

Lucozade

The poem describes a daughter visiting her mother in hospital. She is convinced her mother is going to die. Her mother criticises the gifts she has been brought- including the 'Lucozade' of the title.

Kay portrays the mother's personality with some humour. By incorporating lines of her speech she creates an impression of a strong, brave woman who stands up to adversity.

The poem ends with the moving scene of the young girl leaving the hospital ward, laden with unwanted traditional hospital gifts. By removing the gifts the burden of illness carried throughout the poem is lifted and so too is the sadness that permeates the first stanzas.

The final image of the poem is one of singing - a hopeful and upbeat ending that contrasts with the more sombre opening.

Form and structure

The poem is made up of a series of four-line stanzas - apart from the final line and verse of the poem - these emphatically stand alone.

The initial stanzas follow a loose rhyme scheme.

- In stanza one the repetition of chrysanthemums and die provides strong end rhymes to the lines and adds emphasis to the sombre mood of this verse
- Stanza two follows an abab rhyme scheme - a conventional scheme that reflects the conventions of bringing Lucozade to someone who is ill
- In stanza three the rhyme between eyes, lies, size creates a sense of the constant repetitiveness of the hospital routine

The rhyming gives the poem a colloquial feel. This is in keeping with the teenage narrator.

The poem is symmetrical. From the colon that divides stanza four, the poem takes on a positive tone. The rhyming is lost and we get more insight into the mother's character.

We could argue this lack of rhyme mimics a lack of conformity on the mother's part: she rejects the usual 'ill person's' gifts in favour of luxury and love of life. She is not prepared to give in to convention.

There is a switch in the poem between the mother's passivity and her active dismissal of illness. The first three stanzas present her drifting in and out of consciousness, feebly issuing negative statements:

Don't bring Lucozade

After she 'wakes up' in stanza four, she states what she wants:

Where's the big brandy, the generous gin, the Bloody Mary

Suddenly her personality begins to come alive. This is followed by the daughter's action of clearing away all the 'ill person's gifts' which leaves the mother uplifted and energised (ironically the feeling that Lucozade was intended to provide).

The final images of the poem contrast with the opening ones as they are filled with light and beauty, in turn, happiness.

Themes

Mother-Daughter relationship

The relationship between mother and daughter is a key theme in this poem. It is clear the speaker has a close connection with her mother.

I am scared my mum is going to die

At the beginning of the poem she is clearly worried but by the end she is elated. Her mood closely reflects her mother's health. She takes in the details of the hospital room and everything her mother says - as if concentrating intently on a situation of great importance to her.

By removing all the unwanted gifts the speaker displays her love for her mother. She also frees her mother from the burden of illness. Her mother is rejuvenated and waves to her daughter with energy restored and a positive attitude to her situation.

It is the daughter who carries the nostalgia home - almost protecting her mother from sentimentality and depressing sympathy.

The repeated tell your father and tell him suggest that the mother-daughter bond may be even closer than that between wife and husband - the daughter who provides support and who passes messages to the father.

Illness and death

The speaker's mother is obviously very ill in this poem. The opening image of the sad chrysanthemums prepares us for the subject of death.

However, as the poem progresses, the mother refuses her situation and the traditional images of illness. Rather she wants to embrace the enjoyment of life - luxuries and indulgent food and drink.

It is not the traditional gifts associated with illness and recover that help the mother - in fact they remind her of illness and depress her mood. Ironically, it is their removal that gives her a real boost of energy. This perhaps suggests how we should handle illness and death: defy convention, starve tragedy of our usual response instead of lying waiting on it, sipping orange nostalgia.

Areas of comparison

Gap Year

Both poems portray a loving relationship between mother and child. In 'Gap Year' the mother is energised by thought of her son and his exploration of the other side of the world. This is similar to the mother in 'Lucozade' being energised by her daughter removing symbols of illness. In each case, through their children the mothers experience a sense of life and freedom.

My Grandmother's Houses

Both poems depict women with strong characters. The mother in 'Lucozade' wants her 'luxuries' to cheer her up and will not conform to the conventional behaviour of an invalid. The grandmother in the latter poem is also particular about gifts. She vehemently maintains her routine and standards despite her age. Both are spirited and unconventional in their behaviour.

