

## At the Fishhouses

Although it is a cold evening,  
 down by one of the fishhouses  
 an old man sits netting,  
 his net, in the gloaming almost invisible,  
 a dark purple-brown, [5]  
 and his shuttle worn and polished.  
 The air smells so strong of codfish  
 it makes one's nose run and one's eyes water.  
 The five fishhouses have steeply peaked roofs  
 and narrow, cleated gangplanks slant up [10]  
 to storerooms in the gables  
 for the wheelbarrows to be pushed up and down on.  
 All is silver: the heavy surface of the sea,  
 swelling slowly as if considering spilling over,  
 is opaque, but the silver of the benches, [15]  
 the lobster pots, and masts, scattered  
 among the wild jagged rocks,  
 is of an apparent translucence  
 like the small old buildings with an emerald moss  
 growing on their shoreward walls. [20]  
 The big fish tubs are completely lined  
 with layers of beautiful herring scales  
 and the wheelbarrows are similarly plastered  
 with creamy iridescent coats of mail,  
 with small iridescent flies crawling on them. [25]  
 Up on the little slope behind the houses,  
 set in the sparse bright sprinkle of grass,  
 is an ancient wooden capstan,  
 cracked, with two long bleached handles  
 and some melancholy stains, like dried blood, [30]  
 where the ironwork has rusted.  
 The old man accepts a Lucky Strike.  
 He was a friend of my grandfather.  
 We talk of the decline in the population  
 and of codfish and herring [35]  
 while he waits for a herring boat to come in.  
 There are sequins on his vest and on his thumb.  
 He has scraped the scales, the principal beauty,  
 from unnumbered fish with that black old knife,  
 the blade of which is almost worn away. [40]

Down at the water's edge, at the place  
 where they haul up the boats, up the long ramp  
 descending into the water, thin silver  
 tree trunks are laid horizontally  
 across the gray stones, down and down [45]  
 at intervals of four or five feet.

Cold dark deep and absolutely clear,  
 element bearable to no mortal,  
 to fish and to seals ... One seal particularly  
 I have seen here evening after evening. [50]  
 He was curious about me. He was interested in music;  
 like me a believer in total immersion,  
 so I used to sing him Baptist hymns.  
 I also sang "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."  
 He stood up in the water and regarded me [55]  
 steadily, moving his head a little.  
 Then he would disappear, then suddenly emerge  
 almost in the same spot, with a sort of shrug  
 as if it were against his better judgment.  
 Cold dark deep and absolutely clear, [60]  
 the clear gray icy water ... Back, behind us,  
 the dignified tall firs begin.  
 Bluish, associating with their shadows,  
 a million Christmas trees stand  
 waiting for Christmas. The water seems suspended [65]  
 above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.  
 I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same,  
 slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones,  
 icily free above the stones,  
 above the stones and then the world. [70]  
 If you should dip your hand in,  
 your wrist would ache immediately,  
 your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn  
 as if the water were a transmutation of fire  
 that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame. [75]  
 If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter,  
 then briny, then surely burn your tongue.  
 It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:  
 dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,  
 drawn from the cold hard mouth [80]  
 of the world, derived from the rocky breasts  
 forever, flowing and drawn, and since  
 our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.

#### Annotations

[4] *gloaming*: dusk, twilight.

[6] *shuttle*: tool used to repair nylon fishing nets.

[10] *cleated gangplanks*: ridged wooden walkways with projecting strips of metal or rubber to provide traction.

[11] *gables*: the triangular part of a wall that attaches to the roof.

[15] *opaque*: not transparent.

[18] *translucence*: having the quality of being semi-transparent.

[24] *iridescent*: varying in colour when seen in different lights or from different angles.

[28] *capstan*: a revolving cylinder around which a rope or cable is wrapped. Used for hoisting heavy weights such as anchors.

[32] *Lucky Strike*: a brand of cigarette.

[37] *sequins*: small shiny discs used for ornamentation; in this case, the term is used as a metaphor for the fish scales that fall onto the old man's hands and clothes as he scrapes the fish with his knife..

[53] *Baptist*: a member of a Protestant Christian denomination that believes in baptising its adult members by total immersion.

[54] *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*: a popular Protestant hymn.

[74] *transmutation*: the process of changing from one form or state to another.

