

Disclaimer: Almost all the notes in this document have been directly taken from the website [poetry prof](#), although the information has been rearranged according to theme and made more concise.

Muliebrity

Memory:

The central idea of memory is repeated: she *has thought so much* (anaphora) about a girl she frequently encountered on the street outside of her house in Maninagar. The encounters were brief and the narrator didn't appreciate at the time how significant the image of the girl would become but in the years since she has dwelt on this memory.

Incidental details such as *the wide, round basket* imply the strong impression she made on the narrator. Many years later she still remembers these details clearly.

The poem's liberal use of enjambment allows the words at the end of each line to seem isolated, emphasising them. The use of enjambment also gives the poem a flow. This creates a sense of movement, which enables the reader to visualise the girl clearly. This enforces the idea that she's not a symbol of womanhood but is vivid and real. The flow created by enjambment emphasises how the poem is a flow of thought as the narrator is recounting a memory.

Womanhood and feminism:

The *Radhavallabh temple in Maninagar* is a place dedicated to the worship of Radharani, a Hindu Goddess. *Muliebrity* means womanhood. All characters seen in the poem are female. However the narrator's appreciation of the woman is independent of the metaphor of feminism she may represent.

The title, *Muliebrity*, conveys the appreciation of the girl's womanhood. Her characteristic feminine traits such as her strength, resilience, pride, uniqueness, and dedication are seen.

Simplicity of rural life:

The narration of the poem suggests that extra information gets in the way of us seeing the girl as an individual, distracting the reader from what the narrator wishes to focus on. She's not a symbol of womanhood, because there is no accurate symbol for this. Womanhood (*Muliebrity*) is many things and cannot be represented in one all-encompassing metaphor.

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The girl is not a victim of poverty. She's proactive, *gathering dung* from the first line to the last. Bhatt wants us to see her as a person in her own right, graceful and alert, her face radiating *power and greatness* rather than as an object of shame or deserving of our pity.

This is particularly true given the poem's cultural context. The Indian caste system all but prescribes the opinions people hold about other people from the moment of their birth. A girl gathering cow-dung from the street occupies one of the lowest positions of this hierarchy. The poem's simple language and tone reflects her simple background. However, the poem doesn't present this in a manner that makes the reader pity her or become angry on her behalf. It doesn't try to recruit her image as the face of some cause. The girl is from a caste and gender minority but the poem is in no way discriminating.

Cow dung as a symbol:

The several connotations of cow-dung reduce the reader's disgust. Cow-dung has long been used as fuel; for Hindus, the cow is a sacred animal. Therefore, collecting dung would be a familial or even religious duty. Cow-dung is also used in agriculture as a fertilizer, allowing it to be viewed as something enriching or enhancing.

Feminine stereotypes:

The poem challenges the reader to abandon any stereotypes they might hold about 'beauty' or 'femininity', allowing Bhatt's words to draw an entirely original picture of the girl. You might have noticed that the narrator focuses only on externalities. She does not assume the girl's thoughts and feelings. The parts of the girl she points out to us, her *cheekbones, hands, and waist*, can be used to represent ideals of femininity or beauty, but are not.

Bhatt also mixes these parts of a woman's body with less familiar words and images: *cow-dung, monkey breath, road-dust*. The effect of this is to challenge typically-held notions of what a 'beautiful' girl might look like, or what a 'powerful' woman might do. There are no adjectives describing the girl. Despite the sparsity of description, the narrator conveys the impression of a fully rounded person with her own vibrant inner life.

Role of scent in a memory:

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The poem reminds us that memory is not only visual; it is made up of all the sights, sounds and smells that form our day-to-day perceptions. The memory of *cow-dung* prompts the recollection of other smells: *road-dust*; *wet canna lilies*; *monkey breath*; *freshly washed clothes*; *dust from crows' wings*; and back to *cow-dung* again. The description of the smells suggests a feeling of nostalgia the narrator feels for her home. It helps the reader visualise a place they have never seen. Anaphora (*and the smell... the smell... and the smell again*), repetition, and enjambment emphasises the idea that the poem is a memory. Linking items in a list using 'and' in this way is a technique called polysyndeton.

