



THE ÉMIGRÉE

KNOWLEDGE ORGANISER



| | |
|--|--|
| <p>Context – <i>The Émigrée</i> was written by Carol Rumens and was first published in <i>Thinking of Skins</i> in 1993.</p> | |
| <p>Carol Rumens – Carol Rumens (born 1944) is a British poet, who was born and brought up in the culturally-diverse south of London. She has taught at numerous universities as a lecturer, and has also used her fluent understanding of Russian to translate many Russian poems. Critics have described her as ‘having a fascination with elsewhere’, which is clear in <i>The Émigrée</i>, a poem in which the speaker feels permanently ‘elsewhere.’</p>  | <p>Emigration – Emigration is the act of leaving one’s country in order to settle permanently in another. Someone who emigrates is often known as an emigrant, however in this poem Rumens employs the feminine form of the word – Emigree – to provide a voice to a female speaker. Emigrants may leave their home country for many reasons, including to escape war, tyranny, poverty, or simply to seek a better life abroad.</p>  |
| <p>Thinking of Skins – <i>Thinking of Skins</i> is the anthology in which <i>The Émigrée</i> appears. In this, one of her most popular poetry collections, Rumens confronts both personal and political issues in her engagement with other lives. The poems in this collection are often set against the backdrop of Eastern Europe and Russia, and Rumens adopts a wide variety of voices in exploring themes such as suffering, persecution, love, separation, death and displacement.</p>  | <p>Emigration to the United Kingdom – Throughout the time of Rumens’ upbringing, the population of the UK was undergoing major changes as a result of widespread immigration. In the early 1990s, (when the poem was written), immigration was overtaking ‘homegrown’ population increases for the first time. In multicultural south London, Rumens will have doubtlessly encountered many emigrants experiencing life in a new country.</p>  |

| Language/Structural Devices | |
|--|--|
| <p>Metaphor– Rumens employs a number of different metaphors across the poem, normally with the intent of creating visual imagery of the speaker’s homeland. For example, the tyrant’s regime in the homeland is referred to as a ‘sickness’ – this suggests that the city’s current state is not its true nature, and the speaker patiently waits for it to return to health. Another example is the ‘bright, filled paperweight’ – a metaphor for the positive memory she holds of her city.</p> <p>Quote: “my original view, the bright, filled paperweight. It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants,”</p> | <p>Personification – Rumens uses personification across the poem in order to emphasise the attributes of different places and concepts. The city itself is personified – flying to the speaker in ‘its own white plane’ and acting ‘docile.’ The speaker also suggests that the city takes her ‘dancing through the city/ of walls.’ These examples of personification add to the positive image of the city – we understand the buzz the speaker feels when reflecting on her home city.</p> <p>Quote: “but my city comes to me in its own white plane... ..I comb its hair and love its shining eyes.”</p> |
| <p>Similes – A number of similes are utilised to add to the visual imagery of the poem. In stanza 1, Rumens creates an image of waves rising and falling between the speaker and her city, emphasising the position of isolation (an ocean between them). Later in stanza 3, the city is compared to paper, for being ‘docile.’ This suggests that the city feels within her control, and conforms to her beliefs and desires.</p> <p>Quote: “...and the frontiers rise between us, close like waves...“It lies down in front of me, docile as paper.”</p> | <p>Interesting Verbs and Adjectives – Rumens’ vocabulary choices are used to enhance meanings within the poem. For example, the use of the interesting verb ‘branded’ helps to show that the reader will always remember the city, but also evokes ideas of pain regarding the separation. Furthermore, the use of the adjectives ‘white’ and ‘graceful’ help to create a heavenly image of the speaker’s city.</p> <p>Quote: “but I am branded by an impression of sunlight. The white streets of that city, the graceful slopes”</p> |
| <p>Form/Meter – The poem consists of three stanzas. The opening two stanzas are 8 lines long and the third is 9 lines long. It has been suggested that the extra line at the end reflects the poet’s unwillingness to let go. The poem does not use a regular rhythm or rhyme scheme, which perhaps reflects the feeling disrupted life of the émigrée. The line at the end of each stanza ends with the words ‘of sunlight’ (a refrain).</p> <p>Quote: “My city hides behind me. They mutter death, and my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight.”</p> | <p>Structure – The poem is presented as a first person account by an émigrée. The first stanza introduces the speaker’s thoughts about her homeland, the second adds more depth about forces keeping her from home, and the third deals with the discontent she feels in her new home. As the homeland is not named, the poem seems to be offering a more general consideration of the emotional implications of emigration.</p> <p>Quote: “There once was a country... I left it as a child but my memory of it is sunlight-clear”</p> |

| Themes – A theme is an idea or message that runs throughout a text. | |
|---|--|
| <p>Identity – The speaker struggles to find her identity in her new city, which contrasts heavily with her home city. This is evident through her repetition of ‘they’, (the ‘others’ in her new city) who she perceives as being in some way sinister and unwelcoming. Words such as ‘walls’, and ‘mutter’ shows the distrust between them.</p>  | |
| <p>Exile and Isolation – The speaker is an exile from an unknown city – a place that she clearly still considers as her emotional and spiritual home. She frequently compares her home to the ‘sunlight.’ In contrast, she considers her new home, which others see as ‘safe’, as a ‘dark’ place. It is evident that she feels exceptionally isolated in her new city.</p>  | |

