

10. "Poem at Thirty-Nine" by Alice Walker

POET

Alice Maisenior Walker (1944-Present)

Alice Walker is an American novelist, poet and political activist. She wrote "The Color Purple" in 1982, winning the National Book Award for it and the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. She was born in Georgia to a poor family; her mother worked as a maid and her father worked on a farm. Her mother believed in the importance of education to liberate her children, and Alice won a scholarship to university, graduating from Sarah Lawrence College. After university, she became interested in the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s and campaigned for equal voting, welfare and education rights in Mississippi.

She married Melvyn Leventhal, a Jewish civil rights lawyer; when they moved to Mississippi in 1967 they became the first legally married inter-racial couple in the state. They were threatened by the Ku Klux Klan and experienced great prejudice, but they remained in the state working to gain rights for other black and Jewish people.

BACKGROUND

Walker's father died in 1974. He did not live to see her success in 1982 with "The Color Purple", which was a best-selling and critically-acclaimed novel. The book describes the difficult lives of black women in 1930s Georgia where they are oppressed not only by the white laws and attitudes, but also by the black patriarchy. The poem was written in 1983 after Walker faced some harsh criticism of her novel for exposing negative aspects of black male culture.

SUMMARY

The poem describes how much Walker misses her dead father. She explains all the wonderful things he taught her about life, and concludes that although he may not have agreed with all her opinions, she believes he would be proud of her at this point in her life – at thirty-nine years old.

ANALYSIS

The title of the poem is very precise. It tells the reader that this was written when the poet was thirty nine. It implies that there was some sort of epiphany or realisation at this age, which is after the success of her novel, "The Color Purple". Interestingly, this age is often associated with the end of youth and the beginning of middle age. Perhaps it implies that this is a pivotal moment for Walker when she is finally able to reconcile with her father's memory.

The poem is written in free verse with no fixed rhythm or rhyme scheme. Nevertheless, the short lines create a staccato effect, suggesting to the reader that the poet is both emotional and determined to deal with a difficult subject in a precise way. The poem is also structured around a refrain – "How I miss my father". This is repeated twice in the poem. The second time it is mentioned, it has an exclamation mark, suggesting the poet is becoming increasingly emotional and upset as the poem progresses.

The first line of the poem is "How I miss my father." It is one short sentence which sums up the content and tone of the rest of the poem. It is almost exclamatory, an outpouring of the emotion of bereavement and loss. The expression is quite colloquial, giving the poem a chatty feeling, which enables the reader to relate profoundly to the voice of the poet; it is as though she is confiding in us about her grief. The word "How" implies that missing her father is a great and multifaceted emotion. The possessive pronoun "my" adds to the sense that this is very personal; it is about the poet's own father, no one else's. This is a deeply personal expression of grief.

The first stanza goes on to say "I wish he had not been so tired when I was born". The verb to wish here gives the impression that there are things the poet wants to change about the past; she has a desire or dream she wants to happen. This suggests that there may be regrets about her relationship with her father. The description she then gives of her father is one of exhaustion; he was "so tired". This directs the reader to the biographical details of Walker's life; her father was a poor farmer who worked very hard to make ends meet. Walker is explaining to herself and her father that his exhaustion due to hard work took him away from her. Indeed from the moment she was "born" her father was perhaps too tired to engage with her in the way she wanted.

The next stanza moves on to the reason for her father's tiredness. It is dominated by descriptions of money. The poet explains that she is prompted to "think of" her father when she is "Writing deposit slips and checks". This is how money is entered into a bank account and withdrawn from it to pay bills. It seems surprising to the reader, that it is this moment of business-like activity which reminds the poet of her father; it doesn't seem very intimate. This underlines the impression that the poet's father was preoccupied with work and financial troubles during his life. The poet explains "He taught me how". Her father taught her how to write the bank forms, "This is the form, he must have said". It is interesting that the poet's memory of her father has to be reconstructed, "he must have said". This does not sound as though the poet remembers the details of the lesson; she has to make assumptions about how he taught her. This underlines for the reader how personal the memory is, and how we all have very different memories of events which are often changed over time.

The poet goes on to explain that her father's emphasis on money taught her to see "bits of paper as a way to escape the life he knew". This is ironic. It is her father's lesson about his own life with money which makes the poet want not to be like him. The verb to escape is important here. The life her father led and which her family therefore experienced was clearly a difficult one. The necessity of escape suggests their life was like a prison, that they were held captive by poverty. Thus money is the way to find freedom. The poet notes that "even in high school" she had a "savings account". High school is the American equivalent of the GCSE and A level years in Britain from, the age of fourteen to eighteen. The poet is quite unusual therefore in already saving money during her teen age years and making financial plans for the future to avoid her father's fate. Furthermore, the poet uses the idea of "bits of paper" to confuse the reader. As she is a famous novelist, the reader probably thinks these "bits of paper" are the beginnings of her writing, and that these would enable her "to escape" poverty. However, we then realise that the papers Walker refers to are indicative of her desire to achieve financial security and not her dream of becoming a writer.