Dignity of labour: Another aspect the narrator appreciates is the girl's dignity of labour. She has power despite the menial nature of her job, and is not only completing it, but doing so with pride. Due to this, the narrator highly respects the girl. Though her job may seem disgusting, none of this disgust is conveyed by the narrator.

Setting:

The poet creates a complex and vivid setting through olfactory and visual imagery. Specificities such as the *Radhavallabh temple in Maninagar*, helps the reader visualise a place they have never seen. The contrast in scents helps emphasize this complex setting.

Line by line analysis:

'**I have...much**': Impact of the memory. Inability to forget. Memory at the heart of the poem. Passage of time.

'**Girl**': anonymous. No description.

'**Gathered cow-dung**': thought to be a degrading job.

'**Radhavallabh temple**': temple of a female goddess.

'**Moved...waist**': feminine parts. Beauty not specified. Striking movement. Grace

'**Smell**': scent of smell is emphasized. Contrasting scents.

'**Canna lilies**': resilient. Not fragile. Can grow anywhere.

'**Smell of cow-dung**': repeated for emphasis. Not described as bad.

'**Separately and simultaneously**': alliteration. Smell was overpowering.

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'unwilling...image': does not want to change or substitute the girl in any way in order to present a comparison for the narrator's benefit. doesn't want to generalise. Not use the girl for her own benefit. Retain individuality.

'Greatness and power': appreciation. Respect. Dignity of labour.

'Particularly promising': alliteration.

Hyphen: continuity.

Plenty

Past: The poem 'Plenty' has a past-present structure. The speaker tells the reader in the first line that she's looking back at herself as a child: *When I was young and there were five of us*. Her living situation was quite difficult. The speaker's tone of voice is nostalgic, wry, perhaps slightly bitter or regretful in places – however, these feelings are directed mostly at herself and her childish failure to understand the extent of her mother's sacrifices. She makes the admission of *not knowing then* halfway through the poem. The poet looks back on her childhood with renewed understanding and wisdom that she obtained as she grew older.

Comparison of the past with present: The separation between past and present is clearly marked at the start of stanza seven with the word *now*. The poem creates strong contrasts between then and now: 'scarcity' vs 'plenty', 'dry' vs 'wet', *chaos* vs 'ease'. These contrasts are achieved most often through use of language: *dry dams* is opposed by *cascade*, *never full* opposes *water's plentiful*, an *inch* turns to an excess of water. The final juxtaposition is quite impactful: *five of us* becomes *scattered sisters*. The narrator conveys the impression, particularly through the phrase *I miss... all those bathroom squabbles*, that she is quite lonely now.

Impact of the speaker's childhood on her now: The most pressing impact on her life was lack of water and other essentials– she felt she never had enough of anything. Now the narrator feels guilty of going behind her mother's back all the time to sneak biscuits and water. The language used to describe herself as a child has connotations of crime- *swiped biscuits*, *stole water*, *snapped locks*, and ran *riot*. She thinks of the taps on her bath as *old co-conspirators*, the personification turning them into her partners in crime. Now, in the present, she is in a situation where she has plenty of

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everything but she feels guilty about that as well as she feels that this luxury has come at a cost. This is mainly conveyed by the word *sin*, but also *lolling* (which connotes laziness), *sybarite*, and *excess* (which connotes greed).

Plenty in Childhood: Ironically, as a child her memory is actually quite full of 'plenty.' However, this is used in a negative manner, to emphasise hardship. This is seen in phrases such as *dam leaking*, *expanse of drought*. The poem ends with the phrase *long childhood*. Other words such as *dear*; *plenty*; *full*; *fat*; *disgorged*, convey this as well.

