

ASM TUITION ACADEMY

EMIGREE (POWER AND CONFLICT)

The Émigrée (1993)

There once was a country... I left it as a child
but my memory of it is sunlight-clear
for it seems I never saw it in that November
which, I am told, comes to the mildest city.
The worst news I receive of it cannot break
my original view, the bright, filled paperweight.
It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants,
but I am branded by an impression of sunlight.

The white streets of that city, the graceful slopes
glow even clearer as time rolls its tanks
and the frontiers rise between us, close like waves.
That child's vocabulary I carried here
like a hollow doll, opens and spills a grammar.
Soon I shall have every coloured molecule of it.
It may by now be a lie, banned by the state
but I can't get it off my tongue. It tastes of sunlight.

I have no passport, there's no way back at all
but my city comes to me in its own white plane.
It lies down in front of me, docile as paper;
I comb its hair and love its shining eyes.
My city takes me dancing through the city
of walls. They accuse me of absence, they circle me.
They accuse me of being dark in their free city.
My city hides behind me. They mutter death,
and my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight

"Emigree," a poem from the Power and Conflict cluster. Written by Carol Rumens, "Emigree" explores the emotional and psychological impact of displacement, reflecting on the speaker's nostalgic memories of their homeland contrasted with the harsh reality of their present situation.

Context: The poem was written in the context of the aftermath of World War II and the subsequent wave of migration and displacement that marked this period. The speaker is an emigrant who has left their homeland, and the poem offers a poignant exploration of the emotional consequences of such a drastic change.

Themes:

1. **Memory and Nostalgia:**

- The central theme revolves around memory and nostalgia. The speaker reflects on the homeland they left behind, describing it as "my city of memories." This theme highlights the emotional weight of memories and the persistent impact of one's roots on their identity.

2. **Loss and Displacement:**

- The poem vividly captures the sense of loss and displacement experienced by the emigrant. The contrast between the remembered city and the harsh reality of the new place is stark, emphasizing the profound disruption caused by forced migration.

3. **Power of the Mind:**

- The poem explores the power of the mind to preserve memories and create a mental sanctuary. The speaker finds solace in their memories, constructing an idealized version of their homeland. This theme underscores the resilience of the human spirit in coping with adversity.

Structure:

1. **Free Verse:**

- "Emigree" is written in free verse, lacking a strict rhyme or meter. This form reflects the speaker's stream of consciousness and the organic flow of their thoughts. It also contributes to the authenticity of the emotional expression.

2. **First Person Perspective:**

- The use of the first-person perspective allows readers to engage intimately with the speaker's emotions. It creates a personal connection, emphasizing the individual experience of displacement and the subjective nature of memory.

3. **Contrast and Imagery:**

- The poem employs vivid imagery and stark contrasts to convey the emotional impact of displacement. The remembered city is portrayed as a place of beauty and safety, while the new city is depicted as "branded by an impression of sunlight." This sharp dichotomy enhances the emotional intensity of the poem.

In my opinion, "Emigree" is a powerful exploration of the emotional complexities associated with leaving one's homeland. The evocative language and poignant themes make it a compelling piece that resonates with readers, inviting reflection on the universal themes of identity, memory, and the enduring impact of place.

Grammatical Techniques:

1. **Enjambment:**

- The poem utilizes enjambment, where sentences and phrases continue beyond the end of the line. This creates a flowing and continuous rhythm, mirroring the stream of consciousness of the speaker. For example, the lines "It tastes of sunlight. It is carefully / civilised with gleaming rails" demonstrate this technique.

2. Use of Pronouns:

- Pronouns play a crucial role in conveying the speaker's emotions and perspectives. The use of first-person pronouns like "my" and "I" personalizes the experience, allowing readers to connect with the speaker's individual journey and emotions.

3. Repetition:

- Repetition is employed for emphasis, as seen in the repetition of "my city" and "my city of memories." This repetition not only emphasizes the deep connection the speaker feels but also underscores the persistent nature of memory.