The third stanza gives us another lesson Walker's father taught her – "He taught me that telling the truth did not always mean a beating". This is another double-edged description. At first sight, it suggests that Walker's father was a fair and lenient man. It implies that if Walker was honest about a mistake then her father would not harshly punish her. The word "beating" is shocking to us, but in the past children were hit by their parents for misdemeanours. Nevertheless, "beating" implies an extremely violent response. Walker may be hinting here at the subject of her novel, the violent and abusive lives of poor black Americans. The notion of being beaten for being honest may also have a political implication. Black Americans were unfairly, and sometimes violently, treated by the police and authorities for simply going about their business. Walker may be suggesting that her father taught her to be honest despite the cruelty of the society in which she lived. This would then be a lesson in political defiance.

Walker goes on to end the third stanza with a touching thought. She explains that "many of my truths must have grieved him before the end". Here Walker is coming to terms with the fact that the honest expression of her beliefs during her life probably caused her father great sorrow; the word "grieved" usually means to feel bereavement for a loved one. Here the bereavement seems to be metaphorical. Walker imagines her father feeling a sense of bereavement at the way she lived her life. Perhaps her father felt that he had actually lost her to a lifestyle he could not comprehend or approve of. Again, this is ironic. Her father taught her to be fearlessly honest, but this honesty was a source of unhappiness for him. Walker chose a difficult life of political protest as part of a mixed race couple. This would have been shocking to many Americans, and possibly to her father. It is also the case that Walker's novel, "The Color Purple" describes violent and abusive black men. These characters were seen by some critics as a terrible affront to the black community, suggesting that black people might be as cruel to each other as white people are to them. Thus Walker is coming to terms with the fact her father taught her well, but the way she expressed his teachings might have hurt him, and for this she is sorry.

This is a moment of intense personal honesty and emotion. It is understandable therefore that the next stanza begins with the repetition of the opening line of the poem, this time with an exclamation mark – "How I miss my father!" Walker seems overwhelmed with grief. She possibly wants the opportunity to speak to her dead father and explain her actions; find a reconciliation with him. Obviously, this is not possible after someone has died. Instead, Walker takes the only route she knows to reach her father – she writes this poem about him.

Walker goes on to enjoy a memory of another lesson her father taught her – "He cooked like a person dancing". This simile is joyful. It describes Walker's father doing a task which many might consider a chore or perhaps something better suited to a woman. Yet Walker's father cooks with the pleasure and physical abandon of someone dancing. She elaborates the image. While moving, her father concentrates "in a yoga meditation". Yoga is a Hindu spiritual discipline which involves certain physical postures as well as controlled breathing, and an attempt to clear the mind of busy thoughts. Thus Walker's father cooks with concentration and an almost religious calm. She goes on to explain why cooking is so important to him. He "craved the voluptuous sharing of good food". The word "craved" is significant here. If something is "craved" then it is desired almost to the point of addiction. Therefore her father passionately wanted to share food with others. The act of sharing suggests he was a friendly and sociable man, who loved his friends and family. The word

“voluptuous” means opulent and pleasure loving. This is in stark contrast to the description of him in the second stanza when he is worried about money.

The penultimate stanza begins with the word “Now”. It brings the reader back to the present day from remembering the past. It tells us the influence her father has had on Walker – “I look and cook just like him”. She sees her dead father most in herself when she is cooking because her “brain” is “light”. This image suggests cooking provides a moment when her mind is not heavy with thoughts. The description of cooking now becomes a metaphor. The way Walker cooks is compared to the way she lives, “seasoning none of my life the same way twice”. This suggests that like a good cook who adds appropriate quantities of salt and pepper according to the taste of a dish each time it is made, Walker lives her life in a constantly adapting and thrilling way. The metaphor of “seasoning” a dish also implies that Walker always spices up her life and lives in an exciting and responsive way. The stanza concludes with “happy to feed whoever strays my way”. The verb to stray suggests someone homeless who wanders in. Thus Walker, extends her father’s friendliness, to include any strangers who want to join her table. She is welcoming of others.

The final stanza shows that Walker has moved beyond the terrible feeling of loss and bereavement with which the poem began, and has convinced herself that although she has lived her life differently from her father, she is still like him. She writes “He would have grown to admire the woman I’ve become”. Here she acknowledges that her father might not have immediately liked all her actions, but that he would have “grown” or found a way to appreciate her. The final description is about Walker, not her father. She sums herself up as someone who is “cooking, writing, chopping wood, staring into the fire”. These activities begin with cooking and writing which we already know about. However, “chopping wood” shows us that she is also physically strong and able to do stereotypically-male tasks. Finally the image of her “staring into the fire” shows that she is a woman who can provide for herself both physically and spiritually; she chops the wood for her own fire, and she is able to stare at it in contemplation because she is also a woman of great ideas.

Therefore the poem begins full of sadness and loss, but ends with a realisation of the poet’s own worth which she believes her father would have appreciated.

POEMS WITH LOTS OF POTENTIAL COMPARISONS WITH THIS ONE

“If” – provides useful comparisons as it is the reverse of Walker’s verse – it is a poem in which a father gives advice to a child.

“Search for my Tongue” – provides useful comparisons as both poems are about how identity is formed by our earliest experiences.

“Piano” – provides useful comparisons. Both poems are concerned with remembering a dead parent.

“Do not go gentle into that good night” – provides useful comparisons as it is also about the conflicting emotions felt at the loss of a parent.

“Remember” – provides useful comparisons as it is also about how to remember loved ones who have died.