

“Love Cycle”

By Chinua Achebe.

When our love has perished
As a leaf from a tree,
And we, scattered in the whirlwind,
Turn different ways
I shall not greatly care
Nor should you, I think;
It was good while it lasted,
But it was never a tree.

I shall leave you then
Without a tear, without a qualm
And your parting kiss
Will sing me no sweet songs;
I shall stay in my place
With a hard look on my face
And my lips tightly closed
To keep out old ghosts.

Paraphrase:

When our love fades away, like a leaf falling from a tree, and we both get swept in different directions, I won't care too much, and you shouldn't either. Our love was enjoyable while it lasted, but it was never as strong or enduring as a tree.

When I leave you, there will be no tears or regrets. Your goodbye kiss will bring me no comfort. I will stay where I am, firm and unemotional, with my lips sealed tightly, determined to keep out the memories of what we once had.

"Dereliction"

By Chinua Achebe.

I have been all things uncomely and broken,
Maimed by my beauty to be estranged
Forever from the house of life;
To be an outcast even in the shadows
Of the fallen tower.

Alas for me then the loud waves
And the terrible rose only
Are companions in this cold exile._

Paraphrase:

I have experienced everything that is ugly and broken,
My own beauty has wounded me, making me feel alienated
From the essence of life itself, permanently distanced
From its vibrancy and warmth;
I feel like an outcast, unable to belong,
Even in the shadow of what was once strong and majestic —
Now only ruins remain, symbolized by a fallen tower.

And so, sadly, in my state of loneliness,
I find that only the loud, crashing waves of the sea
And the ominous image of a terrible, withered rose
Are my companions,
In this bitter, cold existence of isolation and exile.

Paraphrase Explanation: In the first stanza, the speaker reflects on their state of being, describing themselves as having been through all things "uncomely" (ugly or unpleasant) and "broken." This suggests a deep sense of personal damage or suffering. The next line introduces a paradox: the speaker is "maimed by my beauty," indicating that even their beauty, something typically positive, has caused them pain and isolation. This beauty has estranged them from the "house of life," which can be interpreted as being disconnected from the vibrancy and joy of living. The speaker feels permanently outcast, not just in the physical world, but even in the symbolic ruins of what once stood tall and strong, represented by the "fallen tower."

In the second stanza, the speaker laments their fate. The only companions they have in this cold, desolate state of exile are the "loud waves" and the "terrible rose." The waves represent a sense of chaos or relentless forces that offer no comfort. The "terrible rose" could symbolize something that was once beautiful but has become twisted or ominous, further highlighting the speaker's sense of desolation. These two symbols reinforce the speaker's loneliness and separation from the world of warmth and life, leaving them in a place of cold exile.

"Vultures"

By Chinua Achebe.

In the greyness
and drizzle of one despondent
dawn unstirred by harbingers
of sunbreak a vulture
perching high on broken
bone of a dead tree
tucked in bashed-in
head a pebble on
a stem rooted in
a dump of gross feathers
instead of nestling snug
in that foul nest
full of vile limbs
and hideous beaks
and you wonder
that a natural evil
can so wear a robe of largesse.

Of course I saw
immediately the certain
touch of kinship in the cold
ferocity of that beaked head and
huge, creeping wings:
they picked the eyes
of a swollen corpse
in a water-logged trench
and ate the things in its bowel.

Full then of a grisly
faith in that charnel-house
somehow comes the charmer
to keep the balance of things
the straight-face silence
of a father.

When he comes at evening
to pick the tender offspring
from its nest of love

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and his kindred spirit
does not betray his profession:
he too shows them respect
as he bends low towards the soiled grave
of his grizzly heart.

Detailed Paraphrase:

On a grey, dreary morning,
with the sky heavy with drizzle,
at the start of a day that seems filled with sadness,
with no sign of sunshine or hope,
a vulture sits perched on the cracked
branch of a dead tree.
Its head, battered and worn,
sits hunched on its thin neck,
resembling a small pebble on a fragile stem.
Rather than being nestled comfortably
in a nest of warmth,
it perches in a filthy nest of decay,
surrounded by repulsive, decayed limbs
and ghastly beaks of other vultures.
And you start to wonder:
How can such a creature,
which seems so full of evil,
also appear to be generous in its role in the world?

Then it became clear to me,
right away, that there is a sense
of kinship in the cold, ruthless
nature of the vulture's beak and
its massive, slow-moving wings.
They feed on the dead,
pecking the eyes
of a bloated corpse
lying in a trench full of water,
and devour the rotten contents of its stomach.

Filled with a morbid belief
in their necessary role as scavengers
in a world filled with death,
they are like grim enforcers of balance
in nature's cycle.

A vulture, much like a father who maintains
a cold and emotionless exterior,
fulfills its duty.

When that father returns in the evening
to take care of his children,
pulling them from the warmth and love of the home,
he does not betray his grim duty,
but instead, even in his dark task,
he shows respect,
bending low over the metaphorical grave
that is his hardened heart,
as he silently carries out the work of death.

