

'Afakasi Chameleon

by Selina Tusitala Marsh

School Journal
Level 4, May 2015
Year 8



Overview

Selina Tusitala Marsh is a well-known performance poet with a particular interest in rhythm and how a poem sounds. She was commissioned to write this poem to accompany Sisilia Eteuati's story "Mata i Pusi" in this Journal. One line of the poem makes a direct link with that story: "You can't divide mata-i-pusi: the eyes of a cat". Ideally, students should read the story before reading the poem.

The poem touches on the idea of family and family trees but goes a lot wider to embrace the idea of mixed genealogy and ethnicity. Many children in New Zealand have more than one ethnicity, and the poem uses the chameleon metaphor of adaptability to suggest reasons for celebrating being "half-caste".

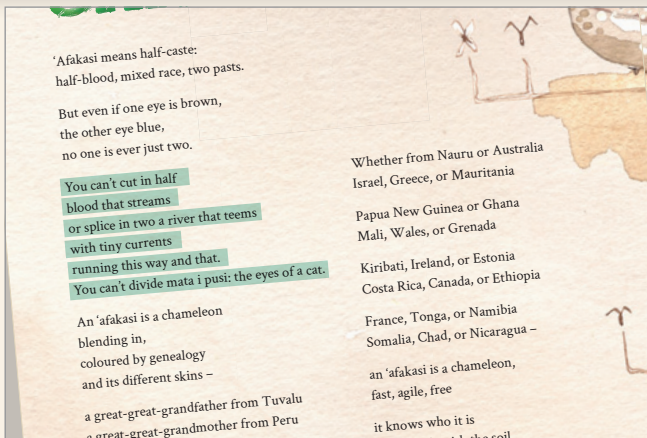
You may wish to show your students Selina Tusitala Marsh's online video "Fast Talking Pt" and Joshua Iosefa's inspiring speech "Brown Brother".

This poem:

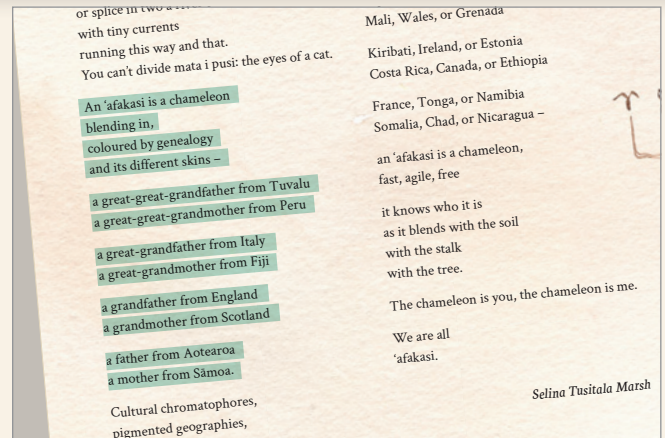
- allows many students to identify with the key idea of having mixed ancestry
- uses the analogy of the chameleon in two different ways
- includes themes of inclusion and difference
- provides an opportunity to explore the issue of mixed races and identity.

Texts related by theme "Mata i Pusi" SJ L4 May 2015 | "King Street Bridge" SJ L4 Oct 2013

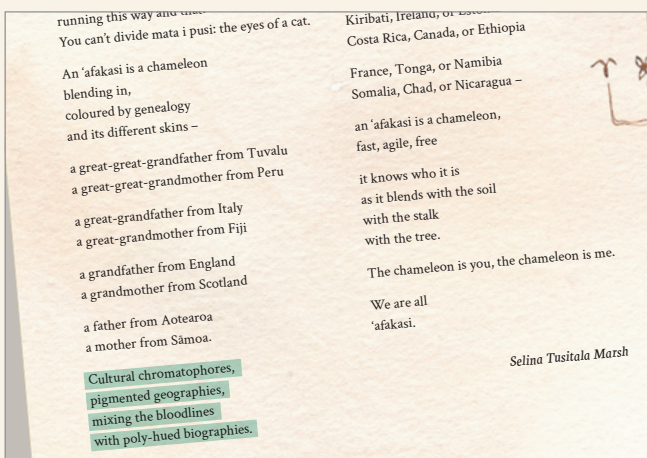
Text characteristics from the year 8 reading standard



complex layers of meaning, and/or information that is irrelevant to the identified purpose for reading (that is, competing information), requiring students to infer meanings or make judgments



sentences that vary in length, including long, complex sentences that contain a lot of information



words and phrases with multiple meanings that require students to know and use effective word-solving strategies to retain their focus on meaning



metaphor, analogy, and connotative language that is open to interpretation

Reading standard: by the end of year 8

Possible curriculum contexts

SOCIAL SCIENCES (Social Studies)

Level 4 – Understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and that this has consequences for people.

