

Poems from Other Cultures and Traditions - Crib/Revision Sheet

In answering examination questions on the poems in this section, you need to have a clear view about what **you** think they mean. The following notes are suggestions and ideas, but you must not use these unless you fully understand and support them.

Exam questions on these poems will ask you to make links and comparisons. You will need to be able to talk about the poems' meaning (message) and how they work as poems (medium). In doing so, try to use some of the following key words:

**culture tradition identity language belief tongue religion metaphor
image positive negative satirical sound effects represent reflection
presentation tone voice**

Whenever you think of one poem, try to think of at least one other related/similar poem. This way, you will always be considering links and comparisons. One of the most obvious themes connecting a number of poems in this section is *shared cultures*.

Shared cultures - poems:

from 'Search For My Tongue'; from 'Unrelated Incidents'; 'Half-Caste'; 'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan'; 'Hurricane Hits England' (note how poem titles are always in inverted commas).

All of these poems are in some way about an individual experiencing two (or more) cultural identities. These two cultures are either in conflict with one another or they are merged and resolved within the individual. The following paragraphs are examples of how to write about this. The first one is written in some detail; the others will be shorter. Note the continued use of **key words**:

'Search For My Tongue' - Sujata Bhatt has two main cultural identities (see note below), Indian and English, which are represented by her use of language. Her 'mother tongue' is Gujarati, and her English voice, an adopted voice, becomes a 'foreign voice'. This is the conflict between cultural identities. However, this is resolved because her 'mother tongue' reasserts itself - she remembers and celebrates her first language and how it represents the culture of her birthplace (**and all of this is the message of the poem**).

To represent this re-emerging 'mother tongue', the poet uses the metaphor/image of the bud and blossoming flower. This is a positive image. Bhatt also represents her shared language/culture by the way the poem is presented on the page. The middle section of the poem is written in Gujarati. This is framed on either side by her English language. Therefore, the Gujarati voice is presented as a shared part of her English voice (**and all of this is how the poem works as a poem, the medium. In this case the medium mirrors the message: the poem's presentation on the page, one voice within another, mirrors the meaning/message of the poem**).

(NB Sujata Bhatt lived in the United States and now lives in Germany so she shares a number of cultural identities/experiences).

'Unrelated Incidents' - Tom Leonard has a powerful sense of his single identity which is Scottish. However, being Scottish is also to be British and this is where the shared identity is a feature of this poem. This shared identity is in conflict in the poem: the Glasgow dialect/accents vs. BBC Standard English.

The Glaswegian dialect of the poem asserts its Scottishness. The linear presentation on the page, and the mainly lower case writing, is unconventional. This mirrors the idea of an unconventional news broadcast in a Glasgow accent.

(NB This poem could be said to be a little dated as BBC national news broadcasters now speak in more obvious regional accents, e.g. Welsh)

'Half-Caste' - John Agard uses the term 'half-caste' to obviously represent the idea of a shared identity. A key feature of this poem is how it uses satire to make important points about individual identity and racism. He ridicules the idea of seeing anything or anyone as half of something by asking a series of rhetorical questions (in this case the answer to which is always 'no') so that the overall message is - should we refer to someone as 'half-caste'? The answer is a resounding 'NO'.

'Presents from my Aunts in Pakistan' - Moniza Alvi explores her sense of a shared culture by using the experience of receiving ethnic clothes from Pakistan. These colourful clothes are so carefully described to stress their difference to British clothing. When a glass bangle 'drew blood' it is an image of how she isn't used to these items of clothing. She mentions feeling 'alien', 'half-English' and having 'no fixed nationality' which are direct statements about her conflict of identity. There is a joke about her aunts wanting cardigans from Marks and Spencers to further explore this shared culture. Do you understand the imagery of the 'camel-skin lamp'?

'Hurricane in England' - Grace Nichols simply relates the 80s hurricanes in England to her childhood experiences of storms in Guyana and the Caribbean. This is the link between her two cultures. The words 'Huracan', 'Oya', 'Shango' and 'Hattie' stress her African/Caribbean experiences. In identifying herself with a 'frozen lake' and the 'very trees within me' she becomes a part of nature, and nature is universal: 'That the earth is the earth is the earth'. In other words, England is Guyana is the Caribbean is....?

Protest - poems:

'Ogun', 'Charlotte O'Neil's Song', 'An Old Woman' and 'Nothing's Changed'.

These poems can be linked as protest poems, poems that raise and to a degree complain about issues related to their cultural origins, but which could be universalised.

'Ogun' highlights an uncle's struggles, but celebrates his craftsmanship; 'Charlotte O'Neil's Song' records her and other's servitude, but celebrates Charlotte's defiance and independence; 'An Old Woman' vividly describes the suffering of a beggar woman and how the poet (and we as readers?) should feel our problems are insignificant when compared with this, and 'Nothing's Changed' bitterly recalls the cruel injustices of racism and argues this situation hasn't changed.