

SAMPLE POEMS AND ANALYSIS

an afternoon nap - Arthur Yap

the ambitious mother across the road
is at it again. proclaiming her goodness
she beats the boy. shouting out his wrongs, with raps
she begins with his mediocre report grades.
she strikes chords for the afternoon piano lesson,
her voice stridently imitates 2nd. lang. Tuition,
all the while circling the cowering boy
in a manner apt for the most strenuous p.e. ploy.
swift are all her contorted movements,
ape for every need; no soft gradient
of a consonant-vowel figure, she lumbers
& shrieks, a hit for every two notes missed.

his tears are dear. each monday,
wednesday, friday, miss low & madam lim
appear and take away \$90 from the kitty
leaving him an adagio, clause analysis, little
pocket money.

the embittered boy across the road
is at it again. proclaiming his bewilderment
he yells at her. shouting out her wrongs, with tears
he begins her expensive taste for education.

QUESTIONS

- (i) what is striking about the description of the mother in lines 1 to 12?
- (ii) what are the boy's feelings in the rest of the poem?

ANSWERS

(i) The description of the mother is striking because she repeatedly mimics the boy's weakest subjects. Line 6 states "her voice stridently imitates 2nd. lang. tuition," The word "stridently" suggests her ruthless behaviour towards her son. The second language is unfamiliar and can be challenging to comprehend. The speaker compares the boy's mother to be speaking in a second language, showing that the boy often does not understand what his mother is berating him about. In line 4, "mediocre report-book grades" show that the boy is not very good with his studies, hence why he needs tuition as he struggles with his subjects. It suggests that the mother is repeating what the boy learns in his tuition in hopes of etching the knowledge into his brain so that he can improve and meet her high expectations.

Line 7-8 states, "All while circling the cowering boy in a manner apt for the most strenuous P.E. ploy." In this line, the poet compares the mother circling her son to strategies in P.E. where a player will circle their opponent, portraying her as someone who challenges him rather than someone who supports him. The action of "circling" also resembles that of a hungry vulture preying on a weak animal, similar to the strict mother using her authority to intimidate and control the vulnerable and scared son. This makes her description striking because unlike most mothers, she does not support the boy or treat him lovingly and gently, instead treating him like roughly

Additionally, the mother's physical behaviour and voice are described to be very aggressive, further making her description striking.

Lines 10 to 11 mention "swift are all her contorted movements, ape for every need". The phrase "contorted movements" shows her unpredictability and abnormal dictation over the boy's academics. The mother "strikes chords for the afternoon piano lessons". The word "strikes" shows the mother's jarring voice, further amplifying her chaos and unclarity. The mother is compared to an "ape", showing her animalistic qualities, much like the rough behaviour of an ape. Lines 11 to 12 "she lumbers & shrieks, a hit for every 2 notes missed". The phrase "lumbers & shrieks" shows her slow and heavy movements and discordant and grating voice, further adding to the description of her aggressive behaviour as she berates the boy.

(ii) In the fourth stanza, the boy feels helpless. Lines 17 to 18 mention that the boy has tuition "every monday, wednesday, friday". This shows that he is not left with much freetime as tuition takes up most of the week, indicating his stressful academic routine. The stanza also mentions that "miss low & madam lim appear& take away \$90 from the kitty". The phrase "take away \$90" connotes that he feels restricted, not being able to do anything about the money taken. He would rather spend the funds for other purposes but is helpless as his mother forces him to go to tuition. The line continues with "leaving him an adagio, clause analysis, little pocket-money". The phrase "leaving him" connotes that it was all he had left, portraying the boy to be robbed of what he wanted with what the mother wanted for him. The phrase "little pocket-money" shows that he wanted to spend money on things other than his academics but he was restrained and unable to as his tuition teachers take away a large sum of money.