Both poems also recognise the possibility of death. In 'Lucozade' the poem begins with worry about mother's illness and ends with images that suggest the mother passing beyond illness to a heaven-like place. In 'My Grandmother's Houses', Kay reflects that her grandmother will one day die with the cemetery, sideboard solid like a coffin and the final image of screaming ambulances.

Whilst Leila Sleeps

Both poems explore a mother/ daughter relationship. But whereas in Lucozade the narrator is the daughter, in Whilst Leila sleeps is written from the mother's point of view.

Both poems also depict people experiencing a period of difficulty. In both poems, the narrators are reflecting upon someone they love and there is a fear about the unknown. In Lucozade the narrator is scared she will lose her mother if she dies and in Whilst Leila Sleeps, the narrator is scared she cannot protect her daughter from deportation and whatever dangers will then face them.

Gap Year

This poem describes Jackie Kay's feelings for her son Matthew as he is travelling on his gap year. She remains at home wondering what he is doing, reminiscing about his childhood and reflecting on how quickly he has grown up.

The title implies the 'gap' his absence leaves in her life and the separation between the two. Despite the literal 'gap', their relationship is obviously a close one.

Form and structure

The poem is divided into two sections with four line stanzas throughout. Kay uses free verse with only the odd moment of rhyme to convey the sense that she is speaking to her son.

Section I

The first section of the poem charts Kay's pregnancy and the birth of Matthew. It is only four stanzas in length. This suggests the brevity of babyhood and how it is quickly over.

The section begins with Kay staring at the empty Moses basket awaiting her baby's arrival and ends with Kay laying her new son in the basket. This suggests suggests completion and contentment.

Section II

Matthew soon grows up and the second section begins with Kay standing in his room when he is away travelling. She describes how she follows his journey and the moments when he phones home or they talk using a webcam.

Woven through this much longer section are Kay's memories of Matthew's scan pictures - this links back to his early life. She is obviously proud of him but possibly also concerned about her once-little child is out in the big wide world.

Warnings from his grandfather are also threaded into the verse. The reader feels Kay's anxiety when Matthew says he will be home four weeks later than he had planned. However, the tone that ends the poem is upbeat and the final line returns to the first in a circular manner by mentioned the basket once more.

Parallels and contrasts

The first lines of each section draw a parallel between the expectant Moses basket and the older son's vacant bed. This implies that the last time Kay waited so long for her son was before he was born. Both then and now he is outwith her control. In each case all she can do is wait, filled with love, for him to come to her when he is ready.

His face on the webcam is described as being grainy, blurry - a consequence of being so far away. This indistinctness reminds us of the scan photograph, and also his birth when he emerged blue and floury.

The final image of Matthew with his arms outstretched amidst vast landscapes contrasts with the earlier images of containment the basket and the tight tub. It is as if in embarking on this gap year he is becoming an adult and breaking free of the constraints of childhood to find his own path in life.

Themes

Growing up

Kay explores the theme of growing up in this poem - mainly from a parent's perspective.

Childhood is all too brief and soon your child is out in the big, wide world. The image of the basket which frames the poem suggests both joy and a mother's instinct to protect her child. It suggests that for a parent, their child will always partly be remembered as an innocent, vulnerable baby.

As much as the 'Gap Year' is about Matthew's adventure into maturity, Kay herself must also 'grow' to accept that she must let go of her urge to follow him around. She must embrace that he is away exploring without her. By the end of the poem we get the impression that Kay has accepted this, despite the fact she cannot believe how quickly he has grown up.

The fact that the poem is dedicated for Mateo (the Spanish for Matthew) shows that Kay embraces her son's new identity, as an adult exploring Spanish-speaking countries.

Love

Kay's love for her son pervades the whole poem. Her affection is expressed in the initial nicknames like 'Tumshie' and the way she stares longingly at the Moses basket. A loving bond she has established even before he is born.

This is then developed by the portrayal of a very close relationship as we move into Section II. She charts all his travels on her atlas and recognises any changes in him - a new haircut, his eagerness to explore.

