

II MA ENGLISH 18PEL9 UNIT – I

TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BY WOLE SOYINKA.

Wole Soyinka is Nigerian playwright, novelist, critic and the first African writer to get the Nobel Prize award for Literature in 1986. In this poem, the poet describes a telephone conversation between a black man and a white woman. The black man is searching for an apartment to live in and is inquiring the lady for any availability. At the beginning of the poem, the man “confesses” that he is an African. He confesses the colour of his skin as if he had done a crime. After this, the poet uses irony and sarcasm to describe their conversation. All of these discrepancies between what appears to be and what really has created a sense of verbal irony that helps the poem display the ridiculousness of racism.

“Nothing remained but self-confession. ‘Madam,’ I warned, ‘I hate a wasted journey-I am African.’”

The African man confesses to the landlady that he is black. This was the first use of irony in the poem. He feels sorry about something that he was born with and had no control over. He says that he hates a “wasted journey” which indicates that he has been rejected before due to racial discrimination. The landlady asks with a sarcastic tone if he was light or very dark. A sense of anger rose inside the man and it has been portrayed by repeating the word red.

“Shamed by ill-mannered silence, surrender pushed dumbfounded to beg simplification. Considerate she was, varying the emphasis-“

He describes the landlady in nothing but positive terms. Her goodness is seemingly confirmed later on when the speaker says that she was "considerate" in rephrasing her question of his skin colour. These kind descriptions of the landlady were filled with verbal irony. After this the African uses nothing but irony and sarcasm in his speech as he describes himself.

““You mean- like plain or milk chocolate?’ Her assent was clinical, crushing in its light impersonality.”

In haste, the man said that he was “west African sepia”. The landlady suddenly realized that he was actually black. Again, she asked hinted a question about the colour of his skin. He told her that he was brunette; facially brunette, but the palm of his hand and soles of his feet was “peroxide blonde”. The African man was being very sarcastic about

the colour of his skin but the landlady could not accept the fact that he was black. When his sarcasm reached a peak, he sensed that the landlady was going to hang up on him. He suddenly stops and says, “‘Madam,’ I pleaded, ‘wouldn’t you rather see for yourself?’”

This poem uses a lot of irony and sarcasm. The poet mainly uses irony in three places. The first tone of irony is sensed when the man confesses that he is an African. When describing the lady, the poet uses a lot of sarcastic language. Irony is lastly used when the man describes himself to the woman. The last line of the poem also leaves a sense of mystery in the reader. Wole Soyinka brings out a great use of irony in this poem.

TELEPHONE CONVERSATION BY WOLE SOYINKA.

"Telephone Conversation" is an imagined conversation between an African man and a presumably white landlady with accommodations to rent.

The poem opens with the African speaker clarifying the essential information about the location, the cost, and similar business details. The landlady is initially described as being of "good-breeding," a standing that makes her questions about the color of the speaker's skin seem suddenly and dramatically out of place. Specifically, she wants to know if he is light or very dark skinned, a distinction that seems to carry particular weight within the racial atmosphere of the day.

From this pointed and clearly prejudicial question, the poem moves smoothly between the thoughts of the speaker as he considers the question as a political statement and the landlady's insistent repetition of the same questions or variations thereof. As the conversation unfolds, it becomes a painful accumulation of ironic miscommunication and blatant racism. The more the speaker tries to answer the questions, the deeper the exchange slips into irony as the speaker answers the woman with cool logic that clouds rather than clarifies the situation. At first comparing himself to chocolate, for instance, the speaker settles on describing himself as "West African sepia," a term he knows will further confuse his listener.

As the speaker's ironic tone takes hold of the conversation, he begins to describe various body parts, from his hair to the soles of his feet, in an effort to explain to her that he is, like all people, several different colours. The final lines of the poem carry a double-edged message. The first is clear: making a judgment about a person's character based solely on the colour of their skin is the key absurdity of racial prejudice. The second layer

of the closing lines underscore the meeting of absurdity with additional absurdity, an approach Soyinka often brings to his explorations of such situations, as the speaker invites the woman to "see" for herself all of the varied colours of the body parts he catalogues.