After he overcomes his helplessness, the boy feels vengeful, as shown in the last stanza. The last stanza follows a similar pattern as the first stanza, replacing certain words to be in the boy's perspective. Lines 18 to 19 says "the embittered boy across the road is at in again." The word "embittered" replies to his mother's ambition as shown in the first stanza where it says "the ambition mother across the road is at in again". The boy wants his mother to experience what she put him through as seen in lines 19 to 20, "he yells at her. shouting out her wrongs, with tears". The phrase "shouting out her wrongs" shows that the boy wants to return every torment he received when his mother was "shouting out his wrongs" as well. The phrase "with tears" contrasts with "with raps", showing his resentment towards his mother's treatment, further showing his vengefulness. Line 21 mentions "her expensive taste for education". The word "expensive" contrasts with "mediocre" in the first stanza, showing that the boy retaliated against the mother, reinforcing the idea of her unattainable expectations which caused the boy's vengefulness.

Flight Dreams - Cyril Wong

I often dreamt of flying when I was younger.
Such dreams supposedly meant
that I had feelings of entrapment in my real life.
It was true. Back then I believed
I was determined to lead a life
my parents would be proud of: I would attain
a degree, a job, remain a Christian, marry a nice girl.
During those days, I would fly
off balconies, jump off the tops of flats and swim
through air for hours in my sleep.
Then I discovered a part of me that rose up
in a hundred bedrooms that eventually
looked like each other, when a stranger's
hand or mouth would push me back into myself,
only to suck me back out again by the shock
of the body's capacity for desire
like a black wave rolling back and forth,
back and forth right through me.
I remember I was catapulted from that claustrophobic
room of my parents' dream of my future.
I believed I began to understand myself
for the first time. The idea of a self
was an astronaut who had been cut
free from his spacecraft and made to float
straight out into a starry nothingness.
For a long time after that, I could not recall
the last time I actually dreamt of flying.

QUESTIONS

- (i) What does the speaker realise about his dreams as he grows up?
- (ii) What do you find striking about the way the poet uses language to convey the speaker's feelings and attitudes towards life?

ANSWERS

(i) The speaker realises that his childhood dreams of flying reflected his desire for freedom from parental expectations. "I often dreamt of flying...that I had feelings of entrapment in my real life." The word "entrapment" suggests that the speaker felt confined by the expectations of his parents. The phrase "dreamt of flying" symbolises a longing to escape these restrictions and explore life on his own terms. The use of "often" emphasises that this feeling of confinement was persistent, highlighting how strongly he yearned for independence. Thus, the speaker understands that his dreams were not random fantasies but a reflection of his struggle for personal freedom against parental pressure.

The poet uses vivid and contrasting imagery to convey the speaker's intense emotions and growing self-awareness. "a hundred bedrooms...pushed me back into myself...black wave rolling back and forth" The repetition in "back and forth" mirrors the oscillation between desire and restriction, showing inner conflict. The "black wave" conveys the overwhelming, almost suffocating nature of these emotions. By describing himself as "catapulted...into a starry nothingness," the poet uses cosmic imagery to illustrate liberation and self-discovery, portraying the excitement and fear of exploring one's own identity. Therefore, through rich and dynamic imagery, the poet captures the speaker's journey from constraint to self-realisation, highlighting both struggle and exhilaration.

(ii) The poet uses personal and sensory language to express the speaker's intimate feelings and attitudes toward life. Phrases like "pushed me back into myself" and "suck me back out again" convey a physical, almost visceral experience of desire and self-discovery. The use of bodily imagery emphasises how deeply the speaker feels these emotions, showing that his exploration of identity is not just mental but also intensely physical and emotional. Through this, the poet makes the reader empathise with the speaker's vulnerability and the intensity of his experiences.

The poet also uses metaphor and cosmic imagery to reflect the speaker's sense of freedom and self-realisation. Describing himself as "an astronaut...made to float straight out into a starry nothingness" suggests liberation and the vast possibilities of discovering his own identity. The metaphor of floating in space conveys both excitement and uncertainty, highlighting the awe and fear of stepping beyond the constraints imposed by others. This imagery captures the speaker's evolving attitude toward life, portraying self-understanding as both exhilarating and daunting.