She paces his empty room imagining his soft face - it is clear that she misses him. But through her love she is able to let him go. Kay finds herself exuberant at the end of the poem, contemplating her son out in the big wide world, despite the fact he has delayed his return. Her feelings are no longer about herself, but her son and his adventure. This suggests the ultimate selfless act of a mother to put the needs of her child before her own.

Areas of comparison

Lucozade

'Gap Year' is about a very close relationship between mother and child. It can therefore be compared to 'Lucozade' which also portrays a tight bond and close understanding. The daughter is able to revive her mother and carry away the burden of suffering just as Kay's longing is transformed to happiness and pride through the experiences and images of her son.

Whilst Leila Sleeps

'Gap Year' is about a very close relationship between mother and child. They also both explore the idea of a child's innocence and a mother's need to protect her child from the dangers of the world. Both poems also explore the idea of a journey, although in "Whilst Leila Sleeps", both mother and daughter are together, whereas in 'Gap Year' it is just her grown-up son who has left home. Furthermore, in 'Whilst Leila Sleeps' the idea of moving around is portrayed very negatively and it is clear the narrator is deeply unhappy about the situation. It is suggested the mother and child are immigrants and face deportation. In "Gap Year", however, although the mother clearly misses her son, the idea of travel is a celebrated one.

Old Tongue

Both poems explore the theme of childhood and growing up. 'Gap Year' is written from the parent's perspective, while 'Old Tongue' is from the child's own perspective. Both poems also explore the idea of a journey. But while the child in 'Gap Year' has chosen this for himself, the child in 'Old Tongue' is deeply unhappy about the move.

My Grandmother's Houses

In this poem the narrator describes different houses she associates with her grandmother.

Kay gives us insight into her grandmother's personality and life style through the eyes of her younger self, as well as reflecting from an adult perspective on her childhood.

This gives details of her grandmother, but also of the world Kay grew up in, with its elements of class division and condescending authority. It is clear that Kay had a close connection with her grandmother.

Form and Structure

Opening and closing stanzas

The poem is framed by two short stanzas which locate where the grandmother lives.

It opens on the second floor of a tenement. The view of the cemetery suggests somewhere peaceful

The final stanza is set on the ground floor of a high rise where the grandmother has been rehoused. There is a contrast of mood - the screaming ambulances suggest that modern society will do little to soothe the elderly woman in her last days.

Three sections - three houses

The body of the poem is divided into three sections. Each one describes a different house connected to the grandmother:

- The first section describes the grandmother's tenement flat, focusing on the child's favourite place - the bedroom filled with the clutter and newspaper parcels
- The second depicts the modern high rise flat the poet's grandmother moved to in the late 1960s. We learn of the grandmother's attempts at settling in while maintaining her routine: her work and church visits
- The third and final section is about the cleaning house where the grandmother works, and this introduces themes of class and the old versus the younger generation

Free verse

The poem is written in free verse with a strong colloquial style. This allows Kay to weave the different voices of into her poem - child, mother, grandmother, the posh woman.

Themes

Family relationships

The bond between grandmother and granddaughter is vividly portrayed. The poem begins with a child's wonder at the grandmother's hoarding and develops to explore visits to church and to accompany her grandmother to work.

There is obvious affection between the two. The girl seems to experience her grandmother's world with real intensity:

- 'unwrapping and wrapping' the collected parcels
- watching her grandmother making soup
- going with her to church
- taking in the strange environment of the 'cleaning house'

These are poignant moments from childhood. They act as reminders of the bond between generations and the differences between the young and the old.

There is a suggestion that the girl and her grandmother have a closer relationship than the mother and grandmother. The mother seems exasperated with the grandmother's refusal to use any of the presents she has been given. In contrast the child accepts that these parcels are part of the grandmother's personality.

Old age

The grandmother's strength and energy are obvious in this poem. But there is still a degree of vulnerability about her. We are told about the grandmother's false teeth, that the girl and grandmother are almost the same height and later she is like the hunchback of Notre Dame. Although the grandmother stays as busy as ever, her body is aging.

There are images of death throughout the poem:

- the cemetery
- the sideboard solid as a coffin
- ghosts sit at the altar
- ambulances, screaming

The grandmother seems unworried about reminders of death in the place she calls home. Perhaps she accepts death as part of her existence.

