

## *Six Poems by Jackie Kay*

### Teaching Notes and Discussion Questions for National Five English

Lorna Smith

#### JACKIE KAY

Jackie Kay was born in Edinburgh in 1961 to a Scottish mother and a Nigerian father. Her birth parents met when her father was a student at Aberdeen University and her mother was working as a nurse. She was adopted as a baby by Helen and John Kay, who live in Bishopbriggs. John worked for the Communist Party of Great Britain and Helen was the Scottish Secretary of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Jackie originally wanted to be an actress, but after a serious road accident, which required a long convalescence, and encouraged by the writer Alasdair Gray, she decided to become a writer. Her first book of poetry, *The Adoption Papers*, based on her own experiences of adoption, was published in 1991 and won the Saltire Society Scottish First Book Award. Since then she has published collections of poetry, a novel, two short story collections, drama, poems and short stories for children, and a memoir, *Red Dust Road*, which explores her search for her birth parents and is a heartfelt, but never sentimental tribute to her adoptive parents who had given her their unstinting love, support and encouragement. Jackie Kay has won many awards and honours including the Eric Gregory Award in 1991, the Somerset Maugham Award in 1994 and the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1998. She is currently Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University. A skilled and engaging performer, she is much in demand for readings of her own work.

#### KEY THEMES OF HER WORK

Her work in prose, poetry, drama and non-fiction is varied, thought-provoking, and grounded in every day experience. She not only writes in her own voice using the Scottish language and speech rhythms she grew up with but also creates other voices: that of a mother, daughter, old woman, lover, child. Her work explores a wide range of emotional experiences, heightened by her awareness of her own complex genetic inheritance. She portrays the complexities of family relationships with insight and compassion and writes of the death of loved ones with great poignancy. Her writing reflects the cruel realities of racism, misogyny and homophobia, but is never bitter or despairing. It is honest, direct and often leavened with humour. It conveys, above all, the transformative power of human love.

#### THE SIX POEMS FOR NATIONAL FIVE

The six poems are all in the collection *Darling*, published by Bloodaxe in 2007: "My Grandmother's Houses" (p. 45); "Keeping Orchids" (p. 86); "Lucozade" (p. 138); "Bed" (p. 148); "Divorce" (p. 210); and "Gap Year" (p. 239). The texts are also available on the Scottish Poetry Library website, at

[www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/jackie-kay](http://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poets/jackie-kay)

They explore family relationships and the complex emotions arising from close family bonds.

#### RANGE:

- National 5 English

#### KEY TEXTS:

##### Poetry Collections

- *The Adoption Papers* (Bloodaxe Books, 1991)
- *Darling* (Bloodaxe Books, 2007)

##### Novels

- *Trumpet* (Random House, 1998)

##### Short Story Collections

- *Wish I Was Here* (Pan MacMillan, 2012)
- *Why Don't You Stop Talking* (Pan MacMillan, 2012)

##### Radio Plays

- *The Lamplighter* (Bloodaxe Books, 2008)

##### Memoirs

- *Red Dust Road* (Picador, 2010)

### My Grandmother's Houses

In this poem, the poet simultaneously recreates her childhood experiences and voices her adult perceptions of her grandmother. Each section of the poem describes a different house, each flat reflecting different aspects of her life, work and personality. This structure enables Jackie Kay to create a vivid, memorable portrait of her grandmother. The first section describes her tenement flat with her bedroom's idiosyncratic clutter. In the second section the poet creates a picture of her life in her new high-rise flat. We learn that she is always busy, still cleaning people's houses at the age of seventy and taking her reluctant grandchild to church with her on Sundays. The third section describes the child's perceptions of her grandmother's "cleaning house" and uses snatches of remembered conversations to portray the somewhat patronising "posh one". The final three lines suggest that her grandmother had moved to a ground floor flat, where she is disturbed by screaming ambulances. It is a sombre ending to a poem which pays tribute to the life of this spirited, hard-working and devout woman.

