

Poetry Themes Analysis

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How to Use This Page

This page groups poems by theme for comparative essay preparation. For any two poems that share a theme, you can write a Paper 2 poetry essay comparing how each poet explores it.

Racism and Racial Discrimination

The most directly examined theme across the syllabus. Several poems deal with how race determines opportunity, dignity, and belonging.

"Dreaming Black Boy" — James Berry

A young Black boy's twelve wishes expose the quiet, everyday violence of racism: the teacher's eyes that pass over him, the education denied, the freedom of travel withheld. His final wish is empathy rather than revenge — he does not want anyone else to suffer what he carries.

"Test Match Sabina Park" — Stewart Brown

The poem reverses the usual racial dynamic: here it is the white Englishman whose racial pride collapses. His "rosette" — a badge of white privilege — is worn proudly on entry and leaves tarnished. The poem treats nationality and race as inseparable, and sport as a leveller that privilege cannot override.

"West Indies, U.S.A." — Stewart Brown

Racial discrimination is institutionalised here: Black Caribbean passengers are ordered to stay on the plane in San Juan to prevent "too many desperate blacks" from entering. The poem connects race to imperialism — Puerto Rico's apparent prosperity is exposed as a stolen thing, and its racial politics as an extension of American control.

"This Is the Dark Time, My Love" — Martin Carter

Colonial occupation is the poem's context. The "man of death" who watches over the sleeping beloved is the literal face of racial domination — an invader who targets not just freedom but dreams.

Colonialism and Imperialism

Several poems engage with the history of European colonisation in the Caribbean and its ongoing effects.

"South" — Kamau Brathwaite

The word "recapture" carries the weight of colonial history. The Caribbean was "captured" — so the speaker's act of memory is a re-taking. The contrast between the "turbulent soil" of home and the "stoniest cities" of the north reflects the emotional poverty of life in the coloniser's country. The river and ocean symbolise two different relationships to the land: borrowed and owned.

"West Indies, U.S.A." — Stewart Brown

The title itself (formatted like an address: "West Indies, USA") implies the region is a subset of America. Puerto Rico became a US territory in 1898 after being taken in the Spanish-American War — just as Texas was taken from Mexico. "Belonged to someone else" is the poem's final verdict on imperialism.

"This Is the Dark Time, My Love" — Martin Carter

Written while Carter was imprisoned by the British colonial authorities in Guyana, 1953. The "strange invader" is not metaphorical. The poem was written from inside occupation.

"Dreaming Black Boy" — James Berry

The reference to ancestors as "woodchoppers" alludes to the legacy of slavery and colonial labour. The persona knows he is no longer enslaved in the literal sense — yet much of that constraint still shapes his world.

Parenting, Love, and Family

"Little Boy Crying" — Mervyn Morris

The poem explores the gap between how the father appears to the boy (a cruel giant) and what he truly feels (longing, guilt, love). The discipline is not cruelty but sacrifice — the father chooses his son's long-term growth over his own immediate desire to comfort him.

"The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son" — Lorna Goodison

The woman carries her son from before birth — "tight up under her heart" — and invests everything in him as a pathway out of poverty. He is not just a child but a hope, a visa, a future. The poem ends with a single word, "Absalom," naming the biblical son whose death broke his father's heart.

Identity and Belonging

"South" — Kamau Brathwaite

The poem is structured around displacement and the slow journey back. The ocean represents Caribbean identity at its most elemental; the river represents borrowed existence in someone else's land. "We who are born of the ocean can never seek solace in rivers" is the poem's central declaration.

"Once Upon a Time" — Gabriel Okara

The speaker's identity has fragmented under social pressure. He has learned to "wear many faces like dresses" — a home face, an office face, a street face. The man who looks in the mirror and sees snake's fangs is unrecognisable to himself.

"My Parents" — Stephen Spender

The speaker's identity is caught between two worlds: the protected, sheltered world his parents built and the free, physical world of the rough boys. The poem ends in a question about whose fault the divide was — and whether reconciliation was ever possible.

