

EXAMPLE LITERATURE : POEM

THE LIVING PHOTOGRAPH

My small grandmother is tall there,
straight-back, white broderie anglaise shirt,
pleated skirt, flat shoes, grey bun,
a kind, old smile round her eyes.
Her big hand holds mine,
white hand in black hand.
Her sharp blue eyes look her own death in the eye.

It was true after all; that look.
My tall grandmother became small.
Her back round and hunched.
Her soup forgot to boil.
She went to the awful place grandmothers go.
Somewhere unknown, unthinkable.

But there she is still,
in the photo with me at three,
the crinkled smile is still living, breathing.

Jackie Kay

Synopsis

The poem talks about the persona's photograph of her grandmother. The persona describes the grandmother as being tall and who dressed up prim and proper.

She had a kind smile and did not fear death. As she aged, Grandmother became hunched and forgetful. She has passed away but the persona still feels her presence as she looks at the photograph of herself and grandmother, taken when she was three years old.

Literal Meaning

Stanza 1

The persona describes her grandmother as tall and well-dressed with a kind smile. Her smile comes from her eyes. On her deathbed, she held the persona's small black hand in her big white hand. She was not afraid to leave the world.

Stanza 2

persona accepts that her grandmother has passed to the other world, as all grandmothers do. Grandmother, who was of a tall stature became small, hunched and forgetful.

Stanza 3

The persona at age three had taken a photograph with grandmother. When she

looks at the photograph, she feels grandmother's presence. To the persona, her grandmother is still very much alive and smiling at her.

Figurative Meaning

Stanza 1

As we start off with our life, we stand tall and confident. We make sure everything is carried out properly without a flaw. We approach every situation with a smile even as we offer encouragement to others and receive support in return. When faced with an inevitable situation, we face the inevitability bravely.

Stanza 2

We can feel the onset of the inevitable as we look around and notice the signs of changes. We begin to lose our grip as things change beyond our control. We may even forget to do certain things. But, finally the situation is out of our hands and we have to let go.

Stanza 3

But sometimes there may be a memento to remind us of what we used to be. The memento helps to keep our memories alive.

Elements of the Poem

PLACE

- Britain, possibly Scotland where the poet grew up.
- In the photograph, the grandmother is wearing a white broderie anglaise shirt which is popular in Scotland.

- The persona is most likely in his/her home as the poem reveals the thoughts of a child who is looking at a photograph of the grandparent.

TIME

- 20th century
- The photograph is in colour and colour photography was expensive and not very common up until the 1960s.

Persona

The persona of this poem is a child looking at a photograph of his/her grandmother and him/her. It is not clearly stated whether the child is a boy or girl. From the description 'white hand in black hand', The persona could either be of mixed parentage or adopted. The child is of reading age but the simple words used to describe the grandmother such as 'tail', 'kind', 'big', 'small' and 'awful'

indicate that the persona is not very old.

Themes

Remembering a loved one

In this poem, the persona describes the grandmother as pictured in a photograph taken when he/she was three years old. The persona describes how the grandmother looks in detail—the

clothes she wears, the way she ties her hair up in a bun and her kind smiling eyes. Then the persona recalls the changes in the grandmother's appearance and behaviour as she grew older— how her back became bent, and how she became forgetful. From the photograph, the persona goes to his/her memory of the grandparent. The grandmother is dead now but she still looks alive in the photograph.

Family relationships

The poem focuses on the relationship between a grandchild and his/her grandparent. The photograph of the two reveals the bond between them. Grandmother is holding the child's hand in hers. Even though the grandparent and the child seem to be of different ethnicity as their skin 'colour' is different, they love each other. Even though grandmother changed into a bent-over forgetful old woman, the child still remembers the grandmother as she looks in the photograph.

Life and death

The poem is also about life and death from the point of view of the aged and the very young. The grandmother knew that she would die soon but she was unafraid—'Her sharp blue eyes look her

own death in the eye' (line 7). It also gives us the impression that grandmother would fight to stay alive for as long as possible. To the young person, death is a fearful thing. He/She understands that death is a place old people like grandmothers go. Death is unavoidable. Death is described as an 'awful place', 'somewhere unknown, unthinkable' (lines 12-13). That is why the person is happy that he/she has a photograph of the beloved grandmother where the grandmother lives on. The photograph defeats death. That is the significance of the title of this poem 'The Living Photograph'.

Moral Values

Unconditional love

The love between the person and the grandmother is clear in the way the child remembers the departed grandparent. This is unconditional love; it goes beyond age, race and distance. The

difference in age and race does not matter. The distance between them, now that grandmother has gone away to an 'unknown place', does not change this loving relationship.