Kay makes it clear there are other factors bound up with this concept of home: the daily routine, the familiar newsagent next door. All contribute to the woman's security. As with many older people, she is comforted by her routine and what she knows. So it is no wonder that she is 'hopping mad' when she, aged 70, is forced to move.

The line 'But she still doesn't settle down' suggest that she never really fits in to her new 'high rise' despite the hot running water and mod cons. She is resilient and continues to work, but we feel sympathy for her as she tries to preserve standards and traditions which have no meaning for the next generation.

Childhood

Many children spend time with grandparents and will share similar experiences to those in the poem. Kay portrays a mix of the alien and the mundane, of wonder and boredom that suggests a loving relationship but recognises the differences between different generations.

The tenement filled with 'tablecloths, napkins, perfumes, bath salts' intrigues the child, and she recalls climbing over the parcels to get into bed as if she is in a fairy tale.

There are moments of play in the poem (going up in the lift to floor 24) and moments where the grandmother's world is a mystery – a 'strange place where the air is trapped'. The young child also gets bored at having to accompany her grandmother to church and wait for her as she cleans the house. She recalls instructions from her grandmother 'I told you don't touch anything' and 'Sit up straight' and an image of her stooped over 'like the hunchback of Notre Dame', which again brings in an element of fantasy, so familiar in childhood.

Areas of comparison

Lucozade

'My Grandmother's Houses' portrays a spirited woman who takes on the challenges of life wholeheartedly. We see a similar strength of will in the mother figure in 'Lucozade' who refuses to be surrounded by the trappings of an invalid.

The grandmother is also particular about gifts and maintains her routine and standards despite her age. Both are determined and unconventional in their behaviour.

Old Tongue

Both poems explore the theme of childhood and growing up. However, the narrator in 'My Grandmother's Houses' is looking outward and reflecting on someone else, the narrator in 'Old Tongue' is reflecting upon herself.

The idea of family relationships is one which Jackie Kay explores in many of her poems and this theme is seen in 'Gap Year', 'Keeping Orchids' and 'Whilst Leila Sleeps'.

Keeping Orchids

The poem deals with Kay meeting her birth mother for the first time. Kay uses the symbol of the orchid, a gift from her mother, to portray the difficulties in their relationship.

The orchid is an exotic flower that is challenging to look after. It comes to represent:

- Kay as a baby, given up for adoption
- the reunion between the women
- the difficulty of keeping their relationship alive

The meeting is emotionally complicated. The mother is very reticent and keeps the 'story of her life' hidden and secret. Kay finds it hard to understand her mother and to process her own feelings and responses to the situation. She uses the orchid to explore emotion stirred up by her past and this woman.

Form and structure

Use of couplets

Kay structures the poem using couplets until the last line.

The two line stanzas suggest a sense of coming together, as these two women unite; however, the frequent use of **enjambment** and **caesura** unsettle the reader.

The poem never fits into the type of set rhythm that is common with writing in couplets. Perhaps Kay is reflecting the unease between her mother and herself, as each woman tries to understand the other.

The last line is on its own reflecting the poet's separation from her mother.

Orchid as symbol

The poem begins and ends with the orchids. This stresses their significance. Kay projects her emotions onto the flowers, leaving the poem itself detached in tone.

The orchids are used as a symbol for:

- the potential relationship between Kay and her birth mother
- Kay herself, as a baby who needs to be nurtured and cared for
- the mother's guarded and secretive personality

The orchids are 'still alive' at the beginning of the poem. By the end, they are in need of extreme measures to make them 'live longer'. The last line of the poem stands alone, carrying a sense of finality.

The poem ends on a description of 'cutting' with a 'sharp knife'. This could suggest severing ties and separation:

- between the mother and daughter who struggle to reunite
- the initial separation between mother and baby when Kay was put up for adoption

There is a feeling of dissatisfaction, frustration and even anger. It is uncertain whether Kay will continue to 'keep' the orchids.

Themes

Adoption

This poem examines the consequences and challenges of adoption.

