

Dennis Scott: Marrysong



Background

Dennis Scott was born in Jamaica in 1939 and died in 1991. Many of his poems were written in a Caribbean vernacular.

The poem is about a marriage. The central metaphor summed up in the short sentence, He charted (tried to make a map) – i.e. tried to make sense of the landscape of her personality.

Questions on the text

- The poem repays very close study. Spend some time on the first sentence. Does the use of the word 'learned' surprise you? What does it imply? The word 'quite' appears at the end of the first sentence. Consider how its position there adds to the meaning.'

He has to learn and analyse her like an object. Quite means he has been trying for a long time but hasn't figured it out. It doesn't demean her but it makes her seem more complex. Perhaps the author is suggesting that a man has to work hard if he is going to understand a woman and he never quite succeeds. The connotation is far from being negative: we get the impression that he enjoys (or has enjoyed) this; learning his wife has made the relationship exciting, like going on a long journey/adventure, hence the extended metaphor. There is perhaps too the reference to the fact that we carry on learning throughout life, that it is an ongoing process.

- Consider what these words and phrases add to an understanding of his experience of the marriage: year after year – times passes, been together a long time, memories are blurred. Rhythm is steady and monotonous, just like their marriage??

without seasons – she changes but not in the regular way that seasons do...

shifted - under his eye: almost an oxymoron because it is not possible that something shifts while being watched..

The punctuation cuts up/ slices up/ dices the rhythm adding to the effect of change of mood.

- Lines 3 to 6: Consider how the writer makes the reader feel the hurt and anger of the first mood and the happiness of the second. Look at the way the images are presented and the sound of the lines.

Hurt and anger: Short sentences, one syllabic words, use of punctuation. The images associated with anger are "walled anger"/ - contained; image of something big and imposing and trapped – pent-up anger.. "quarried hurt" – geographical reference, he has to dig it up as if in a quarry; implied is that it is deep and has to be dynamited/ looked for. "The use of the word "quarried" gives the reader an image of a deep, dark, mysterious mine. It makes the reader feel like the poet's wife is hiding something from him, as if she has buried her hurt in the ground and is hoping no one finds it."

<http://englishlanguage literature.wordpress.com/2011/02/17/marrysong-by-dennis-scott/>

Happiness: "cool water laughing" = metaphor for a relaxed, carefree, happy mood that refreshes you, washes away your worries, fatigue, hurt/ = "stones in her voice": metaphor for the anger because stones are rough and heavy, noisy, block the water. Stones act as a sort of barrage.

AND ALSO:

L5/ expresses a changing of mood from angry and frustrated to calm and relaxed using the metaphor of a stream – flowing like someone's thoughts; blood; veins; bodies; humanity; lives.

- Lines 7 and 8 are made up of four very short sentences. What is the effect of this? (Try to read them out loud.) He keeps on trying to chart her moods. The rhythm is quick and rather harsh / disjointed. He tries but not for long and changes his way of charting her each time. The short sentences to some extent represent her mood.
- Read the images in the next lines from line 9 to 15. Try to chart the twists and turns of the imagery. Write down how the nature of the imagery itself reflects the changing moods and personality of the woman in the marriage.

He tries to predict because he wants to know her but he can't and it irritates him; he makes a map as a guide but has to change it all the time; wind – rain- sea –salty: water metaphor – link with tears. When the sea is rough you get salt spray.

- What is the effect of putting 'jaunty' and 'helpless' together?

Adds to/ emphasizes the effect of ups and downs / mood swings as these words act as oxymorons.

- Consider which of these words are applicable to the writer's marriage experience, remembering to support their decisions:

Bewildering [very confusing] – he doesn't know how to react – wondered; could be lost; shifted under his eye; unexpected; wilderness; the map was never true.

Annoying: no because her unpredictability is actually exciting for him.

Exhilarating: [very exciting; thrilling] all was each day new; unexpected hill; jaunty helpless journey etc.

Fulfilling: [épanouissant]: accepted that geography; to find his way.

- What do the last three lines reflect about the development of their relationship?

The last three lines show a new phase in the relationship. Ironically, instead of journeying, he now 'stayed home'. This is a new twist in the extended metaphor. He stayed at home in a sense that he wasn't going to explore anymore; he was going to take her emotions as they come. He starts to realise that he can't know her emotions in patterns.

- What is the effect of 'wondered' as a one word sentence?

The effect of 'wondered' as a one word sentence is a decision to think about her and not to wander around her personality.

- Look at the rhymes in the verse and how they add to the overall effect of the poem.

Rhyme is not used often in the poem; symbolising how no day is the same and her emotions don't have a pattern. In lines 16 and 17, the rhyme of 'find' and 'mind', symbolises perhaps how he is genuinely interested in trying to find how to understand her 'mind', personality and 'wilderness'. The rhyme in lines 11 and 12, 'new' and 'grew', could show how growing creates new thing, a sort of metamorphosis.

- Contrast the feelings expressed in Clare's poem about 'First Love' with those of this poem.

Nostalgia in both, though the perspectives are different as, of course, are the relationships (John Clare is regretful at a turn of events that prevented him from pursuing the relationship whereas Scott is looking back with fondness and a little bewilderment at a lifetime of marriage).

Compare too with "Time" (old men looking back on their lives); "The Voice": Hardy is very self-critical about how he behaved with his wife whereas here, Dennis Scott is accepting of how his wife behaved with him.

Compare with Dover Beach: defiance (pessimism) of a young man looking forward vs. acceptance (optimism) of an old man looking back.

Weblinks

http://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=marrysong+dennis+scott&oq=marrysong+dennis+s&aq=0&aqi=g1&aql=&gs_sm=1&gs_upl=409415531101718819101018101125112510.1110

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sx1OL0yrhI8>

http://wiki.answers.com/Q/What_is_the_poem_'Marrysong'_by_Dennis_Scott_talks_about

<http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/lifestyle/02/11/10/math-professor-bares-formula-love>