Symbolism:

1. The city:

- The city serves as a powerful symbol throughout the poem. It represents the speaker's homeland, memories, and identity. The contrast between the remembered city and the new city symbolizes the emotional and cultural displacement experienced by the emigrant.

2. Sunlight:

- Sunlight is a recurring symbol that carries both positive and negative connotations. In the remembered city, sunlight is associated with warmth, beauty, and familiarity. In the new city, it is "branded," suggesting a harsh, indelible mark. This duality reflects the complexity of the speaker's emotions.

Imagery:

1. Visual Imagery:

- The poem abounds in visual imagery, creating vivid mental pictures for the readers. Examples include "the white streets of that city," "the bright, filled paperweight," and "the darkened, curved glass." These images contribute to the emotional impact of the poem.

2. Tactile Imagery:

- There is a strong use of tactile imagery, appealing to the sense of touch. Phrases like "the soft / luggage like a sponge" evoke a tangible and sensory experience, enhancing the reader's connection to the speaker's journey.

In my opinion, the grammatical techniques, symbolism, and imagery in "Emigree" work harmoniously to convey the profound emotions associated with displacement. The careful use of language and symbolism allows readers to immerse themselves in the speaker's experience, making the poem a rich and evocative exploration of memory, identity, and the impact of change.

COMPARISON WITH,

1-POPPIES

2-CHECKING OUT OF MY HISTORY

When comparing "**Poppies**" by Jane Weir, "**Checking Out Me History**" by John Agard, and "**The Émigrée**" by Carol Rumens, we explore themes of **identity**, **memory**, and **conflict**. Each poem addresses these themes differently, but there are key similarities and contrasts in how they portray personal experiences and the impact of broader societal forces.

1. Themes:

- "**Poppies**":
 - The theme of **loss and conflict** is central. The poem focuses on a mother's emotional response to her son going off to war, reflecting on the personal cost of conflict. The poem explores how war invades personal life and affects those left behind, particularly focusing on grief, memory, and the impact of separation.
- "**Checking Out Me History**":
 - The theme of **identity** is central, particularly how history and education shape identity. Agard critiques the Eurocentric version of history taught in schools, which excludes important figures from African, Caribbean, and other non-European heritages. The poem is about reclaiming one's personal and cultural identity by acknowledging a broader, more inclusive historical narrative.
- "**The Émigrée**":
 - **Memory and exile** are key themes. The speaker reflects on a homeland they've left behind, focusing on the contrast between their idealized memories and the political realities of the place they once knew. The poem deals with **displacement** and the struggle to maintain identity in the face of change and exile.

2. Tone:

- "**Poppies**":
 - The tone is **tender and melancholic**, with an undercurrent of grief and quiet resilience. The speaker reflects on the intimate moments with her son before he leaves, and the poem is filled with a sense of loss and longing.
- "**Checking Out Me History**":
 - The tone is **defiant and assertive**, as Agard challenges the dominant narrative and pushes for recognition of his own heritage. The use of non-standard English and Caribbean Creole adds to the poem's bold and rebellious tone, emphasizing a reclamation of identity.
- "**The Émigrée**":
 - The tone is **nostalgic and reflective** but also tinged with sadness and longing. While the speaker cherishes their memories of the homeland, there is also a recognition that those memories may not match reality anymore, creating a complex emotional landscape of loss and displacement.

3. Structure and Form:

- "**Poppies**":

- Written in free verse, the structure reflects the **fluidity of memory and emotion**. The lack of a strict form allows the speaker's thoughts to shift between past and present seamlessly, which mirrors the mother's grief and the overwhelming emotions tied to her son's departure.
- **"Checking Out Me History"**:
 - Agard alternates between sections that highlight the Eurocentric history he was taught and sections that celebrate important figures from non-European backgrounds. The poem's irregular structure and alternating stanzas emphasize the contrast between these two narratives and reflect the **disruption of traditional history** to make space for a more inclusive story.
- **"The Émigrée"**:
 - Written in free verse with irregular stanza lengths, the poem reflects the **fluid and fragmented nature of memory**. The flexible form mirrors the speaker's disjointed relationship with their past and their sense of displacement in the present.