## Exploring the Poem

1. The poet is taking her regular evening walk around Great Village in Nova Scotia, and passes by the fishhouses:
  - a. What physical features of the fishhouses are mentioned by the poet? How are fish transported into the fishhouses?
  - b. What effect, in lines 13 to 17, does the twilight have on the landscape of Great Village?
  - c. In what way does the ‘silver’ of the sea differ from the ‘silver’ of the landscape?
2. The poet sees an old man who is busy repairing a fishing net:
  - a. What is the old man waiting for as he sits outside the fishhouses? Why is his net described as being ‘almost invisible’?
  - b. What does the poet offer the old man? What personal connection do they establish? What do they talk about?
  - c. What work does the old man do on a daily basis? What phrases suggest that he has been doing this work for a very long time?
3. In lines 63 to 83 the poet focuses on the sea:
  - a. The poet describes how the sea comes ‘swinging’. What does this suggest about the movement of its waves?
  - b. True or false: The poet believes the sea never changes.
  - c. The poet feels that the sea could flow anywhere, that it’s unbound by the laws of physics. Identify three different phrases that suggest this.
4. The poet continues to describe the sea, depicting it as a rather strange and unsettling force:
  - a. According to the poet, what would happen if you were to ‘dip your hand in’ the sea? What would its waters taste like if you were to drink them?
  - b. The poet compares the sea to a very strange form of fire. What features of this fire does she mention? What does she imagine ‘feeds’ this fire?
  - c. The poet imagines the sea issuing from springs deep within the rocky seabed. What metaphors does she use to describe these springs?
5. The poet’s gift for vivid and detailed **imagery** is evident when she describes a seal she’s seen several times during her evening walks: The seal is presented as being oddly human in its behaviour. Identify three words or phrases that convey this. Look up the term ‘total immersion’. What does it suggest about the poet’s religious

## Focus on Technique

- upbringing? How might the seal, in its own way, be described as ‘a believer in total immersion’?
6. Mention two techniques used by Bishop in her description of the ‘fish tubs’ and the ‘wheelbarrows’. Does she present these objects as: a) ugly, b) strangely beautiful, or c) boring and banal? Give a reason for your answer.
  7. The poet uses **personification** to describe the forest of fir trees. What phrases contribute to this effect? What are the trees portrayed as doing? What phrase describes how the trees seem to blend with their own shadows? Would you agree that this phrase, too, contains an element of personification?
  8. The poet draws a comparison between the sea and ‘what we imagine knowledge to be’. Is the poet referring to: a) general knowledge, b) a specific set of skills, or c) knowledge of the self and the unconscious mind?
  9. Twice the poet begins to describe the sea (in lines 47 to 49 and in lines 60 and 61). And twice she allows herself to

## Focus on Theme

- be distracted. How can we explain this reluctance to directly contemplate the ocean? Discuss this question as a class.
10. ‘The self, like the sea, is always in flux. Therefore, our self-knowledge is always out of date. For no sooner have we understood ourselves than our minds and personalities have changed again.’ Can you identify two phrases in the poem that support this statement?



## LINE BY LINE

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This poem is set in Great Village, Nova Scotia, the Canadian fishing community where Bishop lived between the ages of three and six. Bishop always bore a great fondness for Nova Scotia and its landscape, and for her maternal grandparents, with whom she and mother lived during this time.

But Great Village was also associated with very traumatic events in the poet's life:

- Elizabeth and her mother moved there shortly after her father's tragically early death.
- While she was living there, her mother was committed to a mental hospital and Elizabeth never saw her again.
- Eventually, at the age of six, Elizabeth was taken away to Massachusetts in the United States, to live with her dead father's parents. Elizabeth found this change especially jolting, referring to it, with only slight exaggeration, as a 'kidnapping'.

These events, then, were a source of terrible childhood trauma and of the emotional instability that haunted the poet as an adult. Many years after the events had taken place, Bishop's therapist suggested that she return to Great Village as a means of dealing with these terrible memories. For many years, then, Bishop made regular trips back to Great Village. These were made not only out of love for the bleakly beautiful Nova Scotia landscape, but also in an effort to confront these childhood traumas and heal herself on a psychic and emotional level.