THE CITY PLANNERS - Margaret Atwood

5 Mark

Margaret Atwood is a Canadian author, poet, critic, essayist, feminist and social campaigner. Best known as a novelist, she is also an award-winning poetess. The poem addresses the effects of rapid urbanization and the monopoly of the planners.

The poet recalls her passing by the town on an August Sunday, noon, and she feels her saneness offended, going mad, at the sight of the dull buildings, at the sight of trees planted in proper lines, at the sight of the levelled grounds that seem to be complaining that her car door has a dent.

You cannot here people speaking here, no sound of a child dropping a glass here. All you can here is the sound of a mower that cuts and levels the grass here. Well, the driveways are safe to walk. There is no need of fear for accidents. All the roofs are evenly constructed, avoiding the sun with their slanting roofs.

Every house has a garage for vehicle and there is sickening smell of spilled oil, someone has painted the bricks red, and there is a coil of plastic hose.

When you stare for longer, you can see cracks appearing in the walls, and you can see the landscape through them, through the cracks that will soon develop, and there are signs of a disaster, of these buildings crumbling soon, like glaciers, hard to notice, hard to ignore.

The city planners have the evil faces of political murderers, and they are everywhere in this world, they are hidden from each other, each one lives in a hidden snow-storm, without proper planning they are planning, and draw wrong lines with precision, on a wall in the white vanishing air – on the thin air of the village areas to build there, of the snow that fills the villages.

10 Mark

Margaret Eleanor Atwood is a Canadian author, poet, critic, essayist, feminist and social campaigner. Best known as a novelist, she is also an award-winning poetess. In this

poem, she addresses the perfection, robotic, bland and uniform structure of the city as she takes a cruise through it on a relaxing Sunday weekend, something that she finds completely sickening.

Atwood describes the sights that meet her eye as she cruises along a residential complex on a bright August Sunday. She feels offended by the uniformity she sees and the fact that the people living in cities accept the uniform structures as their homes. She describes rows of houses surrounding landscapes that are all predetermined to look alike and she even personifies these structures by giving them the ability to scorn (to make fun of) a slight dent in her car door! She finds the level of uniformity very amusing but irritating at the same time.

Atwood finds it very ironic that unlike the homes in the olden days, she is unable to pick up any sounds or movements of people living in these structures. She strains her ears to try and hear a shout or the breaking of glass.

The only sound the poet picks up is that of a lawnmower that seems to be following the dictates of the planners by cutting through the grass in predetermine lines.

She says that the driveways of these residences are so neatly planned that they are guaranteed to prevent accidents or chaos because they are so uniform. Much to Atwood's disgust, the roofs of all these houses are inclined at the same angle to keep the hot sun away.

The poet notices that the only things that differentiate one house from the other are things like the smell of different oils in the garages, a sudden splash of paint which she compares to a bruise and other differentiating factors like the way the plastic hoses are coiled.

However Atwood believes that if one were to carefully stare beyond the windows, at the landscape that lies behind these 'homes', it is easy to see cracks in the structures. Metaphorically she refers to how the money spinning real estate dealers build for the sake of monetary gain, without thinking about the safety and security of the structures or the people residing in them.

She believes that someday in the near future the houses will capsize and disintegrate into vast seas of clay just like the polar glaciers that no one is noticing at the moment.

Atwood calls the city planners political conspirators. She calls them insane, their only interest being swindling people of hard earned money. She says that these people operate from and build on land that is not even surveyed for proper and legal real estate development. She says that they work independently and individually, and cut off from one another, thus living in their private worlds where they conspire and plan profitable investments.

Atwood believes that these political conspirators are constantly planning and identifying new suburbs that they can create in all directions, to make their money. She believes that they claim and reclaim landscapes that actually need to be preserved.

The poet reveals her disgust for the city planners who are constantly creating new suburbs and congesting the city in their crazy quest for power. Each one lives in a private world and the only intent is to give into their incessant need to profit from everything they lay their hands on.

Throughout the poem, she addresses the sickening sense of conformity that she finds in the city as well as the hidden hand behind all of this – the ‘evil’ politicians of this world, she says.

