

LITERATURE-IN-ENGLISH

SS 1

WEEK 8

AFRICAN POETRY: 'ONCE UPON A TIME' BY GABRIEL OKARA

POEM

Once Upon A Time by Gabriel Imomotimi Okara

Once upon a time, son,
they used to laugh with their hearts
and laugh with their eyes:
but now they only laugh with their teeth,
while their ice-block-cold eyes
search behind my shadow.

There was a time indeed
they used to shake hands with their hearts:
but that's gone, son.
Now they shake hands without their hearts
while their left hands search
my empty pockets.

'Feel at home!' 'Come again':
they say, and when I come
again and feel
at home, once, twice,
there will be no thrice-
for then I find doors shut on me.

So I have learned many things, son.

I have learned to wear many faces
like dresses – homeface,
officeface, streetface, hostface,
cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles
like a fixed portrait smile.

And I have learned too
to laugh with only teeth
and shake hands without my heart.
I have also learned to say, 'Goodbye',
when I mean 'Good riddance':
to say 'Glad to meet you',
without being glad; and to say 'It's been
nice talking to you', after being bored.

But believe me, son.
I want to be what used to be
when was like you. I want
to unclean all these muting things.
Most of all, I want to relearn
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
shows only teeth like a snake's bare fangs!

So show me, son.
how to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
once upon a time when I was like you.

ANALYSIS

The poem **ONCE UPON A TIME** was written by Gabriel Okara, a Nigerian poet. It was written in the backdrop of Nigeria's independence from Britain. The poet seems to be shocked by the change of lifestyle, values, morals and the total change in the world view in the 'new, independent country'. He seems to be mourning for the passing away of a way of life. Though the country is politically independent, it seems to be still influenced by the British culture the poet remembers the way people used to behave and interact with each other. How the people used to do things with their hearts and soul.

The poem describes what happens when a traditional African culture and civilization meets with the western culture. With his nostalgic vision, the poet recalls the golden times of the past. The purpose of the poem is to outline the behaviour and personality of the people at the moment. It also makes an attempt to bring back the personality of the people who used to do things with emotion and heart.

The poem is a conversation between a father and his son. The son does things with emotions and father wants to forget his fake personality and re-learn and recreate his personality by following the values of the past. He asks his son to express true love and to have real concern for others.

Gabriel Okara's **ONCE UPON A TIME** is about the artificial relationship and manners prevailing in the present world. According to the poet, past is better than present. Because there was love, sincerity and faithfulness in the past. Now in the present, everything has changed. Hence the poet wants to relive the past.

Once upon a time, the people used to laugh with their hearts and eyes. That is, there was genuineness in what they said and did. But in the present, there is only outward 'teeth laugh without understanding the speaker's real self'. The eyes are described as 'ice block cold'. The people have become money minded and they develop their relationships only with the rich. Even when shaking hands with others they are very artificial and mechanical.

Guests are no longer welcome these days. They are given a warm reception only once. If they visit their friends or relatives thrice or more number of days, the doors are shut on them.

In this materialistic and artificial world, the poet has learnt many things especially wearing many faces like putting on many dresses, one has to have 'home face', 'office 'face', 'cocktail face' and so on. All are fixed just like the portrait smile. As this is the way of the world, the poet/speaker has also learnt laughter with teeth; the art of saying 'good bye' when he means 'good riddance', 'Glad to meet you' when he is not glad; and 'nice talking to you' when bored..!!

The poet wants his son to imbibe the exemplary values of the past. Towards the end of the poem the poet appeals to his son to show him how to smile whole heartedly. His desire to revisit the past is nothing but a yearning for the innocence, faithfulness and sincerity.

THEMES IN ONCE UPON A TIME

The poet incorporates the themes of cultural crisis, selfishness, loss of innocence, and real emotion versus fake expression in the poem. The main theme of this poem is the cultural crisis because it is an integral part of the poem.

TONE OF THE POEM

The tone of the poem is nostalgic. The identity is recalling how things used to be the point at which he was youthful and blameless, similar to his child. The ballad features the blame and hatred an African man feels for himself to acknowledge the way of life of the westerners.

EFFECT OF THE PHRASE 'ONCE UPON A TIME

By the phrase '**Once upon a time**', the poet indicates that he is talking about something that happened a long time ago. The phrase 'Once upon a time' also makes the beginning of the poem sounds like the poet is telling his son a story.

THE FATHER AND THE SON IN THE POEM

The father and the son in the poem represent two different periods of time. The father represents old times, values, traditional orthodox times, the son represents the modern, contemporary, present times.

THE PLOT OF 'ONCE UPON A TIME'

The poem is a conversation between a father and his son where the son does things with emotion and the father wants to forget his fake personality and relearn and create real personalities from his son. And he is asking the son to show him how to express true love and show real personality to others.

HOME WORK

1. Summarise the analysis above in **FIVE (5)** sentences.
2. Explain in detail the themes of **ONCE UPON A TIME**.