

## CXC POEMS – A CONVERSATION

### ***THE WOMAN SPEAKS TO THE MAN WHO HAS EMPLOYED HER SON***

#### INTRODUCTION

In recent times the calls for hanging murderers have become more strident (insistent, forceful and determined). Why is this so?

Many of the killers and many of their victims are young persons around your age or a little older. Perhaps some of them are known to you. Why have so many young persons become involved in a life of crime and violence? Do you believe that adults are also to be blamed? Which adults? Why do you blame them?

What is the effect of their children's violence on the parents?

This poem is about a woman who "set no ceiling" on what her son could become but the boy chooses to embrace a life of crime anyway.

#### TITLE

The title is not written in the usual language of poetry. It is neither crisp nor succinct (brief or concise). It is an entire sentence. When you have read the poem, try to explain why the poet chooses this unusual type of title.

The title is somewhat misleading in that the woman does not actually confront her son's employer. Rather her thoughts are conveyed through a third person. Note that the words are "her son", not "my son" and that four of the six stanzas begin with the word "she", not "I".

"She"

#### CONTENT

The first stanza introduces us to a pregnant mother who may be somewhat young and naïve. ("...*signs* made her know that she was not alone in her body.") This is clearly not a planned pregnancy, but she accepts the baby stoically (there is "a metallic tide rising in her mouth each morning") and lovingly ("carried him full term tight up under her heart").

She is obviously poor and like others in her deprived condition, stanza two says that she can only *hope* that some good will come of this boy whom she must raise single handedly. She ironically describes the father as "fair-minded", not that he was fair to her or to his son, but because he was equally *unfair* to the other children that he had fathered, treating them all "with equal and unbiased indifference". Please observe the *satire* here as the poet's voice intervenes through the mother to issue an indictment (critical social criticism) against fathers who do not take care of their children and as a result make them vulnerable to the machinations (sinister methods used to influence others) of evil men who pose as good and caring.

Stanza three reiterates that she had sole responsibility for her son's upbringing.



“She raised him twice, once as mother / then as father”, and states that she was ambitious for him... “set no ceiling on what he could be...”

The contrast between her warm hopes and cold reality is made more poignant (pitiable) by the words:

“**But now** he tells her he is working for you, you *value* him so much / you give him one whole submachine gun / for him alone.”

We pity the misguided youth and feel the mother’s pain and anger. The words “*value*” and “*one whole*” are larded with sarcasm.

Here is a stubborn boy whose mindset the mother has been powerless to change. In stanza four it is clear that the boy’s confidence in the man is greater than his confidence in his mother. After all, he sees him as a replacement for the father he never had. His attitude is probably tinged with a touch of male chauvinism. He and the man must know better than his mother, a mere woman. He believes in his own invincibility and that of the *creep* who is leading him astray. However the mother knows that this is no father figure, that a real father provides moral and material support for a child. A father does not give his child “hot and exploding death”, a weapon to kill others which would ultimately lead to the child’s own untimely demise (death). She resigns herself to the inevitable and prepares for her son’s funeral by buying a black dress and hat. The boy believes that his activities will make him well off, but the mother knows that those activities will lead to his drawing “his bloody salary”, a metaphor for his violent death.

In stanza five the poet explores the practice of *religion* in the lives of those who seek solace and justice. The mother has no earthly power over the man but she is prepared to invoke heaven on her behalf. She uses psalms, prayers “at knee city” (a metaphorical reference) and tears. She *says psalms for* her son (pertaining to the deliverance of his soul since she has already resigned herself to his death). But she *reads psalms for* the man (pertaining to his destruction) as she seeks justice. Please note the curse implied in the metaphor “...her eyewater covers you”. It is believed by some that if a mother is made to weep copiously because of the actions of another person against her child, the guilty party will suffer for it. It is also believed by some that reading certain psalms will cause the destruction of an enemy.

The expression “*throwing a partner*” (In St. Vincent it is a sou-sou) is used to describe an informal system of saving small amounts regularly with friends, relatives or workmates and “*drawing*” a lump sum of money at the end of the agreed period. In the final stanza the mother sees herself as having something in common with parents of rebellious sons in the Bible and therefore metaphorically *throws a partner* with them. She makes *allusions* to the mothers of Judas Iscariot, the thief hanging on the left of the cross with Jesus, and King David who, although his son Absalom sought to kill him, grieved when the boy was killed because of his own waywardness. In declaring that she should have two draws, she seems to be suggesting that she should have a double portion of justice since she performed the role of two parents. The poem ends with David’s grief stricken wail for his son which this mother makes her own cry: “Absalom.”



## THEMES

The poem explores themes of Parenting; Religion; Justice; Dreams and Aspirations; Conflict; and Death.

## TOPE

The mother seems overwhelmed with **despair** and **disbelief**. ("now he tells me..") Later she becomes **resigned** to her fate. There seems to be quiet acceptance of her lot in "...she has no power over you..." In the end however, she is quietly **vengeful** as she is convinced of the justice of her cause and awaits the results of prayers, psalms and "eyewater".

## MOOD

The mood is one of bitter despair, disappointment and sadness.

## LANGUAGE

The language is simple but colourful with a conversational style. Standard English is generally used but occasionally the poet deliberately slips into the Colloquial for additional flavour. Identify the non standard forms of speech where they occur. Do you agree that they add flavour to the poem?

## LITERARY DEVICES

The poet uses the following devices: Irony, Sarcasm, Metaphor, Repetition, Contrast, Allusion

Read the poem to see where these occur and say what they add to your appreciation of the poem.

## ACTIVITIES

- \* Read the story of King David and his son Absalom in the Bible in the second book of Samuel, Chapter 18 to find out for yourself what the mother in this poem has in common with King David.
- \* Why did Lorna Goodison choose such a lengthy title for her poem?
- \* Do you know any wayward teenagers who cause their parents grief?
- \* What caused them to go astray?
- \* Does thinking about them help you to understand the mother any better?
- \* Do you sympathize with the boy? Why? Why not?
- \* What can society do to minimize the kinds of problems faced in this poem?
- \* Read the poem **Dreaming Black Boy** by James Berry and see whether you can detect any similarities between the two poems.