

English 1AA3 Tutorial Assignment

Part 1: Annotation

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No Language is Neutral, page 48 (from “Hard Against the Soul: X”).

¹It's true, you spend the years after thirty ²turning over the suggestion that you have been an ³imbecile, ⁴hearing finally all the words that ⁵passed you like air, like so much fun, or all the words ⁶that must have existed while you were listening to others. ⁷What would I want with this sentence you say flinging it aside . . . and ⁸then again sometimes you were duped, poems placed deliberately in your way. ⁹At eleven, the strophe of a yellow dress at me crosslegged in my sex. It was a ¹⁰boy's abrupt birthday party. ¹¹A yellow dress for a tomboy, ¹²the ritual stab of womanly gathers at the waist. ¹³She look like a boy in a dress, my big sister say, a ¹⁴lyric and feminine correction from a watchful aunt, *don't say that, she look nice and pretty*. ¹⁵Nice and pretty, laid out to splinter you, so ¹⁶that never, until it is almost so late as not to matter do you grasp some part, something missing like a wing, some fragment of your real self.

¹The speaker refers to herself as “you”, suggesting that she is reflecting and speaking to herself. This is the second person narrative voice. In referring to herself as “you”, she is speaking to herself as though she is a different person. “It's true” - The speaker is confirming a fact that was once uncertain to her – only made known through her personal experience as a woman in her thirties or older. This opening suggests that the speaker was once told how you think after thirty or what those years involve. By age thirty, one is usually finished school and getting established in a career. Being in your thirties may be considered a time of more certainty compared to being in your twenties. She is at a point where she can look back on her life so far and revisit her history.

²“Turning over” – uncovering or revealing something that was previously hidden; turning something over to reveal a new side that was unseen – a new perspective. The speaker speaks of uncovering a suggestion – an idea that would have been implied to her by herself, someone else, or something that happened.

³“Imbecile” : According to the Oxford English Dictionary, imbecile means “weak, feeble; *esp.* feeble of body, physically weak or impotent” or “mentally weak; of weak character; stupid”. The speaker uses this harsh, negative word to describe herself in the past as being weak or stupid. This use of a cruel term suggests the speaker is angry with her past self for some reason.

⁴“Hearing finally” suggests that the author has or perceived something at last. The use of the word “finally” implies that there has been a long period of time, delay, or difficulty in perceiving the words that were once spoken to her. But what words does she finally comprehend?

- a) ⁵The words “passed her”, meaning they left came and went past her without registering or being understood.

- b) “Like air” – A connection to nature. Air is all around us, but we do not even think about it or really feel it. It is invisible – the words she heard went unnoticed, but were certainly present.
- c) “Fun” implies light-heartedness or enjoyment. Perhaps at the time, the words she heard seemed light-hearted or amusing, but now she is perceiving them in a negative way and criticizing herself for not understanding before.

⁶The words spoken to the speaker “must have existed”, implying once again that the words were there, spoken clearly, but went unnoticed. She is shocked at the fact that she did not understand or perceive them at the time. The speaker suggests distraction when she says “while you were listening to others”. Listening to other words or people covered up the meaning of the other words that the speaker did not perceive. She gave her attention and understanding to other words at the time, and only now is she understanding and paying attention to the words she did not perceive. It is not yet clear what the words are.

⁷“What would I want with this sentence” – the speaker had asked herself this question in the past, in reference to the words. She saw no use or value in the sentence spoken to her, so she cast it aside. She speaks of the sentence as an actual object that is useless and undesired. The speaker uses the word “flinging” to describe the way the sentence is cast aside. Flinging something suggests violently, forcefully, or carelessly throwing it away. The sentence spoken to her is thrown away like a useless object.

⁸“Dupe” means deceived or tricked. The speaker is more forgiving with herself at this point. It may not have been her fault that she did not understand at the time – she was tricked. She speaks of poems being placed in her way as if they were an obstacle or distraction. Poems were “deliberately” placed in her way to trick her – on purpose, but by whom? How did poems deceive her, or make her believe certain truths? What does she mean by poems – literal poems, or spoken words that she calls poems?

⁹The speaker is now looking back at a time when she was eleven years old. She refers to the “strophe” of a yellow dress. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a strophe is “[In Greek choral and lyric poetry, and imitations of this] A series of lines forming a system, the metrical structure of which is repeated in a following system called the antistrophe. Also, in wider sense, one of two or more metrically corresponding series of lines forming divisions of a lyric poem. Hence occasionally (after French) used with reference to modern poetry as equivalent to stanza”. The use of this word in reference to the yellow dress could structure and repetition, perhaps in the pattern of the dress, or the dress itself is seen as a structure confining her. Strophe is also a term for a stanza in poetry – this is another reference to a poem within this poem. The dress is yellow, which is typically a bright colour associated with joy and happiness. The speaker refers to herself as “crosslegged in her sex”. It is thought that sitting crosslegged is proper or ladylike. The speaker, at eleven years old, is sitting like a proper young lady should and wearing what a proper lady should – a dress. She is fitting into the social structure of what a girl should be.