DEREK WALCOTT’S “A FAR CRY FROM AFRICA”

Derek Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa” expresses how Walcott is torn between “Africa and the English tongue he loves”. Several of Walcott’s poems –include some elements of French patois and West Indian English. The West Indies had “traded hands fourteen times in...wars between the British and French”, and Walcott tied each of these languages together to convey to his readers the extremity of his “racially mixed ancestry” and the indeterminacy that often follows such a varying ancestry. In “A Far Cry from Africa,” Derek Walcott uses the advantages of hybridity to express unhomliness.

Derek Walcott often described himself as a “mongrel”; both grandmothers were African and both grandfathers were European. He hated the English culture but loved the English language and empathized with the Irish for they were also the victims of colonization. In “A Far Cry from Africa,” Walcott does not express all aspects of British and African culture; instead he focuses only on the brutal history of both. He is “poisoned with the blood of both,” and he is torn between the two horrific options of a bloodied Africa or the attacker that is England.

In order to effectively colonize another's land, the colonizer's culture has to become so widely spread and deeply embedded in the colonized land's culture so that the indigenous peoples will begin to accept that they are inferior to the colonizers. Mimicry is a term used to explain the natives' imitating the colonizing country due to their want to be "accepted by the colonizing culture" and their feeling of inferiority and shame for their own culture. In order to fully dominate a land by supporting their culture as superior, the colonizer must use one of the most powerful conveyances for the dispersion of ideologies: language. When the British colonized the West Indies, they enforced English as the official language, the main means of causing the natives to accept the British culture as their own. However, in "A Far Cry from Africa," Walcott ironically describes how he rejects the British culture – the colonialist ideology – but accepts the British language as superior.

As a colonial subject, Walcott would have been seen by the colonizers as an other, and as half-European, Walcott would have been seen as different from the completely indigenous peoples. While these full-blooded natives would also have learned Standard English along with the French Creole and emulated British culture, their hybridity would not be as extreme as Walcott's background. As a person of mixed blood and having family members that were European, Derek Walcott would have had a First World upbringing in a Second World country.

"A Far Cry from Africa" uses metaphors, such as "colonel of carrion", and ironic statements, such as "corpses are scattered through a paradise", to describe the death and destruction and inhumanity that has occurred in both Africa and Europe. As half-European and half-African, Walcott was privileged to bear both horrible histories. The full-blooded natives' desire was to look and behave like the colonizers. However, they did not have to bear the burden of being genetically similar to the colonizers, and not only being torn between two cultures but "divided to the vein". Derek Walcott uses his genetic hybridity and cultural hybridity to express the extremity of his unhomeliness.

A Far Cry from Africa by Derek Walcott deals with the theme of split identity and anxiety caused by it in the face of the struggle in which the poet could side with neither party. It is, in short, about the poet's ambivalent feelings towards the Kenyan terrorists and the counter-terrorist white colonial government, both of which were 'inhuman', during the independence struggle of the country in the 1950s. The persona, probably the poet

himself, can take favour of none of them since both bloods circulate along his veins. He has been given an English tongue which he loves on the one hand, and on the other, he cannot tolerate the brutal slaughter of Africans with whom he shares blood and some traditions. His conscience forbids him to favour injustice. He is in the state of indecisiveness, troubled, wishing to see peace and harmony in the region. Beginning with a dramatic setting, the poem "A Far Cry from Africa" opens a horrible scene of bloodshed in African territory. 'Bloodstreams', 'scattered corpses,' 'worm' show ghastly sight of battle. Native blacks are being exterminated like Jews in holocaust following the killing of a white child in its bed by blacks.