Courage

The persona recognises the courage with which the grandmother faces the possibility of death. In the photograph, the grandmother is said to 'look her own death in the eye'. In contrast, the child is fearful of death, the 'awful place grandmothers go'.

Tone & Mood

The general tone of the poem is nostalgic as the grandchild looks at a photograph of the grandmother and recalls the past when the grandmother was alive. The second verse has a serious tone with an underlying feeling of fear as the child remembers the grandmother growing old and weak and finally dying. The poem ends on a positive note as the persona is comforted by the picture of the grandmother.

Language & Style

The language of the poem is simple and reflects the vocabulary of a child. Many single-syllable descriptive words are used e.g. 'flat', 'grey', 'kind', 'round', 'big', 'tall', 'small'. The lines are short and have a basic structure e.g. 'Her big hand holds mine'.

Imagery

Colour words help the reader to visualise what the persona sees in the photograph, e.g. 'white broderie anglaise shirt' (line 2); 'grey bun' (line 3), 'white hand', 'black hand' (line 6) and 'blue eyes' (line 7).

Contrast

- 'tall' and 'small'
- 'straight-back' and 'back round and hunched'
- 'white hand' and 'black hand'
- 'kind, old smile round her eyes' and 'sharp blue eyes'

SHORT STORY

TANJONG RHU - BY MINFONG HO

Synopsis

Mr T. W. Li, a successful businessman, has just lost his mother. As he mourns her death, he recalls some important events before her demise, most significantly revolving around a pair of binoculars. He had bought his mother a pair of binoculars so that she could see farther as she had cataracts. However, his mother's only concern was to see Tanjong Rhu, a place where they used to live while he was growing up. His father owned a small shipyard there before it was torn down about thirty years ago. When Mr Li finally convinced his mother to use the binoculars, he was upset that she still could not see the ships at the harbour, in front of his office. Instead, in her mind's eye, she saw Tanjong Rhu in the past, back when Mr Li was still a young boy accompanying his mother digging for crabs along the beach. He became impatient with his mother who seemed adamant to hold on to the past and had no interest in the present. He refused to listen to her stories. Back in the present, Mr Li regrets his actions as now he too longs to go back to his childhood in Tanjong Rhu. He finds that his memories are vague and there are many things that he does not remember clearly. Unfortunately, there is no one to answer his

questions as the person who shares the memories with him, his mother, has passed on.

SETTING

- Published in 1986, the story is set in Singapore and the time frame goes back and forth between the present (after the death of Ah-Ma) and the past (before the death of Ah-Ma).

- The most important location mentioned is Tanjong Rhu, a shipping port in Singapore where Mr Li

grew up. In the present day, it is filled with tall buildings and skyscrapers. However, eighty years

ago, Tanjong Rhu only had small shipyards where fishing boats were built. Mr Li's father owned such a shipyard.

- Mr Li's office is located on the 18th floor above Shenton Way, a central business district in Singapore.

- Mr Li has a big house with many rooms, a garden and a swimming pool. He first shows the binoculars to his mother in the garden.

- An important part of the house is the altar room, where Ah-Ma performs her daily prayers.

- The hospital where Ah-Ma passes away is also mentioned in the story.

CHARACTERS

Mr T. W. Li

- A successful businessman in the shipping sector
- Has a happy childhood with his family in Tanjong Rhu
- Happy family life - wife, son and daughter

- Close relationship with his mother but does not open up to her easily
- Modern in his ways and ideas - takes pride in his modern ways - makes sure no one is about when he bows to show respect to his dead parents
- Tolerant - does not interfere in his mother's traditional ways
- Meticulous - keeps track of number of ships every day by counting them
- Patient and respectful - waits for mother to finish prayers although he had to leave for office - does not hurry her
- Filial - made sure funeral of mother is done in the right way - full of customs and traditions
- Strict and does not entertain disrespect from the young - expects daughter to respect elders
- Regrets not talking to Ah Ma and never listening when she talked

Mr Li's mother (Ah-Ma)

- Small and thin with grey hair and a bent back
- A mother of nine, grandmother of thirty-four and great-grandmother of seventeen
- Has cataracts but does not want to have surgery to fix it
- Speaks Cantonese
- A traditional woman who still keeps chickens in the garden and practises the old Chinese customs and rituals
- Particular and meticulous when it comes to taking care of the altar and performing her prayers
- Yearns to see Tanjong Rhu, where she used to live years ago
- A simple woman who is content with what she has

