the scheme of things.



Request to a Year–POEM

If the year is meditating a suitable gift,
I should like it to be the attitude
of my great-great-grandmother,
legendary devotee of the arts.

Who, having had eight children
And little opportunity for painting pictures,
Sat one day on a high rock
Beside a river in Switzerland

And from a difficult distance viewed
Her second son, balanced on a small ice-flow,
Drift down the current towards a waterfall
That struck rock bottom eighty feet below,

While her second daughter, impeded,
No doubt, by the petticoats of the day,
Stretched out a last-hope alpenstock
(which luckily caught him on his way).

Nothing, it was evident, could be done;
And with the artist's isolating eye
My great-great-grandmother hastily sketched the scene.
The sketch survives to prove the story by.

Year, if you have no Mother's Day present planned;
Reach back and bring me the firmness of her hand.

ABOUT THE POEM

The speaker of Judith Wright's "Request to a Year" recounts the story of her art-loving great-great-grandmother, who looked on as her son got swept down a river toward a waterfall.

Realizing that she was too far away to help save the boy's life, the great-great-grandmother quickly sketched the scene to create a record of what happened. The poem suggests that the artist's role in challenging times is to bear witness to and record what's going on around them.

It also speaks to the strength of generations of women in the speaker's family, illustrating how women, in particular, are often the ones to keep familial memories alive. The poem was published in the Australian poet's 1955 collection *The Two Fires*.

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The speaker says that if the year itself is trying to think of a worthy present to give her, she'd like her great- great-grandmother's way of seeing the world. Her great-great-grandmother famously loved art.

But, seeing as she had eight kids, it was difficult for her to find time to paint. One day, she was perched on top of a towering rock next to a river in Switzerland.

She looked down from that great height and saw her second-eldest son clinging to a small sheet of free - floating ice. He was being swept by the current toward a waterfall, which fell 80 feet to the rocks below.

Meanwhile, her second-eldest daughter, despite being hindered by voluminous underskirts that made it difficult to move, held out a walking stick toward the boy in a desperate, last-ditch attempt to save him (and it thankfully did catch him before he went over the waterfall).

SUMMARY OF THE POEM

But it was clear to the speaker's great-great-grandmother that there was nothing she could do to help. So, with the artist's ability to focus on one thing amidst everything that's going on, she quickly drew a picture of the events unfolding in front of her. The drawing remains to this day as proof of what happened.

Addressing the year ahead directly, the speaker says that if it hasn't already chosen a Mother's Day gift for her, it should go back in time and retrieve her great-great-grandmother's steadiness and strength

HISTORICAL CONTEXT



Wright's poetry was the product of the time and place in which she lived. She was inspired by the beautiful landscapes of southern Queensland, Australia, where she spent most of her life. At the same time, Wright lived through World War II and was horrified by the way human beings ravaged each other and the environment alike. She also witnessed the devastating effects of British colonialism on Australia's native peoples.



Wright spent much of her life fighting not only for the land rights of Aboriginal Australians but also for the land itself. She famously campaigned for the conservation of the Great Barrier Reef against harmful oil drilling and also contributed to the founding of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, one of the earliest conservation efforts of its kind.