Expanded Paraphrase Explanation:

In the first stanza, the speaker introduces a bleak, dreary morning, setting a mood of sadness and decay. The vulture is perched on a broken, lifeless tree branch, which symbolizes death and desolation. The vulture's head is described as beaten down, almost like a pebble on a stem, adding to its grotesque appearance. Instead of being comfortably nestled in a soft, warm nest, the vulture is surrounded by the vile remains of other animals, reinforcing its association with death and decay. The speaker then wonders how something so evil-looking can serve such a crucial purpose in nature.

In the second stanza, the speaker realizes that there is a cold, predatory kinship in the way the vulture acts. The vulture, with its sharp beak and large wings, feeds on dead bodies, picking out their eyes and devouring the insides of their bodies. This gruesome scene symbolizes the inevitable process of decay that follows death, as the vultures consume what remains.

In the third stanza, the speaker reflects on the vulture's grim but necessary role. The vulture, much like a father who maintains a stoic exterior, performs its duty in the cycle of life and death. This sense of duty is described with a sort of respect, as the father figure, though emotionally detached, still cares for his children in his own way.

In the final stanza, the father figure is compared to the vulture once again, as he comes home in the evening to take care of his offspring. Even though his task is grim, like picking apart the remains of life, he does it with a sense of respect and duty. The father, like the vulture, bends low over the grave of his heart, showing that even in death and decay, there is a kind of dignity in fulfilling one's role.

This detailed paraphrasing explains the imagery, symbolism, and deeper meanings within the poem, reflecting on themes of death, duty, and the natural cycle of life and decay.

"Refugee Mother and Child"

By Chinua Achebe.

No Madonna and Child could touch
Her tenderness for a son
She soon would have to forget.
The air was heavy with odors
Of diarrhea, of unwashed children
With washed-out ribs and dried-up bottoms
Waddling in labored steps
Behind blown-empty bellies.
Most mothers there had long ceased
To care, but not this one;
She held a ghost smile between her teeth,
And in her eyes the ghost of a mother's pride
As she combed the rust-colored hair
Left on his skull, and then—
Singing in her eyes—began carefully to part it.
In their former life this was perhaps
A little daily act of no consequence
Before his breakfast and school; now she did it
Like putting flowers on a tiny grave._

Detailed Paraphrase:

No image of the Madonna and Child—often used to represent perfect, idealized motherly love—could compare to the tenderness this mother felt for her son. Despite knowing that she would soon have to part with him forever, her love remained intact. The air in the refugee camp was thick with the smells of disease and decay, especially the overpowering stench of diarrhea from the unwashed bodies of children. These children had ribs visible through their skin, and their small, undernourished bodies had dried-up bottoms. They struggled to walk, moving with difficulty, their swollen bellies hollow and empty from starvation.

Many of the mothers in the camp had stopped caring for their children, having given up hope in the face of overwhelming suffering. But not this mother. She managed to hold on to a faint smile, though it was more like the ghost of a smile—weak and barely visible. In her eyes, there was a flicker of a mother's pride, even though it was also fading, like a shadow of what it once was. As she gently combed through the few remaining strands of rust-colored hair on her son's head, she focused on this small task. Her eyes, though weary, seemed to sing with memories of better times as she began to carefully part his hair.

In the past, this would have been an insignificant, everyday routine—a simple act performed before her son had breakfast and went off to school. But now, in the harsh reality of the camp, this once ordinary act has taken on a new meaning. It was as if she were performing a sacred ritual, similar to placing flowers on a tiny grave—preparing to say goodbye to her child in this quiet, intimate way.

Expanded Paraphrase Explanation:

The poem begins by drawing a comparison between the famous Christian image of the Madonna and Child and the refugee mother's love for her son. Achebe suggests that the refugee mother's love is even more profound and tender than the idealized image of maternal love. However, her love is underscored by the painful knowledge that she will soon lose her child, which makes her actions all the more heartbreaking.

The setting of the poem is a refugee camp, where the air is thick with the overwhelming odors of sickness and filth. The children in the camp are severely malnourished, with their ribs showing through their skin and their bellies distended from hunger. The conditions are so dire that many mothers have become numb to their suffering, ceasing to care for their children, perhaps as a way to protect themselves from the inevitable grief of loss.

However, one mother stands out from the rest. Despite her sorrow, she still tries to care for her son with tenderness and love. She smiles, though it is a weak and almost ghostly smile, and her eyes reflect the pride she feels as a mother, even in such dire circumstances. The act of combing her son's hair, which once was a simple, everyday routine, has now taken on a deeper significance. It becomes a symbolic gesture, as though she is preparing for her son's death, much like someone would place flowers on a grave.

In the last lines, the poem reflects on how a mundane task like parting her son's hair has transformed into a final act of love and farewell. The mother knows her son is dying, and this small act becomes her way of expressing love and care in a world that has been stripped of almost all hope.

This paraphrasing unpacks the symbolism, themes of loss and love, and the emotional depth of the poem, showing how Achebe captures the immense tragedy of a mother's love in the face of overwhelming despair.