- Seems to belong in the past as she is often lost in memories and likes to relate stories of the past

Ying

- Daughter of Mr Li and Helen
- Has an older brother at Cambridge University
- Is soon leaving for New York
- Speaks English to her father and Cantonese to her grandmother
- Loves her grandmother, whom she calls Popo, and is very close to her
- Affectionate towards her grandmother
- Takes the customs and rituals lightly and does not seem to acknowledge the importance of it
- Takes care of her grandmother at the hospital and gives her blood
- Very anxious that her grandmother is dying

Helen

- Wife of Mr Li
- Often has tea parties with her friends
- Seems to like socialising

Mr Li's father

- Used to own a shipyard where he built boats in Tanjong Rhu
- Died at the age of 53

- Upon his death, his wife offers daily prayers to him in the altar room and sometimes even talks to him

Mr Li's son

- Unnamed in the story
- Soon to complete his studies at Cambridge University

PLOT

Exposition

Mr T. W. Li, a rich businessman stood at his office window high above Shenton Way. Concerned about something which he could not lay his finger on he was not ready to go home. His mother's (Ah Ma) funeral was just a day before and everything had been done correctly. He counted the number of ships in the harbour as was his habit with his binoculars. The binoculars reminded him of his mother.

Conflict

He recalled he had bought them for Ah Ma and was eager to give them to her. He wanted her to use them as she did not want to undergo a cataract operation. His wife was having tea with friends in a room. Ah Ma was in the garden feeding her chickens. Speaking to her in Cantonese, he mentioned the binoculars as see-far glasses. Ah Ma was irritated as it reminded her of her refusal to have a cataract operation. Later, she mentioned her willingness to use them at his office to see Tanjong Rhu where her husband's shipyard used to be.

Climax

Next morning, Ah Ma prayed in the altar room. Then, she talked to her dead husband to inform him of her going to their son's office. Her granddaughter, Ying offered to do the praying with the joss sticks for her but she would not allow it. Mr Li ticked off Ying for criticising her grandmother for wanting to do things her way. While waiting for Ah Ma, Mr Li looked at his father's photograph and remembered their time together. When they were in his office, Mr Li pointed out the ships and the whole harbour to Ah Ma but she could not see anything. Instead, she talked about seeing their old hut, walks and crabbing on the beach. Coming back to the present, Mr Li felt nostalgic and

wanted very much to go back to the time of his childhood. He tried to recall but had very blurred memories.

Falling Action

He recalled that he tried to ask Ah Ma again. But, by then, she had become very sick and was bedridden in hospital, unable to move or talk very much. Ying helped to look after her. Knowing that her father wanted to talk to Ah Ma, she lifted her grandmother's eyelids and told her father to say something. But, Mr Li could not and scolded Ying for not being respectful. Ah Ma moved restlessly and managed to say something about the key to the altar being hidden before she drew her last breath.

Resolution

Now back in his office/ the day was becoming dark and he suddenly thought of the altar and what he had promised Ah Ma at her deathbed. This was what had been troubling him the whole day, something he had left undone. He rushed home to do that one last thing for her. He paid his respects to Ah Ma but, he could not open the drawer. He cried and told Ah Ma he saw Tanjong Rhu that day and then decided to leave well alone.

THEMES

Seeing

It tells us how the different generations view or 'see' their culture. I examines the relationship between a successful businessman named Mr L and his mother, and looks into the different meanings of 'seeing'. Mr Li look: at material goods as sources of happiness and a better life. He buys a pair o binoculars for his mother, who has cataracts, to see clearly. Mr Li assume* his mother needs a pair of binoculars to see more clearly so that the rest of her life would be more comfortable. But his mother sees Tanjong Rhu, not literally, but metaphorically, as the place where the children had grown up.

Tradition vs modernism

- Mr Li's mother values the importance of traditional practice. Everything must be done properly and she must 'tell' his father about visiting her son's place of work. In Chinese traditions, praying to the ancestor and the dead is important to every family.
- Mr Li, his wife, Helen, and daughter, Ying, are moulded in modernism. Mrs Li plays host to her high society friends with her tea sessions, and Ying speaks in English with her father but in Cantonese with her grandmother.

Generation gap

A picture of a big generation gap arises, with a conservative mother who refuses to have her eyes 'cut open', a severe and slightly self-centred father who always assumes young people do not respect the elders and a naive daughter who openly shows her feelings and opinions without considering her audiences. This generation gap is a result of modernisation eating into old ways, causing each generation to misunderstand the next. It is a common situation faced by people living in rapidly growing societies.