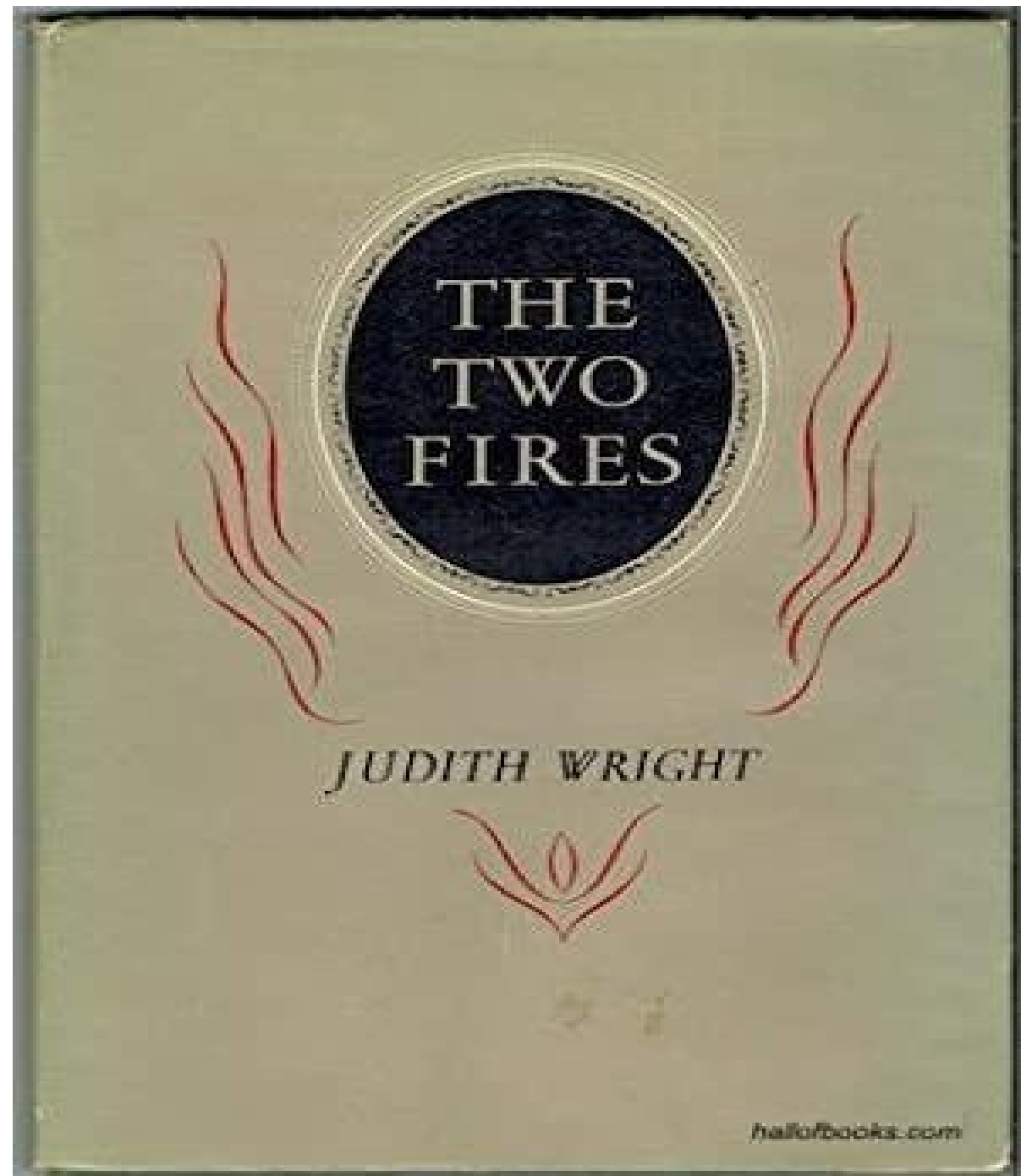
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though she wrote extensively about these issues in her poetry, Wright believed that art, unlike activism, didn't necessarily have the power to change the world. Instead, she argued that "the true function of art and culture is to interpret us to ourselves, and to relate us to the country and the society in which we live."

Indeed, "Request to a Year" seems to argue for this "function of art," as the speaker's great-great-grandmother isn't able to save her son by sketching him (her daughter is the one to save him, by holding out a walking stick).

What she is able to do is preserve the story of what happened, just as the speaker is now preserving her family history through this poem.

LITERARY CONTEXT



The Australian author Judith Wright (1915-2000) published over 50 books in her lifetime. In addition to her work as a poet, she's also known for her short stories, literary criticism, and activism around environmentalism and Aboriginal land rights. Her poetry often explores the tensions between humanity and the natural world and between Australian settlers and indigenous cultures. Wright included "Request to a Year" in her ninth poetry collection, *The Two Fires*, published in 1955. The title of this collection refers to the twin bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the American government during WWII.

Many have come to identify the "two fires" as Wright's two greatest passions, art and activism, as well. Wright's literary influences included the modernist poets T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and W.B. Yeats. Wright's own writing, however, doesn't lean into the more formal experimentation that was popular in the first half of the 20th century.