

Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, my 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 only with 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.

Gabriel Okara

Comment [KH1]: Obviously significant title – suggests a pleasant parent / story-telling situation – however this story isn't pleasant. Underlines the final contrast where parent learns from child.

Comment [KH2]: First of all – this is a message to the persona's son – however it becomes a plea to him

Comment [KH3]: Lots of 'they' – threatening because indistinct, also they are all one, vague, amorphous, homogenous

Comment [KH4]: Positive organs – suggesting genuine feeling – soft vowel sounds. Also the heart is internal, eyes are windows to soul. This is the first of a sequence of many repetitions – eventually the words become meaningless because repeated – like empty gestures

Comment [KH5]: Contrast with eyes and heart – sharp, harsh consonants also they are superficial and vaguely threatening. The positive image of laughter is undermined by teeth and the positive image of eyes is undermined by coldness

Comment [KH6]: Metaphor – suggesting a lack of real emotion

Comment [KH7]: Vaguely threatening – looks like they are looking for weakness, summing him up, assessing him – shadow is negative

Comment [KH8]: Time words – and contrast between 'used to' and 'now' suggest a change / development / growth for the worse

Comment [KH9]: Clear contrast word – underlining the whole message of the poem

Comment [KH10]: End-stopping suggests it is very definitely over – the enjambment may be used, by contrast, to stress this negativity

Comment [KH11]: Word search is repeated – this time more explicitly a violation

Comment [KH12]: Empty itself suggests hopelessness

Comment [KH13]: Fake and empty sentiments – highlighted by the exclamation mark

Comment [KH14]: Interesting modal verb suggesting certainty

Comment [KH15]: A clear image of exclusion

Comment [KH16]: This is important because it explains the logic of the argument

Comment [KH17]: Learned has negative connotations – the idea that it's almost brainwashing, unholy imitation

Comment [KH18]: The idea suggests superficiality – the ease with which the dresses are interchanged suggests they are meaningless

Comment [KH19]: A clearer example of how repetitions of a word result in meaninglessness

Comment [KH20]: A clearly significant word, along with muting, suggesting that he has lost his individual identity, spark and meaning

Comment [KH21]: Repetition of these phrases to show that he has succumbed

Comment [KH22]: However, this again suggests a turn in the tables – a fight back – there is still some life / hope – next generation

Comment [KH23]: There have been I's all the way through suggesting that the individual is not totally defeated – however, at this crucial transition point – they explode – the individual is reasserted

Comment [KH24]: Again an argument word – after a transition – suggesting a resolution – some hope

Comment [KH25]: Note – the reassertion of the positive in these last lines!!
Once again a symbol hope

Comment [KH26]: Clearly significant cyclical poem – repetition of the title and opening line suggesting that we have come full cycle and it is now the child's turn to lead and teach

Comment [KH27]: Final focus on 'you' emphasises the importance of the coming generation and their ability to set an example – here the 'you' is emphasised of the 'I' which is lost in the preceding sentence