¹⁰“Abrupt” means sudden, unexpected, or brief. The speaker refers to the boy’s birthday party as abrupt, meaning it was unexpected or happened without warning – a surprise party, perhaps. This memory takes place at a boy’s birthday party – perhaps a friend from school or a relative. A birthday party is a celebration of someone – typically a happy and joyful event. Once again we see the idea of happiness and joy – a yellow dress and a birthday party. The speaker is describing what is supposed to be a joyous occasion.

¹¹A tomboy is a girl who acts or dresses in a “boyish” way. There is contrast between the yellow dress and the speaker as a tomboy. A tomboy in a dress suggests the speaker feels out of place – forced to fit the ladylike stereotype.

¹²A ritual is a set of fixed actions or words performed ceremonially. Rituals imply traditionalism, formality, and structure. Once again, the dress on the speaker is seen as part of a social structure or traditional view of what a young girl should look like and be. She describes the “ritual stab of womanly gathers”. The use of the word stab implies pain, sharpness, and a wound. The folds of the feminine dress on the speaker bring her pain. Perhaps she feels forced by the traditions of society to fit the feminine stereotype as a young girl. At the time, she may not have realized the wound left behind by the dress, but in reflecting she now sees the pain.

¹³The speaker's older sister says that she looks like a boy in a dress – out of place or not belonging. These words come from her older sister, who is likely a role model for the speaker. These may be the words the speaker was referring to in the beginning of the poem. Someone she looks up to as an example is making fun of her for the way she looks at the birthday party. The imperfect grammar (using “say” instead of “says”, and “she look” instead of “she looks”) reflects the culture of the speaker and her family. English is not their first language; Trinidad origin.

¹⁴The Oxford English Dictionary describes a lyric as “the name for short poems (whether or not intended to be sung), usually divided into stanzas or strophes, and directly expressing the poet's own thoughts and sentiments.” Describing the correction as a lyric connects to poetry again – perhaps the poem that was seen as a roadblock or something in the way of the speaker mentioned earlier. The correction of her aunt is also described as feminine. She is saying that the speaker looks “nice and pretty”, like a young girl should in her feminine dress. Her aunt is correcting her older sister, implying that what she said was wrong and should be replaced with “nice and pretty”. The words of her aunt may also be the words that she did not fully comprehend at the time.

¹⁵To splinter is to “break or split into splinters or long narrow pieces, or in such a way as to leave a rough jagged end or projections”, according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Again, pain is associated with stereotypical femininity. The words “nice and pretty” are said to break the speaker down and hurt her. She says they are “laid” out, perhaps like a dress is laid out before putting it on. The idea of what femininity looks like was laid out for her like her dress.

¹⁶The words “nice and pretty” are meant to prevent the speaker from finding and holding onto an important part of her identity. She describes this part of her as something “missing like a wing”. A wing of anything – a bird, insect, or even an airplane – plays a critical role in the way the creature or machine functions. A missing wing would ruin bring the creature or airplane down from the sky and prevent it from rising to its full potential. It would not be an insignificant missing piece. The “nice and pretty” stereotype is meant to break her down. In footnote 5, the speaker says the words passed her like air. Air connects to wing of a bird or airplane flying. Perhaps the words “nice and pretty” break the speaker down like a bird with a missing wing, falling through the air that passes by her. A splinter, as mentioned in footnote 14, is a fragment. The speaker is broken into fragments and only when she is older does she understand what was spoken to her and find the fragment of her true self. Perhaps the part of herself is her sexual orientation. On page 50, she says “I have become myself. A woman who looks at a woman and says, here, I have found you”.

This poem comes at almost the very end of the collection of poems, perhaps because after self-reflection and understanding her past, the speaker is finally finding the fragment of herself.

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Part 2: Argument

In this poem from “Hard Against the Soul: X”, the speaker suggests that casual words spoken to young girls about stereotypical, “nice and pretty” (48) femininity have profound, lingering effects. The speaker describes the long-lasting pain associated with the constraints of stereotypical femininity that was laid out for her, like a dress, by her family when she was a young girl. By reducing femininity to dresses and beauty, the real, unique identity of the young woman is lost and dissolved into the feminine stereotype.