Mother's role: Her mother was a patient, stoic woman who protected the family from hardship as best she could. However, the narrator couldn't see this as a child as her strictness and rationing seemed frustrating. The **simile** *Like mommy's smile* compares the *windmills stalling* and the *dry dams* to her mother's pained, *stretched* expression. This association of her mother with the arid, dry landscape shows how the narrator, as a child, thought her mother's smile was devoid of love and emotion. However, she later realises it was to protect her children from all her *worries*: the gradual depletion of day to day items, and lack of water and money.

The poet uses asyndeton by using commas to form a list-like structure to convey the idea that the mother's life was a list of worries. Contrast is used again to emphasise the mother's stoic patience when faced with her wild children. *Running riot* contrasts with *anchored down*, and *chaos* opposes *clasp*.

Through a metaphor, her mother's smile is compared to a *lid* or *clasp* that shuts all these troubles inside her and away from her children. The young speaker felt she was locked and trapped, but her older, wiser self knows that her mother was hiding their desperate situation and taking on all the responsibility for the family. This belated understanding is suggested through a further metaphor: *anchored down* doesn't represent a lack of freedom but stability in what was an uncertain time.

Bathtub as a symbol: The bathtub is the central symbol used to compare the past and the present. It is a constant in both. *Griffin claws* decorating the feet of the tub elevate its status through association with mythology and compare it to luxury. The stolen luxury of a full hot bath is one of the speaker's strongest memories. The bath becomes the focal point for the memories of her family.

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Water is associated with the tub, and has life-giving and vital connotations. Dixon uses water as a symbol for time passing, hardship and luxury. Water is seen to be a focus throughout the speaker's life. Words related to water are used often, such as, *running, tub, stained, leaked, anchored, spilling, toilet, shower, cascade*. Enjambment is used to create a flow that is associated with water.

Irony: Water plays an important part in the poem and it's ironic that the final image is associated with *lean, dry times*. Irony is also used to show that she has what she wanted as a child, but now wants what she had then. The word *released* suggests her mother is no longer alive and the narrator has not been able to show her appreciation for her mother. Looking back, she now realises she had *plenty* of everything after all.

CAGED BIRD

Use of language for the free bird: The poem begins unexpectedly, given the title, with a description of the life of a free bird. He 'leaps' through the sky, exploring the world as far as he is able, suggesting unlimited possibilities. He 'floats downstream'. The word 'floats' underlines how effortless the free bird's life is. He floats 'till the current ends' suggesting that he can fly as long as he likes. The free bird is warmed by the sun which is a symbol representing warmth, life, luxury. Wherever the free bird chooses to go, he is guaranteed a life of ease and relaxation. The free bird enjoys a life of ease and luxury, able to indulge in all his favourite pastimes: flying, exploring, eating 'fat worms' – the whole world is his playground.

Language juxtaposition: Almost every word in the free bird's life speaks of freedom and indulgence. He *leaps* where the caged bird *stalks*. He *floats* where the caged bird *stands*. He *dips his wings in the orange sun's rays* while the caged bird is associated with *shadow*. The most obvious technique in this poem is juxtaposition: you can try to pair almost everything the free bird enjoys with its exact opposite in the caged bird's world. Images as well as words are juxtaposed: the free bird *dares to claim the sky*. By contrast, the caged bird *stands on a grave of dreams*. The language used to describe

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the caged bird's situation (*nightmare, shout, screams*) effectively suggests the terrible psychic state of a bird or person confined all their lives.

Context: Parallels and allusions to the history of the African-American slave trade, and subsequent social injustice between blacks and whites, are scattered through the poem. Trade winds are referred to in the poem, which helped early sailing ships travel from Europe and Africa to the Americas. The word *trade* alludes to the slave trade. This helps contextualise Angelou's poem. Other freedoms which were taken away from enslaved people were the freedom to own property and even the right to name one's own children. When the free bird is able to *name the sky his own*, he is actually exercising basic rights that were denied his enslaved brethren.

