



Sub : Ways with
Words

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ONCE UPON A TIME

BY GABRIEL OKARA

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- Nigerian poet , born in Bumoundi in Yenagoa, Bayelsa state.
- First Modernist poet of Anglophone Africa
- Known for his early experimental novel, *The Voice(1964)*, award winning poetry, published in *The Fisherman's Invocation(1978)* and *the Dreamer, His Vision(2005)*
- Okara incorporated African thought ,religion ,folklore and imagery into both his verse and prose.
- Called as “ the Nigerian Negritude”.
- One of the founders of Modern African Literature
- Link between colonial poetry and vigorous modernist writing
- Considered as highly original and uninfluenced by other poets.
- Successful in capturing the mood, sights and sound of Africa.
- His poems show great sensitivity, perceptive judgements and a tremendous energy.
- Topic: what happens when the ancient culture of Africa's faced with modern western culture.
- Pioneer of Negritude Movement.

- *Once Upon A Time* is a free verse poem that focuses on a father's attitude to cultural change and times past, before the incoming Western culture affected the native African way of life.
- In the poem the man (presumably a father) addresses the son, telling him in a rather nostalgic manner, how things used to be. People were different back then, more genuine it seemed, and that is what the speaker would like to do now - return to a restored world - if he can only learn from the youngster.
- Back then people weren't after your money, they could look you in the eye and smile real smiles. But nowadays, although the smiling teeth are on show, and they'll shake your hand, all they want to know is your financial status.
- And so the poem progresses, the early stanzas revealing more of the negative changes that have occurred during the father's lifetime. He is old enough to have watched decent human standards drop to the wayside as western ideals (together with capitalism) gradually took over.
- The speaker wants to relearn from the as yet untainted son; how to laugh and be genuine again. It's rather a pathetic plea, coming from the adult to the youngster.

- Once upon a time title suggests something so far-fetched.
- Laugh with their hearts : suggests deep honest emotion. It meant that when they laugh or shook hands with their hearts, it came from within.
- Laugh with their eyes: it is a cliché that the eyes are the windows of the soul, but they do not let us see what a person might be really feeling.
- Laugh with their teeth: if someone laughs with their eyes, we can see their emotions. But teeth , which is hard , white and expressionless, reveal nothing.
- Ice-block-cold-eyes :revealing no warmth. The metaphor states that their eyes are now 'ice-block-cold' displays that people are now emotionless.
- Left hands search.....my empty pockets : people are now dishonest and insincere, saying things they do not mean. While shaking hands, they use the free hand to search the empty pockets.
- Like a fixed portrait smile : creates an image of a forced smile. It indicates that all these faces never change and its like a smile fixed for its own occasion, how for each occasion people tend to have a different smile like a fixed picture that never changes.
- Lines 19-24: he describes his behaviour in an interesting way, saying that he has learnt to wear many faces like dresses. Like dresses, he changes his face, taking off one and exchanging it for something more suitable like home face, office face and street face. Here these faces are a series of masks or false faces, which show no real emotion. These faces, unlike hearts, are not sincere.

- I have also....Good-riddance: suggest show he has also learnt how to say goodbye in a nice way and not mean it in a good way at all. When he says goodbye, he means good riddance.
- Line 25-32: the writer is saying that there are no true emotions in his words and feelings and they are said with just his tongue and not his heart. This shows his environment has had an impact on how he behaves , how he is emotionally detached from other people, how it has destroyed his passion and made his heart unfeeling.
- Like a snake bare fangs: the poet has used a very strong metaphor. A snake is commonly used in mythology and fairy tales to describe evil, insincerity and dishonesty. This suggests that when he laughs you see his teeth and smile but his intentions are also insincere and dishonest.
- Lines 35-39: these lines describe his desperation to go back to his old and innocent ways where he felt his life was simple and his emotions were honest emotions, it also describes his hope and desire to unlearn all bad habits he has picked up over the years.
- Lines 4-43: he pleads to his son to show him how to laugh and smile. The poet sums up asking to teach him all the good habits he has lost and to have true emotions.