The title of the poem involves an idiom: "a far cry" means an impossible thing. But the poet seems to use the words in other senses also; the title suggests in one sense that the poet is writing about an African subject from a distance. Writing from the island of St. Lucia, he feels that he is at a vast distance- both literally and metaphorically from Africa. "A Far Cry" may also have another meaning that the real state of the African 'paradise' is a far cry from the Africa that we have read about in descriptions of gorgeous fauna and flora and interesting village customs. And a third level of meaning to the title is the idea of Walcott hearing the poem as a far cry coming all the way across thousands of miles of ocean. He hears the cry coming to him on the wind. The animal imagery is another important feature of the poem. Walcott regards as acceptable violence the nature or "natural law" of animals killing each other to eat and survive; but human beings have been turned even the unseemly animal behavior into worse and meaningless violence. Beasts come out better than "upright man" since animals do what they must do, any do not seek divinity through inflicting pain. Walcott believes that human, unlike animals, have no excuse, no real rationale, for murdering non-combatants in the Kenyan conflict. Violence among them has turned into a nightmare of unacceptable atrocity based on color. So, we have the "Kikuyu" and violence in Kenya, violence in a "paradise", and we have "statistics" that don't mean anything and "scholar", who tends to throw their weight behind the colonial policy: Walcott's outrage is very just by the standards of the late 1960s, even restrained. More striking than the animal imagery is the image of the poet himself at the end of the poem. He is divided, and doesn't have any escape.

"I who am poisoned with the blood of both, where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" This sad ending illustrates a consequence of displacement and isolation. Walcott

feels foreign in both cultures due to his mixed blood. An individual sense of identity arises from cultural influences, which define one's character according to a particular society's standards; the poet's hybrid heritage prevents him from identifying directly with one culture. Thus creates a feeling of isolation. Walcott depicts Africa and Britain in the standard roles of the vanquished and the conqueror, although he portrays the cruel imperialistic exploits of the British without creating sympathy for the African tribesmen. This objectively allows Walcott to contemplate the faults of each culture without reverting to the bias created by attention to moral considerations.

However, Walcott contradicts the saviour image of the British through an unfavourable description in the ensuing lines. "Only the worm, colonel of carrion cries/ 'waste no compassion on their separated dead'." The word 'colonel' is a punning on 'colonial' also. The Africans associated with a primitive natural strength and the British portrayed as an artificially enhanced power remain equal in the contest for control over Africa and its people. Walcott's divided loyalties engender a sense of guilt as he wants to adopt the "civilized" culture of the British but cannot excuse their immoral treatment of the Africans. The poem reveals the extent of Walcott's consternation through the poet's inability to resolve the paradox of his hybrid inheritance.

The ongoings in Kenya magnified an internal strife within the poet concerning his own mixed heritage. Walcott has both African and European roots; his grandmothers were both black, and both grandfathers were white. In addition, at the time the poem was written, the poet's country of birth, the island of St. Lucia, was still a colony of Great Britain. While Walcott opposes colonialism and would therefore seem to be sympathetic to a revolution with an anticolonial cause, he has passionate reservations about Mau Mau: they are, or are reported to be, extremely violent—to animals, whites, and Kikuyu perceived as traitors to the Mau Mau cause. As Walcott is divided in two, so too is the poem. The first two stanzas refer to the Kenyan conflict, while the second two address the war within the poet-as-outsider/insider, between his roles as blood insider but geographical outsider to the Mau Mau Uprising. The Mau Mau Uprising, which began in 1952, was put down—some say in 1953, 1956, or 1960—without a treaty, yet the British did leave Kenya in 1963. Just as the uprising was never cleanly resolved, Walcott, at least within the poem, never resolves his conflict about whose side to take. He has been given

an English tongue which he loves on the one hand, and on the other, he cannot tolerate the brutal slaughter of Africans with whom he shares blood and some traditions.

His conscience forbids him to favour injustice. He is in the state of indecisiveness, troubled, wishing to see peace and harmony in the region. Beginning with a dramatic setting, the poem "A Far Cry from Africa" opens a horrible scene of bloodshed in African territory. 'Bloodstreams', 'scattered corpses,' 'worm' show ghastly sight of battle. Native blacks are being exterminated like Jews in holocaust following the killing of a white child in its bed by blacks. "I who am poisoned with the blood of both, where shall I turn, divided to the vein?" This sad ending illustrates a consequence of displacement and isolation. Walcott feels foreign in both cultures due to his mixed blood. An individual sense of identity arises from cultural influences, which define one's character according to a particular society's standards; the poet's hybrid heritage prevents him from identifying directly with one culture. Thus creates a feeling of isolation. Walcott depicts Africa and Britain in the standard roles of the vanquished and the conqueror, although he portrays the cruel imperialistic exploits of the British without creating sympathy for the African tribesmen. This objectively allows Walcott to contemplate the faults of each culture without reverting to the bias created by attention to moral considerations. However, Walcott contradicts the savior image of the British through an unfavorable description in the ensuing lines. "Only the worm, colonel of carrion cries/ 'waste no compassion on their separated dead'." The word 'colonel' is a punning on 'colonial' also. The Africans associated with a primitive natural strength and the British portrayed as an artificially enhanced power remain equal in the contest for control over Africa and its people. Walcott's divided loyalties engender a sense of guilt as he wants to adopt the "civilized" culture of the British but cannot excuse their immoral treatment of the Africans. The poem reveals the extent of Walcott's consternation through the poet's inability to resolve the paradox of his hybrid inheritance.