The cage as a symbol: The most important symbol in the poem is the cage which traps the bird. It is both physical (*narrow*) and figurative, therefore, it restrains both the bird's body and its soul. Firstly its *wings are clipped* and *feet are tied*. The bird is unable to exercise his most natural birth-right – his instinctive need to fly. But the cage also alters the bird psychologically: it is *fearful*, suffers from *nightmares*, and is sometimes provoked to anger: *bars of rage, scream, shout*. This idea is what gives the poem most of its pathos. The cage denies the bird his freedom and suppresses his natural identity. In fact, the only freedom left for him is to *open his throat to sing*.

Rhythm: A major aspect of any song is rhythm, and Angelou's song has its own **iambic meter**. 'Unstressed-stressed' patterns are called **iamb**s; 'unstressed-unstressed-stressed' is an **anapest**. You can see that the free bird has far more anapaests than his caged friend: It is faster and more drawn-out, communicating the free bird's lively, easy existence. The caged bird is almost always given a shorter, more truncated iambic foot – rhythm as a kind of 'prison' for the words. The free bird is written in free verse while the caged bird's has a rhyme scheme as though it is forced into a format.

Enjambment to show contrast: A majority of the twin birds' opposite experiences are suggested through aspects of form. The use of enjambment suggests that the lines are flowing freely, expressing the freedom the free bird has to roam and fly. It also

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connects to the *wind* and *stream*: the lines flow like water and air. However, in the caged bird's experience, the capital letter and full stop at the beginning and end of each stanza creates a separation between the caged bird and free bird, which he is not allowed to cross.

Enjambment draws the reader's attention to the word 'and' because it represents freedom of choice. This linking of items in a list using 'and' in this way is a technique called polysyndeton.

Due to enjambment, in a verse describing the caged bird, each line begins with a strong image. Repetition of words at the beginning of a line is called anaphora, which creates the impression of the bird stalking to and fro down a narrow cage. Having nowhere to go, he turns to retrace his steps down the same path over and over, hence the repetition.

Rhyme: The impression of being trapped is heightened by rhyme: *cage/rage*. In fact, in the third stanza describing the caged bird's song, *trill*, *still* and *hill* all rhyme. Creating 'bonds' between lines like this is a way of representing the bonds trapping the caged bird. The strongest rhyme in the poem is also the strongest **image**: *as the caged bird stands on the grave of dreams/ his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream*.

Blame on the free bird: Importantly, the poem partially blames the free bird for not fulfilling the obligation it should have towards its caged cousin. After all, historically, it was so that some people could freely indulge in comfort that others found themselves segregated, exploited or enslaved. Parts of this poem are a reminder that injustices such as these couldn't happen without complicity; throughout history a blind eye has been turned by so many to the suffering of others. Therefore, when the caged bird sings, his *fearful trill is heard on the distant hill*. One of the most interesting and provocative ideas in the poem is that others can hear the caged bird's cries – but do nothing to help. The sequence of stanzas comes into play here – after hearing the song, the free bird continues to *think of another breeze*. He does not allow the misery of his fellow bird to turn his mind from thoughts of luxury: *fat worms* and *dawn-bright lawns*.

The theme of freedom is portrayed in a manner which implies that it is the key to unlocking a person's full potential. In the first stanza, by the time his travels are done,

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the free bird has the daring and courage to *claim the sky*. It is also suggested that freedom is an inheritance that cannot be denied. A bird caged its entire life can feel their basic freedoms denied as *things unknown but longed for still*. However, the poem does have a positive tone as the caged bird's song is heard. The last word of the poem also is *freedom*, leaving the reader with a slightly optimistic ending.

Not Waving but drowning

Summary: The audience misinterprets his desperate flailing as *waving* to some unseen friend on shore. The subject of the poem lived a very closed off life as no one knew what he was going through. Everyone in the poem are simply bystanders who are unwilling to participate or help. Tragedy is playing out under their noses but they are knowingly or unknowingly, indifferent to the suffering of others. The lines "Nobody heard him, the dead man/ But still he lay moaning" convey the information that a man has died by drowning. He died in full view of others who could have helped him but they didn't realise the difficulty he was in.

