

LOOKING TO WRITE GRADES 6-12

Writing Poems Inspired by Du Fu

INTRODUCTION

Throughout Chinese history, three art forms have been closely intertwined: painting, calligraphy, and poetry. All three use the same tool: the brush. Du Fu, also called Tu Fu, was a major Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty. He was born in the year 712 in Gongxian, China. His poetry was known for its simplicity and realistic detail, and was celebrated for its range of moods and subject matter. There is often an underlying sadness to his work—a sense of passed ancestors, seasons changing, or old mythical legends.

The painting seen here is by the Chinese artist Wang Chen and is an example of literati painting. In this genre, painting, calligraphy, and poetry harmoniously coexist on the picture plane. The artist's aim was not to depict a landscape realistically, but rather to express an idea, mood, or feeling about a place, such as serenity. That is why these paintings are often created in black and white, or with only small touches of color. In fact, there are even literati paintings with Du Fu's poems inscribed on them.

Created in 1784—almost 1,000 years after Du Fu—Chen's work is titled *Fisherman in Landscape*. The poem on the scroll, also written by Chen, reads:

*Rains wash the mountains clean;
Cinnabar maple leaves float on the waters.
What place does the man of superior
understanding seek?*



READ

Read the following poem by Du Fu. Then take a moment to reflect on the mood of the poem.

To a Friend Bound East

The old fort brims with yellow leaves...
You insist upon forsaking this place where you have lived.
A high wind blows at Hanyang Ferry
And sunrise lights the summit of Yingmen...
Who will be left for me along the upper Yangzi
After your solitary skiff has entered the end of the sky?
I ask you over and over when we shall meet again,
While we soften with wine cups this ache of farewell.

Du Fu

ACTIVITY

In the spirit of this Chinese master poet, **write a poem** that looks back on a golden time. Create an image of a remembered place of beauty and harmony. Perhaps you will think of a cherished friend, or family member now gone, or a happy moment made sad by the thought that such joy is fleeting.

Use the imagery of nature and the seasons to set a mood. If desired, sketch out an image that conveys this mood. You could look at Wang Chen's painting as inspiration or even imagine a new landscape in your mind. Establish a sense of time and place. Use resonant images such as rivers, sunsets, mountains, clouds, birds, and the sea. Think of the landscape of dreams and memory. You might want to write as though you are addressing an old friend or family member. Try to capture in your poem the bittersweet quality of a single moment when something was lost or remembered or discovered. The tone can be nostalgic or subdued. Your poem need not rhyme and may be as short as 6 or 8 lines.

EXAMPLE

Below is a model based on Du Fu's poem:

The garden fills with fallen petals...
You must move on from the home where you have grown
A soft breeze stirs the jasmine
And countless stars light the cloudless skies above...
Who will remind me of the wish behind each star
After you have made your independent journey?
I ask myself when will we sit like this again
And soften the ache of farewell with the balm of memory.