**St. Catherine High School**

**Grade 8 Literature**

**Poetry: Once Upon A Time by Gabriel Okara**

Once upon a time, son,  
they used to laugh with their hearts  
and laugh with their eyes:  
but now they only laugh with their teeth,  
while their ice-block-cold eyes  
search behind my shadow.

There was a time indeed  
they used to shake hands with their hearts:  
but that’s gone, son.  
Now they shake hands without hearts  
while their left hands search  
my empty pockets.

‘Feel at home!’ ‘Come again’:  
they say, and when I come  
again and feel  
at home, once, twice,  
there will be no thrice-  
for then I find doors shut on me.

So I have learned many things, son.  
I have learned to wear many faces  
like dresses – homeface,  
officeface, streetface, hostface,  
cocktailface, with all their conforming smiles  
like a fixed portrait smile.

And I have learned too  
to laugh with only my teeth  
and shake hands without my heart.  
I have also learned to say,’Goodbye’,  
when I mean ‘Good-riddance’:  
to say ‘Glad to meet you’,  
without being glad; and to say ‘It’s been  
nice talking to you’, after being bored.

But believe me, son.  
I want to be what I used to be  
when I was like you. I want  
to unlearn all these muting things.  
Most of all, I want to relearn  
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror  
shows only my teeth like a snake’s bare fangs!

So show me, son,  
how to laugh; show me how  
I used to laugh and smile  
once upon a time when I was like you.

*Once Upon A Time* is a free verse poem that focuses on a father's attitude to cultural change and times past, before the incoming Western culture affected the native African way of life.

* In the poem the man (presumably a father) addresses the son, telling him in a rather nostalgic manner, how things used to be. People were different back then, more genuine it seemed, and that is what the speaker would like to do now - return to a restored world - if he can only learn from the youngster.

Back then people weren't after your money, they could look you in the eye and smile real smiles. But nowadays, although the smiling teeth are on show, and they'll shake your hand, all they want to know is your financial status.

And so the poem progresses, the early stanzas revealing more of the negative changes that have occurred during the father's lifetime. He is old enough to have watched decent human standards drop to the wayside as western ideals (together with capitalism) gradually took over.

The speaker wants to relearn from the as yet untainted son; how to laugh and be genuine again. It's rather a pathetic plea, coming from the adult to the youngster - for what can the son realistically do? Can the clocks be put back? Can an ancient culture be retrieved from the overwhelming modern culture?

* The **themes** are: how society changes, cultural shift, capitalism, values.

Perhaps the tone is ironic, perhaps the speaker knows deep inside that he'll never regain that purity, he won't be able to turn back time and relive life as a transformed person. That's why the title could be from a fairytale; the speaker's wishes are a fantasy.The speaker dearly wishes to relearn how to smile a genuine smile again, how to laugh without pretension - but will he really be able to learn from the youngster?

The speaker is earnest, he clearly wants to get back to a time he perceives as pure and innocent and good...in the old African culture, before the Western values crept and took over.

**First Stanza**

The first line suggests that this poem is going to be based on a story, is a kind of story or or fairytale?

The speaker is addressing his son, so this could well be a father beginning to explain how things used to be, how people *'they'* used to laugh with their hearts and eyes. Back in the past.

In contrast, nowadays laughter is more of a show of teeth, and the eyes are cold and looking for something other than the real person.

So already the present is being judged by the past. And from what we can gather from these first six lines, the speaker prefers the attitudes of the people from the past. There is the feeling that negative change is here.

**Second Stanza**

The art of shaking hands has also changed. In the past a greeting was genuine, a person welcomed for who they were. But nowadays people shake hands with one eye on your status, your financial status.

People are no longer genuinely warm towards others. People are on the make, wanting to get something from you.

**Third Stanza**

People invite you round to their homes making out as if you're important to them but if you don't measure up socially or your status isn't quite right, you're not invited again.

The alienation continues. People nowadays are artificial and fickle because of the change in culture.

**Fourth Stanza**

The first three stanzas outline the speaker's perception of changing culture and attitudes and values in his country.

This fourth stanza describes how the speaker himself had to change and learn in order to comply. He uses a comparison - faces to dresses - to highlight the various personas he took on, all the while smiling.

The repeated use of *face* affixed to various places and situations is highly visual.

**Fifth Stanza**

He also has become adept at the heartless hand shake and hollow toothy smile, plus he knows how to deceive people with his farewells and welcomes and false politeness.

Basically he is saying that he has become an integral part of this new culture. It's been quite an education for him.

**Sixth Stanza**

But he is not happy being a conformist. He wants to regain a former innocence the youngster still holds. He wants no part of this new culture and *all these muting things.* That word *muting* means to deaden in this context.

What he wants most is to be able to laugh in innocence again - he likens himself to a snake, his teeth hold something toxic, even dangerous.

**Seventh Stanza**

He comes clean. He wants the son to show him how to regain this lost innocence. How to laugh and smile like in the old days when he was young and carefree and the culture encouraged openness and honesty a pure identity.

**Literary Devices**

**Alliteration**

When two or more words close together in a line begin with the same consonant, creating different sound textures:

*hands without hearts....these muting things....So show me, son,...when I was*

**Assonance**

When two or more words are close together in a line and have similar sounding vowels, again creating different sounds:

*upon a time, son....like a fixed portrait smile....was like you. I want....*

**Simile**

When something is compared to a different thing, using the words like or as. For example:

*I have learned to wear many faces/like dresses -*

*with all their conforming smiles/like a fixed portrait smile.*

*like a snake's bare fangs.*

**Activity**

Answer the following questions based on the poem, “Once Upon a Time” by Gabriel Okara.

1. Where do we see the words, “Once Upon a Time” being used?
2. What does this say about the subject matter of the poem?
3. What do you think brought on the change that was seen in the personas throughout the poem?
4. Why do you think the father decided to seek help from his son?
5. Shouldn’t the father know the answers?
6. Why do you think people have so many different faces and how is it reflected in the poem?
7. In what way do you think the son would be able to help his father?
8. What are the literary devices being used in the poem?
9. How do these devices help to bring across the message the persona is trying to convey?