### Questions for Discussion

- Describe how the poet structures this poem.
- Comment on the content of the first and the last two lines, suggesting why the poet has framed the main body of the poem in this way.
- Look closely at the poet's detailed descriptions of the tenement flat and the high-rise flat. What do they suggest about her grandmother's personality and her way of life?
- "even at 70 she cleans people's houses / for ten bob" What does this statement reveal about the poet's grandmother?
- Choose three phrases which show that the child is reluctant to accompany her to church and does not enjoy the experience and suggest why they are effective.
- "like an octopus's arms"; "a one winged creature". Name the language technique used in each of these phrases and suggest what you think the poet is trying to convey.
- What do the snatches of remembered conversation suggest about "the posh one"?

### Keeping Orchids

This poem describes the poet's first meeting with her birth mother. It is a painful emotional journey for both women. The poet uses the images of the orchids her birth mother gave her on their first meeting and of her own and her mother's "troubled hands" as symbols of the complex, painful emotions they both feel. It is not a joyful meeting. Jackie Kay can articulate her own feelings but finds it hard to read her mother's feelings as "she tells the story of her life". The poet describes her mother's account of her life as "compressed", "airtight", "a sad square". It does not reveal enough; it does not bring comfort to her daughter, hungry for emotional connection and revelation.

### Questions for Discussion

- Why does the poet emphasise in lines 1 and 2 that the orchids are still alive?
- What does the line "I carried them back, like a baby in a shawl" reveal about the poet's feelings?
- Why does the poet emphasise that "twice since" she carried the orchids home, their glass carafe had fallen over causing her to rearrange them "with troubled hands"?
- Why does the poet repeat the image of the buds "closed as secrets" in stanza 5?
- How does the poet develop the image of her mother's troubled hands in stanzas 10 and 11?
- "A door opens and closes. Time is outside waiting". What two meanings could these lines have?
- Using "boiling water" and "cutting the stems with a sharp knife" are somewhat drastic but effective remedies for wilting flowers. Why is it so important for the poet to try to make the orchids last?
- Once you have read and discussed the poem, it would be a good idea to read the poet's prose account of this meeting in her memoir *Red Dust Road* (pp. 61–67), then compare and contrast the prose account and the poem.

### Lucozade

In this poem Jackie Kay describes visiting her mother in hospital. She was a young girl of sixteen, afraid that her mother would die. The poem not only describes the shock of seeing her mother but conveys the personality of her mother expressively and with humour. Her mother's ironic questions, her humorous commands, her idiosyncratic remarks may be partially the result of her treatment or operation but strongly suggest a person who faces her hospital experience with spirit and humour. There is something indomitable about her. The last two stanzas describe the euphoria of relief the poet feels when she realises her mother will not die but has recovered enough to wave from her hospital bed. The clearing of her mother's ward cupboard of the traditional gifts an invalid receives, which her mother had decisively rejected, is a cathartic moment for the poet. For the sixteen-year-old poet, her senses heightened after the trauma of her mother's hospitalisation, the sight of her mother waving becomes for her a beautiful, almost heavenly vision.

### Questions for Discussion

- Comment on the poet's word choice in stanza 1. Which words suggest that it is a young person speaking?
- Why do you think the poet repeats the phrase, "sad chrysanthemums"?
- How does the poet suggest her mother's confused state in stanza 2?
- What impression of her mother's personality do we get in stanza 4?
- How is this impression reinforced in stanza 5?
- "Says she". What does this expression suggest about the poet's reaction to her mother's orders?
- The phrase, "weighted down" refers to the collection of unwanted gifts her mother has rejected. Does it suggest another meaning?
- In what way is the line, "my mother on her high hospital bed, waves back" in stanza 7 the turning point of the poem?
- Comment on the language the poet uses in stanza 7 to describe her recovering mother and her own emotional reaction to this experience.

### Bed

In this poem Jackie Kay uses the dramatic monologue form to convey the stark realities of extreme old age. The speaker is an elderly bed-bound woman, completely dependent on her daughter for her care. She voices her thoughts and feelings in a colloquial Scots which is direct, expressive and sometimes bleakly humorous. Her words describe with a raw honesty the physical ravages of old age and the guilt and frustration she feels. She has become the "wean noo". In the second last stanza her words have a stark poetry in the personification of Time held "between / the soft bits o' ma thumbs". In the last stanza she contemplates her own death. Her matter of fact question, "how wull she feel?" and her apparently simple and direct statements suggest a complexity of emotions about her own death and how it will affect her daughter.