Dorothy Livesay – Green Rain

Dorothy Livesay was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1909. Her mother was a poet, writing her own as well as translating Ukrainian poems and novels. Her father was very much in the political scene, organizing the Canadian Press, and becoming the first to

manage it. (Bennet and Brown 481) Because of her father's position, Livesay moved to Toronto, Ontario in 1920.

At even 11 years old, Livesay was encouraged by her father "to read great books, especially those written by women, and to attend lectures and listen to speakers—including advocates of women's and worker's rights" (481). Her father especially loved history books, and her mother was always writing poetry and sketches for Canadian newspapers. The house had an atmosphere of "writing," and Livesay's mother would always ask her to tell a story, and then write it down for her daughter with a typewriter ("An Interview with Dorothy Livesay").

Livesay began writing her own poems in Toronto just after the age of 13, but the interesting thing is that she hid them from her mother! In an interview, Livesay stated:

"I mean I never showed my mother my poems. I hid them in a drawer, but she found them. I was furious... I just wrote them for myself. A bosom friend at school read them. However, my mother sent one or two out to newspapers. The Vancouver Province published the first poem, sending me a cheque for two dollars." ("An Interview with Dorothy Livesay").

Livesay, still in her teens, managed to win the Jardine Memorial Prize for her poem called "City Wife" in her second year at Trinity College, University of Toronto. Around this time, she also had her first book published, *Green Pitcher* (1928) (Bennet and Brown 481). In 1932, Livesay did a year of graduate work abroad, in Paris, France!

Livesay classified some of her writings into a style called "agit-prop," which was: "a term that arose in the Communist Party during the 1930s to describe writing, usually drama, in which political techniques of agitation (oral persuasion) and propaganda (written proselytizing) are united in simple pieces for working class audiences" (482).

Of Livesay's *Right Hand, Left Hand* (1977), 'Day and Night' is a good example of this agit-prop styled writing, a poem which seems more like a jingle about working in a factory. This poem also helped Livesay win the 1944 Governor General's Literary Award for poetry. ("Dorothy Livesay").

In 1936, Livesay moved to Vancouver. Here, she began to teach creative writing. From Livesay's suggestion that the west coast should also have a poetry magazine, the *Contemporary Verse* was founded in 1941 (Bennet and Brown 482). Livesay continued

writing throughout the 40s and 50s, eventually relocating to the University of London in 1958, to pursue a teaching career.

Livesay continued to publish poetry, fiction, and bodies of work for the rest of her life. Her poems were gathered into many collections, and published throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Livesay contributed so much to Canadian poetry and Canadian Literature, producing “a body of poetry that is frequently epigrammatic yet also personal—even confessional—and always socially engaged” (482).

Documentary Poetry

Livesay considered “Documentary Poetry” to be something very much prevalent in Canadian Literature. From the Anthology of Canadian Literature in English, a description of documentary poetry is as stated:

“...in which historical or other “found” material is incorporated into a writer’s own thoughts, in order to create a dialectic between the objective facts and the subjective feeling of the poet. The effect is often ironic; it is always intensely personal” (Bennet and Brown 482).

Alongside *Day and Night*, other poems by Livesay show this documentary poetry style. Some examples are *The Documentaries* (1968) and *Call My People Home* (1950), a piece of work about the mistreatment of Japanese Canadians during WWII. In fact, Livesay’s *Right Hand Left Hand* (1977) “combines retrospective commentary with period photographs, newspaper articles, poetry, drama, and unedited letters that emphasizes the integration of the individual history with social history” (“Dorothy Livesay”).