The orchids my mother gave me when we first met

The first line throws the reader, as we are surprised to find she has only just met her mother. We then realise the context and the paradox of meeting someone you are so closely related to but who is a complete stranger at the same time.

Kay uses the orchids to depict the mother's reticence. They also symbolise the difficulties Kay faces in beginning a relationship with someone she lacks connection with.

The meeting must be an emotionally charged one, and yet the mother's response is to shut down and keep her secrets. She holds her past in a green carrier bag and unpacks it in a systematic fashion. Kay is affected greatly by

her mother's detachment. It is implied that Kay seeks much more from this meeting than her mother is prepared to give.

The line Time is outside waiting suggests that Kay doesn't need her mother. Her life can go on without her - after all she has lived without her all these years.

But although she can get back to her life, she is left disappointed. Instead of the warmth of reconciliation, she leaves with fragile flowers that appear unresponsive to her care.

Relationships

Kay explores her regular theme of the connection, or lack of connection, between mother and daughter. The symbol of the orchids reflects different aspects of their relationship.

Here the relationship is portrayed entirely from the daughter's point of view. There are clear suggestions as to Kay's emotions of worry, frustration and anger.

The mother is portrayed as being detached and awkward, unable to confront or explain her past. Kay is keen to reach out to her mother, but is hurt by her lack of emotional engagement. Instead of explicitly describing the problems she experienced, Kay uses the orchids with their 'closed' buds to portray the mother's coldness and the struggle to look after the flowers.

Areas of comparison

Gap Year

Unlike 'Keeping Orchids', the relationship in 'Gap Year' is close and positive.

While memory of the brief meeting in 'Keeping Orchids' is quickly lost as Kay and her birth mother travel off to different destinations, in 'Gap Year' Kay's relationship with her son stays strong despite the geographical distance between them.

There is an openness and a sense of sharing experience that brings them together. In contrast, in 'Keeping Orchids' the mother's closed nature and secretiveness prevents a close bond forming.

Lucozade

Both poems deal with a mother-daughter relationship from the daughter's perspective. But there is a significant contrast in how the daughters feel about their mothers, and in the mothers' personalities.

In 'Lucozade' the daughter feels worried and protective towards her mother. There is warmth and openness in the relationship and it is clear the mother is willing to tell her daughter what she is feeling.

Both poems make symbolic use of flowers. In 'Lucozade' the chrysanthemums represent negative associations with illness and death. It is their rejection that is positive.

In contrast the orchids are a more complex representation of many different aspects of Kay's relationship with her birth mother.

Whilst Leila Sleeps

Both poems deal with mother/ daughter relationship. Both poems have an atmosphere of unease. But whereas the relationship that is depicted in 'Whilst Leila Sleeps' is a very close and loving one, in 'Keeping Orchids', the relationship is not close at all and this is what the narrator is mourning.

Old Tongue

In this poem, Kay considers the effect of relocation on language and accent and how she misses the evocative words and expressions of her youth.

Overview

The poem looks at Kay's then-partner's experience moving from Scotland to England

In this poem Kay looks at the experience of her then-partner, who moved away from Scotland when she was an eight year old child. Kay considers the effect this move had on her accent. She laments the loss of the Scottish words she used to say such as "**dreich**", "**wabbit**" and "**crabbit**" and compares them to words with longer vowels spoken down south. Throughout the poem, Kay implies that the girl had no control over the change in her accent. It is something that happens when you become surrounded by different voices. The experience is not just one person's, it is universal.

Despite this, she wants her "**old tongue**" back. She prefers it to the English words she has grown used to saying and endeavours to resuscitate it. The poem suggests that the words are still part of her, lying dormant in the soil, ready to be found and brought back to life.

Form and structure

This poem takes the form of three stanzas of different lengths. It is written in free verse, which gives it a colloquial feel. This is fitting for a poem that is about language. Due to the lack of rhyme, the occasional moments of strong rhyme stand out, such as a "**south**" and "**mouth**", creating an immediate connection between the words.

In the first stanza, Kay introduces the idea of the persona losing her Scots words when she moves to England. The second focuses on the sounds of the English accent which she inadvertently picks up. This makes her want to reclaim her old words.

The final stanza acts as a conclusion to the poem where the persona returns to the Scottish phrases of her youth, seeking to give them new life.