ENGLISH (Reading)

Level 4 – Language features: Show an increasing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.

ENGLISH (Writing)

Level 4 – Language features: Use a range of language features appropriately, showing an increasing understanding of their effects.

Possible reading purposes

- To enjoy the sounds of a poem by reading it aloud, and in the head, and by listening to it being read
- To think critically about the author's message and how it is conveyed
- To evaluate the writer's particular style and choice of topic and presentation
- To integrate the theme and ideas in "Mata i Pusi" with the ideas and themes of "Afakasi Chameleon".

Possible writing purposes

- To use the theme as a model for your own writing
- To write your own poem about all the ancestors, places, and culture that make you "you"
- To try using a range of language features to convey your ideas
- To write your whakapapa.



Text and language challenges

VOCABULARY

- Possibly unfamiliar words and phrases, including "half-caste", "splice", "teems", "chameleon", "genealogy", "chromatophores", "pigmented", "poly-hued", "agile"
- The (often negative) connotations of the terms "half-caste", "half-blood", and "mixed race"
- The many place names, some of which will be unfamiliar to most students
- The generation by generation extensions of "mother" and "father" by the addition of "grand" and "great"
- The different ways of expressing skin colour: "chromatophores", "pigmented", "poly-hued"
- The unusual juxtapositions of words to convey the concept of mixed ethnicity: "cultural chromatophores", "pigmented geographies", and "poly-hued biographies"
- Words with more than one meaning, including "streams", "currents", "skins", "fast", "stalk", which can be problematic for English language learners. (Check that students understand the meaning in this context.)

Possible supporting strategies

Some of these may be more useful before reading, but they can be used at any time in response to students' needs.

- The out-dated term "half-caste" is considered unacceptable today, but most students will be familiar with it and its negative connotations. Discuss why the term may be used and why it may be offensive.
- List and explore each of the pairs of words used to describe mixed race. Prompt students to consider why Marsh uses these combinations and how they help convey the many variations of skin colour.
- Note that a chromatophore is a special kind of cell found in animals like chameleons to control the colour of the skin. The Greek root "chrom" means colour and "phoros" means bearing or carrying. The Greek root "poly" means many. You could use a disappearing definition to support the meaning of chromatophore, which is central to understanding the poem's theme. (Provide the definition on the whiteboard and have the students read it. Then rub out the words one by one and have the students reread the definition each time a word is deleted. The students have to provide the missing words as they read.)
- [ESOL Online](#) has information on disappearing definitions and a variety of other strategies to support vocabulary development.

SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE REQUIRED

- Familiarity with poetic structures and language
- Familiarity (personal or otherwise) of the idea of being of mixed race or genealogy and the effect this can have on skin colour
- Some knowledge of the way people of mixed genealogy can be treated as "less than"
- Knowledge of the chameleon, a kind of lizard that can change the colour of its skin as a way of adapting to its surroundings

Possible supporting strategies

- If necessary, show images and videos of chameleons that show how their skin colour can change.
- After one or more readings (or listenings), prompt the students to identify the connections they can make with the poem.
- Many students will know their grandparents, and some may have or know about great-grandparents and possibly great-great-grandparents. You could list these titles and show how a family tree expands as we go backwards (from one person, to two parents, four grandparents, and so on).
- Although it is not essential for making meaning, you may wish to provide time for students to find all the places mentioned in the poem.

TEXT FEATURES AND STRUCTURE

- A poem in a large number of stanzas of varying lengths
- The irregular use of rhyme
- The use of rhyme, line length, punctuation, and syllables to create rhythm when the poem is read aloud
- Varying grammatical structures, including adjectival and adverbial phrases: "a river that teems with tiny currents running this way and that", "cultural chromatophores", "pigmented geographies", "poly-hued biographies"
- The connections made within the text, with the related story "Mata i Pusi", and with ideas and concepts beyond the text
- The chameleon metaphor or analogy, used in different ways throughout the poem.

Possible supporting strategies

- Prompt the students to recall the features they expect to find in poetry and how they can distinguish a poem from a prose text. They could record these on a matrix.
- Use the matrix to identify poetic devices in this poem. Add any that the students did not identify earlier. Discuss the devices. The same matrix could be used to provide devices they might include in their own writing.
- Support students, if necessary, to follow the poem's pattern, using the line breaks, the punctuation, and the stanzas to support reading it aloud.
- Have students read the poem aloud, trying out different ways of showing the rhythm.
- Discuss the ways metaphors and analogies can be used to carry an idea, and prompt the students to identify the two ways the chameleon is used here. It may be helpful for English language learners to draw the meaning of the image.



Instructional focus – Reading

Social Sciences (Level 4 – Social Studies: Understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and that this has consequences for people.)