Of course, this documentary poem style of writing descended from Canadian writers before Livesay, namely Crawford, Lampman, and D.C. Scott. However, with Livesay’s contribution through her own writing, “Documentary Poetry” is a style of writing that can be thought of as a Canadian genre (Bennet and Brown 482).

Imagism

During the early 1900s, American and English poets were involved in an Imagist movement. That is to say, they wrote poems, usually in free verse, that strived towards “clarity of expression through the use of precise visual images” (“A Brief Guide to Imagism”).

American poet Ezra Pound defined Imagist poetry as having three qualities:

- I. Direct treatment of the “thing,” whether subjective or objective.
- II. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
- III. As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome. (“A Brief Guide to Imagism”).

In fact, Livesay herself was very much a part of an imagist movement in Canada during her time. In her poems, “she sought simplicity of form and the direct impact of the image to express unromanticized observations about everyday life” (Bennet and Brown 482). We are going to see this in her poem, ‘Green Rain.’

“Green Rain”

Green Rain is an absolutely stunning poem. As I was reading through, I found each sentence adds to the entire “picture” being presented. Livesay weaves from the outdoors to inside, from nature to man-made. The green rain is a strong image throughout the poem, but through recalling the coloured rainfall, the memories of her grandmother and a previous loved one are entwined within.

The poem is split into 3 sections or “stanza”. Each stanza begins with the words “I remember” (the first and last line of the entire poem also begin this way), possibly signifying that she is recalling memories continuously, fluidly from one to the other. As far as I can see, there is no rhyme or meter, just a poem written free from form. Let’s take a look at the first stanza.

I remember long veils of green rain
Feathered like the shawl of my grandmother –
Green from the half-green of the spring trees
Waving in the valley.

When I think of long veils, I think of perhaps a curtain, or the strands of someone’s long hair. However, Livesay uses a simile to liken long veils of rain to an old shawl belonging to her grandmother. It was difficult for me to liken the two, but I get the feeling Livesay is describing how sometimes an object can remind you of something from your past. Lines 3 and 4 label the green rain as something very much connected to nature, the overall green pigment of the trees, seemingly staining the rain falling around it.

I remember the road
Like the one which leads to my grandmother’s house,

A warm house, with green carpets,
Geraniums, a trilling canary
And shining horse-hair chairs;
And the silence, full of the rain's falling
Was like my grandmother's parlour
Alive with herself and her voice, rising and falling –
Rain and wind intermingled.

We are now being taken in from the green outdoors to inside grandma's house. This main part of the poem really shows me Livesay's "Imagist" style. She plays on the senses, with the sight of green carpets and geraniums. She plays with sound, with the trilling bird and the clash of silence inside and rain falling outside. She plays with touch, with the sensation of a warm house, or the (more than likely soft) horse-hair chairs. These sensations, brought on by the green rain, remind Livesay of similar sensations felt in her grandmother's presence. I think this is really interesting, because sometimes nature and man (a home, indoors, etc) are pit against each other, showing the confrontation or differences between the two. However, Livesay's poem displays harmony, showing how the two are strongly linked within her memories.

I remember on that day
I was thinking only of my love
And of my love's house.
But now I remember the day
As I remember my grandmother.
I remember the rain as the feathery fringe of her shawl.

The final stanza has a lot of repetition from the first two, playing almost like a revisit of the reoccurring memories. However, in this final stanza, we get the introduction of a past love, and the past love's house. In fact, if we separate the first 3 lines from the last 3 lines, you could think of Livesay's act of remembering as a selective one. That is to say, some days you can remember something about the past, and on other days, the same memory might appear to you differently. Livesay might be saying she used to remember her love every time she saw rain outside, but now, the rain reminds her only of her grandmother. Could this mean that the memory of her past love is one which she'd rather not remember?

Discussion:

1) Where have we seen examples of Documentary Poetry and Imagist Poetry from what we've read so far in this course?

2) From the Biography section, do you think Livesay's constant moving around Canada, as well as travelling abroad, changed her writing style as time passed?

3) How is Livesay's poetic writing style different than previous female poets we've studied in this course?