

02/13/2001
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ENC 1102
Once Upon a Time
By Gabriel Okara
Interpreting Poetry
Revision

“Once Upon a Time” is an emotional poem about the story of a grown up man—who once was an innocent child.

His adult world has lost the charm of his childhood years. The poet describes how the process of growing up transforms the innocence of childhood. After entering the adult world, the young adults will gradually forget how to “laugh with their hearts.”

While growing up, the cold world intimidated our main character. He used to sense people’s insincerity and their superficial laughs, because “they only laugh[ed] with their teeth,/while their ice-block-cold eyes/search[ed] behind [his] shadow” (624).

It is a vicious circle: once someone has entered the adult world, he will change—then change others. Our character will learn how to say things that he doesn’t really mean: “I have also learned to say, “Goodbye,”/when I mean “Goodriddance”;/to say “Glad to meet you,”/without being glad; and to say “It’s been/nice talking to you,” after being bored” (625).

Like everyone else, our main character was forced to grow up—in order to adapt to the adult world: “I have learned to wear many faces/like dresses—homeface,/officeface, streetface, hostface, cock-/tail face, with all their conforming smiles/like a fixed portrait smile” (624).

In this selfish world, our character learned how to adapt; he adapted a little too well. He now can play the adult role without any problem.

However, once he became a parent, parenthood seems to have helped him to remember the innocent world of his childhood. Because of his son, he wants to re-learn how to be sincere. His son holds the key to this old, forgotten world.

What a wonderful poem! It presents in such a simple manner, such a complicated subject: the pain of growing up, and the loss of innocence.

Works Cited

Okara, Gabriel. "Once Upon a Time." *Angles of Vision: Reading, Writing, and the Study of Literature*. Eds. Arthur W. Biddle, and Toby Fulwiler. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1992. 624-625.