| Line-by-Line Analysis | | | |
|-----------------------|------|--|--|
| STANZA | LINE | POEM | ANALYSIS |
| 1 | 1 | There once was a country... I left it as a child | <p>In the opening stanza, the speaker views her home through rose-tinted spectacles, using <u>weather imagery</u>. The first line is written like the <u>opening to a story</u>, but suggests loss. Memories of childhood are often hazy, but the speaker’s memories are <u>happy and bright</u> (‘sunlight clear’). ‘November’ implies that things were getting <u>colder, darker and gloomier</u> – suggests a dark point in the country’s history. The ‘paperweight’ <u>metaphor</u> helps the reader to see that no matter what bad things she hears about her country, it will always be <u>positive in her mind</u>. The suggestion that the country is ‘<u>sick with tyrants</u>’ makes the reader think that the country is at no fault, it is stricken by plague, but the use of ‘<u>branded</u>’ in the final line of the stanza shows that the speaker’s <u>positive view of country is permanent</u>.</p> |
| | 2 | but my memory of it is sunlight-clear | |
| | 3 | for it seems I never saw it in that November | |
| | 4 | which, I am told, comes to the mildest city. | |
| | 5 | The worst news I receive of it cannot break | |
| | 6 | my original view, the bright, filled paperweight. | |
| | 7 | It may be at war, it may be sick with tyrants, | |
| | 8 | but I am branded by an impression of sunlight. | |
| 2 | 9 | The white streets of that city, the graceful slopes | <p>The speaker fondly remembers her home city, in <u>direct defiance</u> to the erosive effects that <u>time and oppression</u> have on its memory. The use of the adjectives ‘white’ and ‘graceful’ in the opening line make the home city seem <u>heavenly</u>. Time is personified as an enemy in war, as it ‘rolls its tanks’ and creates a <u>separation</u> between the speaker and her homeland. In the second half of the poem, the speaker seems to express that she wishes to speak in her <u>native language</u>, but has been in some way prevented from doing so – ‘banned by the state.’ Holding this language and being unable to use it makes the speaker feel ‘<u>like a hollow doll</u>’ (a simile). But she can’t forget the language that she used to speak; the inclusion of another sense (<u>taste</u>) adds to the <u>vividness of the imagery</u>.</p> |
| | 10 | glow even clearer as time rolls its tanks | |
| | 11 | and the frontiers rise between us, close like waves. | |
| | 12 | That child’s vocabulary I carried here | |
| | 13 | like a hollow doll, opens and spills a grammar. | |
| | 14 | Soon I shall have every coloured molecule of it. | |
| | 15 | It may by now be a lie, banned by the state | |
| | 16 | but I can’t get it off my tongue. It tastes of sunlight. | |
| 3 | 17 | I have no passport, there’s no way back at all | <p>The speaker opens the third stanza with a statement that makes the situation seem desperate and hopeless, and yet the second line revives the mood – the city is personified, and the speaker’s memory is compared (through a metaphor) to a white plane that brings visions of it rushing back to her. The similes ‘docile as paper’ suggests that the memories yield to her every desire, rather like a blank sheet of paper does to an artist – what it becomes is within her control. There is a childlike joy in how the speaker treats the memories – rather like nurturing a cherished pet (line 20). The speaker then reveals contrasting perceptions of the city that she is in now – those around her see it as a ‘free city’ but she sees it as restrictive (city of walls). The darkness in the new city contrasts with the brightness she feels from her own city. Repetition of ‘they’ makes these unknown ‘others’ appear menacing and unwelcoming. She feels the need to defend her old city, as to her it is still ‘sunlight.’</p> |
| | 18 | but my city comes to me in its own white plane. | |
| | 19 | It lies down in front of me, docile as paper; | |
| | 20 | I comb its hair and love its shining eyes. | |
| | 21 | My city takes me dancing through the city | |
| | 22 | of walls. They accuse me of absence, they circle me. | |
| | 23 | They accuse me of being dark in their free city. | |
| | 24 | My city hides behind me. They mutter death, | |
| | 25 | and my shadow falls as evidence of sunlight. | |

| Poems for Comparison | Words from the Poet |
|---|--|
| <p>The Prelude/ Kamikaze</p> <p><i>The Émigrée</i> can be compared and contrasted with these poems in its approach to the theme of <u>identity</u></p> | <p>“I think in my social attitudes I am a fighter. I don’t want to write polemic. I don’t want to write about what I haven’t experienced for myself. So the material available is limited, and the tone must remain true to my voice. But I am angry about many things, and deeply disappointed with the human race. We are incapable of learning from history. I have very little hope for the future. I have begun exploring this in my latest poems.”</p>  |
| <p>Exposure/ Storm on the Island</p> <p><i>The Émigrée</i> can be compared and contrasted with this poem in the approach to the themes of the <u>Exile and Isolation</u></p> | |