

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Power and Conflict

The Emigr e - *Carol Rumens*



THE EMIGRÉE

Carol Rumens

Brief Summary

The poem is about somebody who had to leave their country as a child to be safe. They are looking back fondly whilst lamenting the discrimination they experience in their new country.

Synopsis

- The narrator tells a story about her memories of the country she left as a child
- She believes the memories to be infallible
- The news now shows that there are tyrants and wars throughout the land and the narrator acknowledges this sad truth
- She goes on to present a positive perspective
- As time goes on, she gains more clarity on the situation
- It is revealed that her language is important in terms of who she is
- Although she cannot return, she is reminded of her city
- She presents maternal emotions towards it
- She either returns to how the city is today or compares the city to her new home
- There is a threatening atmosphere from the citizens
- This contrasts with the positivity of her old city

Summary

Context – Links to the modern day refugee crisis

Structure - There is no progression in the narrative to show that the narrator is stuck in the past.

Language – Sunlight // Childlike lexis // discrimination.

Key Points – The bad aspects of the war torn country are overlooked to idealise it.

Context

Carol Rumens (1944-)

Rumens was born in London but also lived in Belfast and Wales as well as travelling widely throughout Russia and eastern Europe. This aspect of her life is reflected in her writing which is largely about foreign customs, cultures and language.

The Emigrée

The poem is contained in the 1993 collection “Thinking of Skins” which is centred on political consciousness in Russia and East Europe. Within the collection there is also a focus on the relationship between identity and culture.



The Emigrée

This use of temporal deixis from the outset creates a childlike tone to the poem.

The theme of language is used here to show how the narrator has not moved on from her childhood.

This alludes to the pain and conflict inflicted by man-made borders.

There once was a country... I left it as a child
but my memory of it is sunlight-clear
for it seems I never saw it in that November
which, I am told, comes to the mildest city.
The worst news I receive of it cannot break
my original view, the bright, filled paperweight.
It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants,
but I am branded by an impression of sunlight.

The white streets of that city, the graceful slopes
glow even clearer as time rolls its tanks
and the frontiers rise between us, close like waves.
That child's vocabulary I carried here
like a hollow doll, opens and spills a grammar.
Soon I shall have every coloured molecule of it.
It may by now be a lie, banned by the state
but I can't get it off my tongue. It tastes of sunlight.

I have no passport, there's no way back at all
but my city comes to me in its own white plane.
It lies down in front of me, docile as paper;
I comb its hair and love its shining eyes.
My city takes me dancing through the city
of walls. They accuse me of absence, they circle me.
They accuse me of being dark in their free city.
My city hides behind me. They mutter death,
and my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight.

The theme of sunlight is referred to repeatedly.

This use of gustatory imagery shows the narrator's delight in the memory.

This use of emphatic repetition shows the persecution the narrator endures in their new home by creating a violent tone.



The opening

The opening line “**there once was a country**”, establishes a **fantastical tone** to highlight the fact that the place described is a memory rather than a reality. This shows how the place the speaker remembers is **romanticised by the idealism of youth** and was never as perfect as the way it is depicted. The **unreliability of the memory** is further presented through Rumens’ use of **ellipsis** which creates the pause necessary for the narrator to gather their thoughts and carry on with the story.

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The title itself is indicative of the content of the poem. There is a contrast between the English “**the**” and the French “**Emigré**”. This establishes the idea of two conflicting cultures and identities.

Structure

Repetition

The **repetition** of “**they**” creates an **aggressive and accusatory tone** to make the city seem threatening and hostile. This reflects the aggression aimed at her from the citizens of her new city due to their racism which is seen in they “**accuse me of being dark**”. This shows that she is experiencing a new threat which is no longer physical conflict but social rejection. She feels that she does not belong in her new city as she does not share their culture or identity.

However, she cannot return to her native country leaving her in a precarious position in which she experiences no “**sunlight**”. Rumens further emphasises her feelings of **segregation** through the **repetition** in “**their city**” and “**they accuse me of absence**”.

The last stanza

The last stanza can be interpreted to be a description of the narrator’s new city. Rumens uses **enjambment** in “**Through the city// Of walls.**” to separate “**of walls**” from the rest of the text. This causes the reader to see walls as an isolated idea, creating **connotations of entrapment**. The final stanza also contains **caesura** and **free verse** to create a sense of chaos which could conversely be interpreted as indicative of freedom.



Form

The poem is predominantly in **free verse** with **no rhyme or rhythm**. This could be seen to represent the chaos and lack of control over a country with no stable government. This interpretation **juxtaposes** with the **positive imagery** in the poem so the form could more likely be presenting freedom.

There is some limited order to the poem in the similar stanza lengths which could be seen to represent the attempt at order inflicted upon her life through her emigration.

Language

Epistrophe

_An **epistrophe** is the repeated use of a word at the end of a stanza or sentence. In this poem, every stanza ends with a **reference to sunlight**. Rumens **juxtaposes** the **positive connotations** of **“sunlight”** with the **negative connotations** of **“branded”** in **“But I am branded by the impression of sunlight”**. This shows how her love for her country will always overrule any feelings of pain caused by it.

The **gustatory imagery** in **“it tastes of sunlight”** is similarly positive as is the **juxtaposition between darkness and light** in **“my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight”**. Rumens' use of **epistrophe** in the poem demonstrates that no matter what she hears in the news, the speaker will always have a positive view of her city.

Subjunctive case

_When referring to the **negative attributes of her city**, the speaker uses the **subjunctive case** in **“it may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants”**. This shows how these flaws seem hypothetical to her as she does not have a new perspective of her city besides what she gained before she left as a child.

Contrastingly, the negative traits of her new city and her feelings of fear are stated definitively. These flaws are shown to be more tangible in **“they mutter death”, “city of walls”** and **“they accuse me”**. This shows her certainty of the flaws of her new city but this is likely because she no longer has the naivety of childhood altering her perspective.

Extended metaphor

The poem acts as an **extended metaphor for a lost childhood**. As well as the narrator being depicted to have naïve childlike tendencies, her relationship with her former city is also shown to be maternal. The **metaphor “I comb its hair and love its shining eyes”** implies that she acts like a mother to the city in the way through her unconditional love and protective tendencies. This impression is reinforced by **“my city hides behind me”** which implies that she is attempting to defend it from the criticism of the outside world.



Comparisons

Checking out me history

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The violent connotations of “Bandage up me eye with me own history” allude to the conflict between Agard’s narrator’s culture and the one being inflicted on him by colonial rule. There is a similar conflict shown in Rumens’ poem by the aggressive undertones of “I am branded by an impression of sunlight”. • Both poets attach great emotional significance to their cultural identity. Agard’s repetition of “Dem tell me” shows the anger the narrator feels at having had his heritage hidden from him. Likewise, Rumens appears to have maternal feelings towards her former home and this is shown by the childlike lexis of “I comb its hair and love its shining eyes”. • The importance of language is seen in Rumens’ work in “child’s vocabulary” which shows the narrator desperately clinging to the language of their childhood. Similarly, Agard uses a Creole language to represent the different cultures which have influenced him.
<p>Differences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In <i>Checking out me history</i>, the narrator demonises his childhood through his angry tone and the separation of the stanzas to show how he was not educated sufficiently. Contrastingly, Rumens uses light imagery in “an impression of sunlight”, “The white streets” and “It tastes of sunlight” to present a dreamlike, idealised childhood.