English (Level 4 – Language features: Show an increasing understanding of how language features are used for effect within and across texts.)

First reading

- If possible, show students the video of the poet performing “Fast Talking Pi” before introducing them to the poem.
- Explain that the poet is also a performance artist, and that when she reads her poems aloud on stage, it sounds a lot like rap or hip hop.
- Direct the students to read the first two lines and to discuss them as a group. *Did you know the term “Afakasi”? Did you know the terms “half-caste”, “half-blood”, or “mixed race”? What do those terms mean to you? Consider the title: what is the special trick that chameleons can do? How might that be similar to the meanings of these terms in the first two lines? What are the connotations of these terms? Have you heard these terms used as ways to put people down because of their colour?*
- Direct the students to read the poem to themselves silently, then to start reading all, or parts of it, aloud in pairs or small groups. *Experiment with different ways of developing a rhythm as you read. Don't worry about words you don't know, just try to get a groove going. Use the words, punctuation, and line breaks to help you work out places to pause, to run lines together, or to repeat a beat.*

If the students struggle with this text

- To strengthen their understanding of the rhythm and sound of the poem, give students multiple opportunities to hear the poem read in a variety of ways while following along. Don't ask students who are struggling to read aloud unless they feel very comfortable with the unfamiliar words and how to read them.
- The ninth stanza will challenge many students; however, encourage them to use knowledge of structure (adjectives describing a noun) and knowledge of words including root words, prefixes, and suffixes to work out possible meanings of “cultural chromatophores”, “pigmented geographies”, and “poly-hued biographies”. It may be helpful for students to check their approximations in a dictionary or thesaurus.
- Remind the students of the girl's struggle with her identity in “Mata i Pusi” and prompt them to make links between the story and the poem as they read.
- The stress, intonation, pitch, rhythm, speed, and pronunciation of English can be areas of difficulty for English language learners. Most would benefit from listening to repeated readings of the poem before reading it aloud themselves. Group choral readings and repetition can be supportive strategies along with explicit feedback on their oral reading attempts. It can be helpful (and enjoyable) for some students to record themselves reading the poem aloud and then listen to the results.

Subsequent readings

The teacher

Ask questions to help students identify and evaluate the analogies used in the poem.

- *How is the writer using the image of a river in the third stanza?*
- *What does she mean by “coloured by genealogy” in the fourth stanza?*
- *How does this link to the chameleon image in that stanza?*
- *How does she make that clear in the following four stanzas?*

The teacher

If you have not done so already, explain the meaning of “chromatophores”, using the chameleon as an example. Direct the students to reread the “Cultural chromatophores” stanza.

- *Tap or clap the syllables as you say these lines: how do the words affect the rhythm?*
- *What is the impact of so many multisyllabic words in a single sentence?*
- *What word knowledge did you use to work out how to say them?*
- *How does the idea “poly-hued biographies” link with the lists of countries in the next stanzas?*

The teacher

Prompt the students to identify the writer's theme or message by linking the images she uses throughout the poem.

- *Why has the writer used the chameleon metaphor?*
- *Apart from the characteristic of changing colours, what is it about chameleons that the writer sees as features to celebrate?*
- *Why does she say “We are all/afakasi”? What is her message?*
- *What impact has the poem had on you? Discuss your opinions with the group.*

METACOGNITION

- How do your own experiences help you understand a writer's message? If you don't have similar experiences, how do you connect with the ideas to identify the message?
- What did you learn or understand from the poem that you didn't know already?
- How does reading a poem aloud or listening to it help you know what the writer wants to express?

The students:

- make connections between the text and their own knowledge to infer that the poem explores the concept of “Afakasi” by making comparisons with a chameleon (which has more than one colour), a river of blood (where several “currents” appear as one), and a cat (They could draw these images for additional support.)
- make connections between the text and their own knowledge of how features such as the colour of eyes, hair, and skin are passed down through generations to infer that, in many families, these features change as the genes of people from different cultures and countries combine over time
- make connections between the text, the story “Mata i Pusi”, and their own understanding of genealogy as they evaluate and synthesise ideas about being “of mixed blood”.

The students:

- use their knowledge of word-solving strategies to identify syllables and familiar chunks or roots and pronounce the words correctly
- notice and identify the way the words change the beat or rhythm of the poem.

The students:

- locate, evaluate, and synthesise information and ideas in the poem, together with their own knowledge of inheritance, to appreciate the writer's message that “We are all/afakasi”
- consider and share their opinions of the poem and the impact it had on them, for example, on how people with “mixed blood” might feel.