Themes

Change and loss

The poet describes how a girl's accent changes from being full of evocative Scots words to adopting the longer English vowels. The 'English' she describes is very much the 'Queen's English' and the implication is that, universally, local dialects and words are often lost in the wake of globalisation and standardisation. The loss Kay describes is personal, as she lists all the words she used to say and how she wants them back, but then she invites the reader to delight in the Scots as well, so that we too miss them by the end of the poem.

Nostalgia

Kay reminisces fondly about her then-partner's past by focussing on the language of her youth. She lists many of the words and expressions she used to say, encouraging the reader to listen to them and to experience them too. She contrasts this with her new English accent and implies that it does not belong to her in the same way. The poem ends by recalling her old phrases in a lively manner as if she is enjoying delving back into the "**great cauldron full of riches**" that is the Scots language.

Displacement and identity

It is clear the poet/speaker feels a sense of displacement in this poem, as the words she is used to saying simply disappear as a result of relocation. This is upsetting to the speaker who wants them back and writes the poem in an effort to summon them from her memory. There is an implication that they give her feelings of belonging and identity.

Comparisons This poem fits well with *Whilst Leila Sleeps*, as both explore the theme of displacement and identity. *My Grandmother's Houses* also works as a comparison under the theme of childhood and change.

Whilst Leila Sleeps

This dramatic monologue is about a mother and daughter fleeing their home, only to be apprehended by the authorities. Kay does not give specific details, but we might infer that the woman is an immigrant facing deportation.

Overview

This is a topical poem about a mother who is forced to flee her home with her daughter in the middle of the night. It is suggested that she is an immigrant woman perhaps facing deportation. Kay deliberately holds back details so that the situation becomes universal - it could be set anywhere and in any modern time period. It does have particular resonance in our current political climate.

Kay uses the first-person narrative throughout to make it immediate. The reader is thrust into this woman's experience and we feel her fear when she is caught by the authority figures, who are significantly male.

The relationship between mother and daughter is central to this poem. The 'Leila' from the title is the speaker's daughter, who despite the danger and her mother's anxiety sleeps until she is awakened by the presence of "**the men in plain suits**" in the penultimate verse. Her mother must soothe her, although she is very frightened herself.

Form and structure

The poem is written in six stanzas, each of five lines and relatively equal length. It is a dramatic monologue. This form allows the reader to access the speaker's thoughts. Kay writes in first person using the present tense, which makes this insight more powerful and vivid. The situation may be alien to most readers but by putting us in the woman's position Kay helps us empathise with anyone in these circumstances. The poem charts the journey of the mother and daughter as they move from the house to the car to having to go with the men.

Although Kay does not use a tight rhyme scheme, the presence of half rhyme "**appeared/fear**", "**suits/soothe**" work to hold each stanza together. There is also rhythm created by lines such as "**packing things, turning out lights**" which works with the sound to give the poem a sense of pace and action, mimicking the mother's hurry, her fear and anxiety and the fact they are travelling.

The poem ends with the mother trying to soothe her child to sleep again, despite her own feelings of terror, which brings the poem back to the title. This reminds us that the whole ordeal is perhaps an effort to save her child.

Themes

A relationship between mother and daughter

The mother's role in this poem is to protect the child. She waits until the child is asleep so that the act of leaving their home is less upsetting for her. When she is apprehended by the men, she comforts her child and sings to her in an effort to keep her going. The mother in the poem also thinks of her own mother who is over "**the other side of the world**". Despite the distance, there is a connection between the women as they are united in their desire for freedom and security.

Displacement and identity

This poem begins with the mother and child leaving their home, a place that should be one of belonging and security. The mother is afraid they will be caught and tries to protect her daughter, but to no avail. When they are apprehended, the men want her name, her papers, her licence – anything that identifies her. The implication is that once they have her name, they have more power over her.

Comparisons

This poem fits well with *Lucozade* and *Gap Year* under the theme of mother/child relationships. *Lucozade* places the daughter in the role of rescuer, while in *Gap Year* Kay explores the connection she has with her son even when he is not with her. It also fits with *Old Tongue* under the themes of displacement and identity.