The man's depression: The opposition between him and the others is set up in the third line, *I was much further out than you thought*. The use of 'I' and 'you' emphasizes the distance between the man and those around him. The poet doesn't clarify whether his frantic *waving* was genuinely misinterpreted or whether it was done because it was easier for the people to believe that he didn't need help when he did.

Ironically, the public voice speakers unwittingly identify the right cause of death, though not in the way they intended: *cold* suggests the detached and uncaring attitude of the people around the dying man, and the circumstances of his lonely life, rather than the literal cold of the water. The final verse suggests the man died alone and unhelped. The repetition of the word 'cold' suggests the world he lived in was indifferent and uncaring. This is what, ultimately, killed him.

While drowning is central to the poem, there is no mention of water. This shows how accidental drowning wasn't the cause of death, but the man's troubled life and mental state.

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Anonymous speaker: There are three **voices** in the poem, one of whom is the voice of the man just drowned. An anonymous speaker who begins the poem, the voice of observers and the dead man himself.

The first voice is an example of an invisible voice that the reader does not notice. The speaker's character does not intrude into the poem. The invisible voice is detached from the proceedings. Despite the invisible narrator only delivering three or so lines in the whole poem, it sets the tone for the poem.

Confusion: The contradictory ideas of a "dead man" and "moaning" confuse the reader, reflecting the confusion present throughout the poem. These lines contain disturbing information, but are presented by the speaker without any emotion, which further shocks the reader. The "dead man" remains anonymous throughout the poem, which shows how no one really knew him or what he was going through. There are no quotation marks to show the change in perspectives to emphasise the confusion regarding the man's death.

Attitude of the public: The onlookers speak in one voice, presenting the views of a group or majority, so this type of voice is called the **public voice**. These are people who claimed to know who the dead man was, but are merely acquaintances because they didn't know what he was going through. On the surface, these people seem to offer consolatory words: *Poor chap*. However this phrase seems rather condescending. They seem deaf to the ghostly voice telling them *I was much further out than you thought and not waving but drowning*. The word "you" has an accusatory tone which implies that the public were in some way involved. Their words simply acknowledge the tragedy. No one grieves, showing their callous attitude. The voices of the onlookers are quick to point the finger of blame at the dead man himself through the phrase *he always loved larking*. The word *larking* has connotations of carelessness, an impression that is heightened by alliteration (*l*oved *l*arking) which sounds more light-hearted than serious. The abruptness of the second line, *And now he's dead*, is quite shocking because of the callous and matter of fact way in which it is pronounced. On the surface, this line expresses sympathy and condolence, but it has undertones of indifference.

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After this abrupt proclamation, the observers speculate the cause of death, deciding on heart failure, accusing him of lacking the necessary strength to cope with life. In the phrase *It must have been too cold for him*, the word *must* conveys the impression that the speakers are trying to persuade others as well as themselves that only the dead man was to blame. They make it seem as though the man was weak and sensitive, resulting in his death.

Having heard the rushed excuses of the onlookers, the dead man strongly rejects their judgement – although he does not disagree that it was *cold* that killed him. The repetition of *cold* and the use of the word *always*, shows how it was the coldness of the world and its people that allowed the man to die. In contrast with the detached tone of voice we have heard from the others, the dead man shows emotion through the onomatopoeia *Oh*, and the repetition of *no no no*. Assonance emphasises the emotional tone which is lacking in the narration of the observers and anonymous speaker.

Conclusion: The poem ends the same way it begins, with the dead man insisting he was *not waving but drowning*. This structure is called loop composition and it shows nobody has learned anything and nothing has changed. The observers are entrenched in their position, insisting the man only had himself to blame. *Not Waving But Drowning* is presented in simple rhyme, with a limited, repetitive diction. On the surface the story it tells seems quite simple too, but the thoughts it provokes are disturbing. It is reflective of how the situation was easily dismissed by the onlookers while a deeper message lay beneath the surface.