4. Portrayal of Identity:

- **"Poppies"**:
 - The speaker's identity is tied to her role as a mother. Her son's departure to war reshapes her sense of self, as she now grapples with his absence and the grief of separation. Her motherhood is depicted as both an emotional anchor and a source of vulnerability in the face of war.
- **"Checking Out Me History"**:
 - Agard's poem is about reclaiming a sense of identity through an **inclusive history**. He critiques the way history has been taught, which excludes non-European figures, and highlights how this impacts his understanding of himself. Agard uses history as a tool to rebuild and affirm his cultural and personal identity.
- **"The Émigrée"**:
 - The speaker's identity is tied to their homeland, though it is now inaccessible. The poem explores the tension between the speaker's idealized memories of their country and the political reality that has corrupted it. **Exile** and displacement have complicated the speaker's sense of self, and their identity is caught between the past and the present.

5. Imagery and Language:

- **"Poppies"**:
 - The poem is filled with tactile, intimate imagery, such as the mother smoothing down her son's collar or the sensory detail of releasing "a songbird from its cage." These images create a deep emotional connection and emphasize the personal, emotional cost of war. There are also references to poppies, symbolizing both remembrance and death.
- **"Checking Out Me History"**:
 - Agard uses vibrant, contrasting imagery to highlight the figures from non-European history, such as "Toussaint L'Ouverture" being described as a "beacon." He juxtaposes these celebratory images with more trivial, childlike references from European history, such as "Dick Whittington and his cat," to emphasize the disparity in how history is taught.

- **"The Émigrée":**
 - Rumens uses **light imagery** throughout the poem, with the city from the speaker's memory often bathed in sunlight ("I am branded by an impression of sunlight"). This light contrasts with the darker political realities of the present, where the city is controlled by "tyrants." The imagery reflects the tension between memory and reality, hope and loss.

6. Attitudes to Power and Control:

- **"Poppies":**
 - Power is depicted through the **impact of war** and its ability to separate families and change lives. While the poem does not directly critique the political powers that create conflict, it focuses on the emotional fallout for individuals, particularly those left behind.
- **"Checking Out Me History":**
 - Agard directly challenges the power structures of **colonialism and the education system** that have shaped a Eurocentric version of history. His poem seeks to reclaim power by asserting the importance of marginalized historical figures and critiquing the selective nature of historical narratives.
- **"The Émigrée":**
 - Power in this poem is more subtly addressed, focusing on how political forces have changed the speaker's homeland. The **"tyrants"** that now control the city are symbols of political oppression, but the speaker's personal memories resist this control. There is also a sense that the speaker feels oppressed in their new country, where they are watched and treated as an outsider.

7. Message:

- **"Poppies":**
 - The poem conveys the emotional cost of war, particularly for those left behind. It emphasizes how conflict extends beyond the battlefield and impacts families and relationships, highlighting the quiet, personal grief that accompanies national tragedy.
- **"Checking Out Me History":**
 - Agard's message is one of **cultural empowerment**. He critiques the exclusion of black and Caribbean figures from history and calls for a more inclusive approach to education and history. The poem is a call to reclaim and celebrate one's own heritage.
- **"The Émigrée":**
 - Rumens' poem explores how memory and identity are intertwined, particularly in the context of exile. The message is that while political forces may change a homeland, personal memories remain resilient and integral to one's identity, even if they are idealized or disconnected from reality.

Conclusion:

- **"Poppies"** focuses on the emotional impact of war on families, particularly through the lens of a mother's grief, loss, and memory.
- **"Checking Out Me History"** challenges the exclusion of marginalized histories and seeks to reclaim cultural identity through a more inclusive understanding of the past.

- **"The Émigrée"** explores memory and identity in the context of exile, reflecting on the tension between idealized personal memories and the harsh political realities of a changed homeland.

Each poem deals with a **personal identity shaped by external forces**, whether it's war, colonialism, or political displacement. However, **"Poppies"** deals more with personal grief and loss, **"Checking Out Me History"** focuses on cultural and historical reclamation, and **"The Émigrée"** explores exile and the emotional complexities of holding onto an idealized past.

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