“Colonial Girls School” Explication

In “Colonial Girls School” Olive Senior writes about the experience of a colonial school girl and the ways it altered her image of herself and understanding of history. The second to last stanza begins with "so, friends of my childhood years,"(42) effectively concluding the rest of the poem before, and switching from talking about her past to the present. She starts these last two stanzas with what sounds like the beginning of a message. Senior talks to all the other girls who went through what she did. Then the following two lines, "one day we'll talk about/ how the mirror broke."(43-44) By saying "one day," she implies that the friends of her childhood years may not be ready for this conversation she wants to have. It is also a vague statement that suggests this conversation will happen at some undetermined time. The mirror represents how she saw herself. She had an image of herself that she borrowed from the ideals presented by her colonial school. She needed to will her skin pale, but now that reflection of herself is broken, and she can see herself for who she is.

The following line is "who kissed us awake"(45) this is referring to the idea of waking up and realizing the truth, it also alludes to fairy tales like Sleeping Beauty and Snow White. In both those stories the protagonist is put under a sleeping spell and can only be awoken by the kiss of their true love. Olive uses this reference to express how deeply colonial history and ideas were ingrained in the narrator that it took tremendous effort and help to wake up and break free of it. This is the volta of the poem, something switched in the narrator and allowed her to learn how she was affected by colonization.

The final line of the first stanza is "who let Anansi from his bag."(46) Anansi is a mythical spider in African folklore known for his intelligence, knowledge, and being a trickster. Anansi is often depicted defeating significantly physically stronger foes by using his knowledge and cunning. In this instance, Anansi's bag is mentioned, which refers to the story of Anansi and the bag of wisdom. That story is about how Anansi tried to bag up all the world's knowledge and hide it from humanity. He didn't think they could be trusted; however, the bag is so full that knowledge keeps falling out, and eventually, he gives up and releases it all. Senior uses Anansi to represent how her whole history and culture were kept from her, but through her intelligence, she could open the bag and gain that knowledge.

In the last stanza, the narrator reflects on how her perception has changed. Earlier in the poem, the narrator talks about how she was oppressed and denigrated by pale northern eyes, however in this stanza she says, “Northern eyes/ in the brighter world before us now/ Pale?”(48-50) The meaning of pale is switched, instead of representing the color of her colonizers, pale now means insignificant and fading. The colonizers that used to be so important in her past are now, in the light of a brighter world, revealing themselves to be faded and unimportant.

Throughout these last two stanzas there is a certain rhythm that the poem has that is lost. Before the poem, while not having a rhyme scheme, still often rhymes, flows smoothly, and reads somewhat quickly. However, there is no rhyming in these two stanzas and the rhythm significantly slows down. This partially provides emphasis, as it especially slows down in the last stanza. The change in pace also creates the feeling of a close and important conversation. The narrator is trying to talk to someone about her experiences and how she feels about them now.

* If choosing a longer poem, you may choose one section of it; clarify this at start of essay.

Content

* **Understanding of passage as a whole:** Essay reveals a clear, nuanced understanding of selected part of poem and addresses ambiguous sections of it. Discusses plot, speaker, mood, and tone

* **Literary Devices:** Essay identifies relevant literary devices; effectively explains the ways they add meaning to the passage

* **Diction:** Essay thoughtfully discusses significant words such as patterns, connotation, repetition and omissions. As appropriate, essay references earlier uses of the word. Includes discussion of dialect (pidgen. creole, British English) and influence of dialect

* **Quotations**: Essay quotes sufficient lines to illustrate its point and effectively discusses these examples. Quotations are integrated seamlessly into analysis. Essay is developed thoroughly (500-600 words)

Style & Structure

* Organizes essay with solid coherence; leaves no room for confusion or ambiguity
* Composes essay in distinctive, engaging voice generated by artful expression
* Employs absolutely precise diction
* Generates beautifully fluid reading through varied syntax and concision techniques
* Polished and free of errors