### Questions for Discussion

- What do we learn about the speaker's circumstances in stanzas 1 and 2?
- What feelings does she express about her situation?
- Name the techniques the poet uses in the following phrases and comment on how effective they are in portraying the woman's personality: "this big blastit bed"; "year in, year oot"; "ma great tent o' nappy".
- What reason is suggested for the lack of communication between mother and daughter in the statement, "the blethers ha been plucked oot o' us"?
- In stanzas 4, 5 and 6, what more do we learn about her and her situation?
- Which of her expressions reveal her frustration with her isolation and lack of company?
- Look at stanza 7. Why do you think she says "Aye fine" when her daughter hands her her "baby food"?
- In stanza 9 and the first line of stanza 10 the woman's language becomes less conversational. Comment on the effectiveness of the language techniques the poet uses to convey this change.
- What qualities does the woman still have, despite her cruel circumstances?

### Divorce

This poem is written in the form of an address. The title leads us to expect a poem about divorcing parents but it is soon clear that it is a young person who wishes to divorce her parents. The dramatic, often comical tone leads us to question how serious the girl's grievances are or wonder if her histrionics mask a deeper hurt. Her vision of the parents she wishes for is lyrical and idealistic, suggesting that in her disappointment with her real parents she is seeking the impossible. There is a wistfulness and longing in the lines "who speak in the soft murmur of rivers" and "sing in the colourful voices of rainbows" which is in strong contrast to the confrontational persona presented in the rest of the poem. The girl uses blunt, assertive, uncompromising statements: "I want a divorce"; "I never chose you"; "I don't want to be your child"; building up to the final climax in the last line, but their force is blunted by the humorous effect of the rhyming of the final couplet. The poem is dramatic, humorous and unsettling.

### Questions for Discussion

- What does the title of the poem suggest the subject matter of the poem will be?
- How do the first four lines seem to reinforce this?
- "so part I must, and quickly." Comment on the sentence structure and word choice in this line and suggest the tone the speaker has adopted.
- What does the father's comment, "Are you off in the cream puff, Lady Muck?" reveal about his opinion of his daughter?
- Show how the poet uses repetition in the second stanza to build up to a climax in the last line.
- What kind of parents does she wish for? Comment on the tone and word choice she uses.
- In the last five lines the speaker's words are blunt and uncompromising, bringing the poem to a dramatic and humorous climax. What language techniques are used to create this effect?
- Consider the poem as a whole. Is she exaggerating her grievances? Or do her confrontational words mask a deeper hurt?

### Gap Year

This poem is written in the form of an address to her son, Mateo. It expresses her love for and pride in her son, who is spending a gap year travelling widely in South America. In the first section she describes her memories of the weeks before he was born: her excited anticipation, the difficult birth. In the second section she describes the progress of his travels and her mixed feelings about his departure. She is caught up in the romance and adventure of his travels in exotic places but misses him greatly. In contrast, his grandfather's blunt advice reminds her of the very real dangers he might encounter. She cannot hide her strong feelings of disappointment when she learns he will return home four weeks later than she had expected, but comments with wry humour that she feels "like a home-alone mother". In the last two stanzas, however, her mood changes to one of elation and pride when she looks at photos of her son "on top of the world". It seems no time since he was a baby dreaming in his Moses basket.

### Questions for Discussion

- Look at the first stanza. What feelings does the poet have as she awaits her son's birth?
- Name the language techniques used in the following phrases: "tight tub of a stomach"; "turning, burping, awake, asleep"; and say how effective these expressions are in describing the expectant mother's experience.
- What does the phrase "close stranger" and the word "tumshie" tell us about the poet's feelings about her unborn child?
- How does the poet link the two sections of the poem?
- What is the poet's first reaction to the grandfather's blunt advice?
- How does she react to the news that he will be returning four weeks later than expected?
- The last two stanzas signal a further mood change. Comment on the effectiveness of the language the poet uses to convey her feelings.
- Comment on the poet's word choice in the phrase "a flip and a skip ago". What is she trying to emphasise?