Loss of Innocence

"Once Upon a Time" — Gabriel Okara

The "once upon a time" framing presents the speaker's authentic self — the child who laughed with his eyes and heart — as a fairy tale, something so far gone it no longer feels real.

"Dreaming Black Boy" — James Berry

The boy's wishes are a child's wishes: recognition by a teacher, a hug after scoring a goal. Racism steals even these small dignities, forcing a child to carry adult burdens.

"My Parents" — Stephen Spender

The speaker loses the chance of friendship with the rough boys through no action of his own. His parents' protection becomes the mechanism of his social isolation.

Oppression and Survival

"Dreaming Black Boy" — James Berry

Survival here is psychological as much as physical: the persona survives by dreaming, by wishing, by aspiring to Paul Robeson's voice. "I could suffer a big big lot" is the poem's most raw admission — and its most defiant.

"This Is the Dark Time, My Love" — Martin Carter

The title calls it a "time," not a "forever" — implying a season that will pass. The sun is hidden, not extinguished. Hope persists even inside the poem's darkest imagery.

"The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son" — Lorna Goodison

The woman's only remaining power is prayer: "at knee city she uses them." She has no power "at the level of earth" — only spiritual resistance. The poem ends not in resolution but in preparation.

Appearance vs. Reality / Hypocrisy

"Once Upon a Time" — Gabriel Okara

The entire poem is a meditation on the gap between appearance and truth. The "teeth" smile (appearance) vs. the "heart" laugh (reality) structures the poem's central contrast. The speaker has mastered the art of saying "goodbye" when he means "good riddance."

"A Stone's Throw" — Elma Mitchell

The crowd claims "virtuous" hands while bruising the woman's skin. They describe the stoning as "love-bites" and "kisses of stone." The poem's entire voice is ironic — the narrator cannot see the contradiction between his self-righteousness and his actions.

"Test Match Sabina Park" — Stewart Brown

The persona's pride is exposed as a performance. The "rosette of my skin" he wears proudly on entry leaves "tarnished" and "frayed" on exit. His explanation ("the monsoon season in Manchester") reveals his condescension — and his desperation.

Religion and Moral Judgment

"A Stone's Throw" — Elma Mitchell

A retelling of John 8:3–11: the woman caught in adultery, brought to Jesus to be stoned. The poem gives voice to one of the would-be executioners, exposing how religious authority can be used to mask sadism. The crowd walks away "still holding stones."

"The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son" — Lorna Goodison

Biblical allusions run throughout: the "deep crowned hat" recalls the crown of thorns; "hot and exploding death" alludes to Matthew 7:9; the final word "Absalom" names King David's son who betrayed him. The poem frames the son's fate as tragedy of biblical scale.

"Ol' Higue" — Mark McWatt

The Ol' Higue exists at the intersection of folklore and religion. She functions as a scapegoat for the guilt and fear that mothers cannot acknowledge — what the poem calls "the murder inside your head."

Folklore and the Supernatural

"Ol' Higue" — Mark McWatt

The poem gives voice to the soucouyant — a Caribbean folklore figure who removes her skin at night, transforms into fire, and drinks the blood of infants. The poem's radical move is to make her sympathetic: she does not want to be this. She is compelled by forces she cannot control. Her existence is sustained by belief: only "the foolish" can be harmed by her.

Women, Gender, and Violence Against Women

"A Stone's Throw" — Elma Mitchell

The woman is never given a voice in the poem — she is defined entirely by the narrator's gaze. Her beauty is noted alongside her terror with equal detachment. The sexual imagery ("love-bites," "frigid rape," "kisses of stone") exposes the sadism beneath the crowd's moral posturing.

"Mirror" — Sylvia Plath

The mirror observes a woman's daily confrontation with aging. She turns away from it to "those liars, the candles or the moon" — preferring comfortable illusion. The poem frames her search in the mirror as a search for identity, not just appearance.