GIVE FEEDBACK

- *I noticed you read the poem together a few times to understand the rhythm. You commented on the way the changes in the rhythm matched the writer's focus on the way we are all different and all the same. Rereading several times really helped you to notice this particular aspect of the writing.*
- *The connections you made to your family's genealogy was a useful way of connecting with the message in the poem.*



Reading standard: by the end of year 8



The Literacy Learning Progressions



Assessment Resource Banks

Instructional focus – Writing

Social Sciences

(Level 4 – Social Studies: Understand how people pass on and sustain culture and heritage for different reasons and that this

has consequences for people.

English

(Level 4 – Language features: Use a range of language features appropriately, showing an increasing understanding of their effects.)

Text excerpts from “Afakasi Chameleon”	Examples of text characteristics	Teacher (possible deliberate acts of teaching)
<p>You can't cut in half blood that streams or splice in two a river that teems with tiny currents running this way and that. You can't divide mata i pusi: the eyes of a cat.</p> <p>a great-great grandfather from Tuvalu a great-great grandmother from Peru</p> <p>a great-grandfather from Italy a great-grandmother from Fiji</p> <p>a grandfather from England a grandmother from Scotland</p> <p>a father from Aotearoa a mother from Sāmoa.</p>	<p>RHYME AND RHYTHM</p> <p><i>Writers can choose whether or not to use rhyme, but even those who use it, don't always put rhyme in the places you might expect.</i></p> <p><i>The rhythm of a poem is usually determined by the placement of stressed syllables, the punctuation, and the line breaks.</i></p> <p><i>These features work together to “show” the reader how to give a poem the sound the writer intends.</i></p>	<p>Model how you identify the way Selina Tusitala Marsh achieves impact in this extract. If appropriate, refer to the matrix created in the Instructional focus – Reading section.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">As I read this stanza aloud, I found myself using the stressed syllables (can't; half; blood, streams, two ...) and the rhymes (can't/half; streams/teems; that/cat) to show me how to make it sound. Tapping out the rhythm helped me too.The punctuation and line breaks show me where each separate idea starts and ends.The rhythms and line breaks cut across each other in places, for example, I had to keep the pace up between “teems” and the next two lines to make the sentence work. This makes the second clause flow like a river. She's a very clever writer! <p>Also draw the students' attention to the repeated structure from stanza five to eight.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">What is the impact of this repeated structure?Why did the writer use it?How might you use repeated structures in your poem to achieve a similar effect? <p>Support students to identify the structures or language features they could use as they write a poem.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Who do you want to read your poem? What kinds of poetry or music do they enjoy? Will you try to reflect these as you write?How do you want your ideas to “sound” when your poem is read aloud?What ideas or details will you emphasise? How will you do this? <p>Remind students to constantly try out sounds by reading their work aloud.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Try changing the structures, the words, and the images.Ask a partner to give you feedback and make the changes that will work best to get your ideas across to your audience.
<p>Cultural chromatophores, pigmented geographies, mixing the bloodlines with poly-hued biographies.</p>	<p>RICH LANGUAGE</p> <p><i>There are always several ways to express one idea. Writers explore language to give readers a rich reading experience that will have a powerful impact. They may draw on technical, scientific, literary, and everyday vocabularies to surprise readers into seeing an idea in a new way.</i></p>	<p>Ask students to share a section of their writing with a partner.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Explain the impact you want the section to have, then help each other to find words that could give a more precise meaning or a bigger emotional impact.What resources can you use to find more interesting words?If you use unusual words, what response or impact will you achieve?
<p>The chameleon is you, the chameleon is me.</p> <p>We are all 'afakasi.</p>	<p>MESSAGE</p> <p>Poems are a compact way of expressing an idea or a message. Sometimes that message is implicit; sometimes writers make the message very explicit. Either way, writers consider the impact they want to have on their readers.</p>	<p>Prompt students to consider how well they have conveyed their idea or message.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">What kind of journey have you taken your readers on?Do you want readers to have to work out your message, or will you give it to them directly? Are you able to do both?Are there times when you might want to show AND tell for a particular effect?Will readers feel satisfied with the way you've ended your writing? <p>GIVE FEEDBACK</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">You've used a style that reminds me of nursery rhymes. It fits the theme of the vulnerability of children very well.The dramatic change in the middle made me stop and change my ideas. The powerful words you chose had just the impact you wanted. All that research with the dictionary and thesaurus worked out well.The feedback your partner gave you was good, but I noticed you weighed it up then decided to stay with your own ideas. Feedback is very useful, but it's also important to make sure your own voice comes through.
<p>METACOGNITION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Which comes first, the ideas you want to convey or the way you want to convey them? Is there a right or wrong way to do this?Tell me about some of the decisions you made, before, during, and after reading.How did your changes improve the writing?		<p>Writing standard: by the end of year 8</p> <p>The Literacy Learning Progressions</p>