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| **A) Summary and structure of the poem** | **B) Key quotations and references from the poem** | **C) Key techniques and/or vocab to discuss quotes** | **C) Key context / interpretation: some vocabulary and further discussion** | POEM AT THIRTY-NINE |
| **Summary:** Alice Walker uses a fast-paced, stream of thought style to write about her father after his death. At times it feels like a eulogy as it celebrates his great achievements and best qualities, but Walker does not shy away from exploring their times of conflict, too. Although it is a poem about death, the tone is warm and loving. | **Biographical:** Walker was born in 1944, the youngest of eight siblings. Her parents were poor sharecroppers. Segregation in Georgia meant she went to an all-black school, but she excelled academically at school and beyond. She was very active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. She had an abortion while at college, and later had relationships with women as well as men. She is the author of poetry, prose and journalism. |
| **Stanza 1:** She declares she misses her father, and talks about her very early memories. | *“How I miss my father”**“I wish he had not been so tired when I was born”* | The declaration begins with ‘How’, which sounds like a sigh.Simple, monosyllabic words are used, as a child might. |
| **Stanza 2:** Memories of how he taught her good financial skills. | *“he must have said”**“bits of paper* [were] *a way to escape the life he knew”* | ‘Must’ suggests it happened very early on. She can’t fully remember the details but financial independence was always taught by him as it was a way out of poverty. | **Interpretation:** This free verse poem seems to meander along but there is a tighter structure than first appears. Walker seems to age throughout, and this is reflected in the changing vocabulary from the simple, monosyllabic words in the first stanza to the more complex, metaphorical language later.It is helpful to know something about Walker’s racial and economic background when reading this poem, but it also functions as a loving reflection upon a father/daughter relationship. It is touching how he taught her, a little girl, about money while me, the grown man, took immense pleasure in cooking. The collection of gerunds at the end reflect this mixing of traditional gender roles Walker is happy to take on as an adult.“He” and “I” recur very often, emphasising that it is not about her father so much as about their relationship and his enduring importance to her.Walker’s age when writing the poem, thirty-nine, is also important. She would have already drifted away from her father, as adults inevitably do, so the poem’s tone is nostalgic and loving rather than anguished.  |
| **Stanza 3:** A hint of darkness here as she explores conflict. | *“truth…did not always mean a beating”**“must have grieved him before the end”* | Corporal punishment was used, but he was a man who valued truth; he does not seem cruel.Might she be referring to her abortion or her bisexuality? |
| **Stanza 4:** She repeats her declaration and talks about him cooking | *“How I miss my father!”“yoga meditation”**“craved the voluptuous sharing”* | The addition of an exclamation mark heralds a shift in tone from melancholy to joyous. Cooking was a not just about subsistence to him but was spiritual. It was an act of love. |
| **Stanza 5:** She considers how like him he is. | *“I look and cook just like him”**“seasoning my life..feed whoever”* | The assonance here draws attention to the similarity.There is a metaphorical meaning here, too, perhaps about how varied her life has been or how her writing has nourished countless readers. |
| **Stanza 6:** Speculation about her father’s opinion of her as an adult. | *“He would have grown”* *“cooking, writing, chopping wood, staring”* | An echo of “must have” in stanza 2. She is confident he would approve of her.Interesting collection of gerunds: male and female; domestic and academic; productive and reflective. |