"The Woman Speaks to the Man Who Has Employed Her Son" — Lorna Goodison

The woman's power is entirely denied "at the level of earth." She raised her son alone, set no ceiling on his ambitions, prepared for his funeral before it happened. The poem is a monologue addressed to a man who is not listening.

Aging, Time, and Self-Image

"Mirror" — Sylvia Plath

The mirror tracks the woman's aging with cold objectivity. "In me she has drowned a young girl" — youth is not simply lost but submerged, replaced by something she does not recognise. "Like a terrible fish" presents old age as something monstrous rising from the depths: unavoidable, grotesque, and real.

Art and the Creative Process

"Landscape Painter, Jamaica" — Vivian Virtue

The poem celebrates Albert Huie — the father of Jamaican painting — by showing the landscape actively resisting his attempt to capture it. The mountains "pose" with self-conscious dignity; the little hills "fidget." The painting can never fully hold what is alive and changing. "Artlessly frustrating the painter's art" is the poem's wry conclusion.

War and Anti-War

"Dulce et Decorum Est" — Wilfred Owen

The poem is a direct assault on the idea that dying for one's country is noble. Owen builds toward the title line — the "old Lie" — by forcing the reader through the gas attack, the drowning man, the gruesome body. Every detail dismantles the propaganda before the Latin phrase is finally named for what it is.

"This Is the Dark Time, My Love" — Martin Carter

War here is colonial occupation, not a distant battlefield. The "boot of steel" tramping down "the slender grass" is an image of power crushing innocence. The enemy is not a foreign country but a force already present and watching.

Desire, Dreams, and Aspiration

"Dreaming Black Boy" — James Berry

The poem is structured entirely around wishes — twelve of them, accumulating into a portrait of everything racism withholds. The aspirations are both small (a teacher's glance) and large (Paul Robeson's voice, freedom of movement). The final wish turns outward: he hopes no one else will have to carry what he carries.

"It Is the Constant Image of Your Face" — Dennis Brutus

The persona's desire for his lover is in direct conflict with his desire for his country's freedom. He confesses the "treason" of having been distracted by love — and asks both his lover and his country for forgiveness.

"South" — Kamau Brathwaite

The poem ends with the speaker "joining" the river — a movement toward home and the ocean. The final image of "the limitless morning" is desire fulfilled: belonging restored.

Nostalgia and Migration

"South" — Kamau Brathwaite

The entire poem is an act of memory and return. "But today I recapture the islands' bright beaches" sets the elegiac tone. The speaker has "sojourned" in the north — stayed as a guest, never as a resident — and the poem is the long, slow journey back to the sea that made him.

"Once Upon a Time" — Gabriel Okara

The speaker looks back at his authentic self with the same nostalgia a person feels for a lost home. "Once upon a time" — the fairy tale opening — frames the past self as something so distant it has become mythological.

Key Themes by Poem (Quick Reference)

| Poem | Key themes |
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| "A Stone's Throw" | Hypocrisy, violence against women, religion, judgment |
| "Dreaming Black Boy" | Racism, oppression, aspiration, identity |
| "Dulce et Decorum Est" | War, propaganda, trauma, loss of innocence |
| "It Is the Constant Image of Your Face" | Love, loyalty, patriotism, guilt |
| "Landscape Painter, Jamaica" | Art, nature, Jamaican identity |
| "Little Boy Crying" | Parenting, love, discipline, childhood |
| "Mirror" | Aging, identity, women, self-image |
| "My Parents" | Class, identity, isolation, childhood |
| "Ol' Higue" | Folklore, supernatural, compulsion, blame |
| "Once Upon a Time" | Hypocrisy, identity, loss of innocence, nostalgia |
| "South" | Migration, belonging, colonialism, nature |
| "Test Match Sabina Park" | Race, nationalism, humiliation, culture clash |
| "The Woman Speaks..." | Parenting, violence, poverty, religion |
| "This Is the Dark Time, My Love" | Colonialism, oppression, war, hope |
| "West Indies, U.S.A." | Imperialism, race, inequality, appearance vs. reality |