### A visit to Great Village

This poem is set during one such visit to Great Village. Each evening, during her stay, the poet has taken a stroll along the coastline. On this particular evening her route takes her close to the village's fishhouses. These are buildings where each day's catch is stored until it can be transported to the markets

of the towns and cities. The area around the fishhouses, unsurprisingly, stinks of fish, of cod especially. The smell, according to the poet, is strong enough to make 'one's nose run and one's eyes water'.

The poet notices an old man sitting by one of the fish houses. It is 'a cold evening' and it's beginning to get dark. But he continues to sit there, busily repairing one of his fishing nets: 'an old man sits netting'. In the gloaming, or twilight, the poet can hardly make out the net itself: 'his net, in the gloaming almost invisible'. It strikes her as no more than a blob of colour, of 'dark purple-brown' in the fast descending darkness.

The poet describes the fishhouses with typical attention to detail and factual accuracy. She notes that there are five such buildings. She notes that they have 'steeply peaked roofs'. She notes that they are accessed by means of wooden ramps or 'gangplanks' up which wheelbarrows full of fish are rolled. She even notes that the gangplanks are 'cleated', meaning they have strips of wood running across them to prevent the wheelbarrows rolling back down.

The poet describes how twilight makes everything in the landscape seem silver-coloured: 'All is silver'. Most things in the landscape – the benches, the lobster pots, the masts of the various fishing boats – exhibit a 'silver' that is of an 'apparent translucence'. These objects seem to be barely present, to be practically see-through in the evening light.

The sea's surface, on the other hand, exhibits a shade of silver that is 'opaque' or impossible to see through. The sea, according to the poet, is 'swelling' or expanding and looks as if it is 'considering spilling over', as if might come bursting across the jagged rocks, flooding the entire village.

The poet finds a strange beauty in the ‘fish tubs’ and wheelbarrows that can be found outside the fishhouses. The ‘big’ tubs, she notes, are ‘lined with layers’ of scales that have come from countless herring fish. These scales, she declares, have a ‘beautiful’ appearance and we can imagine how they might shimmer as they catch the evening light. The wheelbarrows, too, are lined with scales that resemble ‘mail’, or armour. She describes how the accumulated scales have a ‘creamy’ texture to the touch. She also describes them as ‘iridescent’, suggesting that they glint and change appearance as the light strikes them.

The poet notices an abandoned ‘capstan’ on the grassy slope behind the fishhouses. (A capstan is a cylindrical device used on ships for winding ropes.) This particular capstan is described as ‘ancient’, suggesting that it was dumped here by the crew of some vessel many years ago. Its years on the hillside have left it in a terrible condition: it has become ‘cracked’, its handles are ‘bleached’ from exposure to the sun and its iron components have all ‘rusted’.

The poet decides to go and talk to the old man who is still busy mending his net. She approaches and offers him a cigarette, which he accepts: ‘The old man accepts a Lucky Strike’. The old man, it turns out, was a friend of the poet’s grandfather, who has long since passed away. He is waiting ‘for a herring boat to come in’, at which point he will be busy gutting and descaling fish, but for now he is happy to sit and chat. The poet and the old man discuss the ‘decline’ in the local population as well as fish and the business of fishing.

The poet is keenly aware that this is a hard-working man, one who has spent a life-time engaged in this difficult work. He has scraped, she realises, the scales off countless or ‘unnumbered’ fish. He has used the same old ‘black old knife’ for year after year of work at the fishhouses, so much so that its blade is ‘almost worn away’.

The poet considers the ‘long ramp’ or slipway that fisherman use to ‘haul up the boats’ out of the water. She notes that ‘silver tree trunks’ have been laid out across the ramp’s ‘gray stones’. She notes how the ramp seems to go ‘down and down’. She notes how it goes ‘descending into the water’ until it reaches what seems like an impossible depth.

Seals can be glimpsed in the waters off Great Village. The poet mentions one seal in particular that she has encountered regularly during her evening walks: ‘One seal particularly/ I have seen here evening after evening’. The poet, it seems, has found herself attributing human emotions to this creature. She got the feeling that the seal ‘was curious about [her]’. She got the feeling that it ‘was interested in music’ and indulged this apparent interest by singing to him.

The poet was raised in the Baptist faith, one that believes in baptism by ‘total immersion’, by completely covering one’s body with water. The poet wittily declares that the seal must also be ‘a believer in total immersion’. After all, doesn’t it spend

all day completely immersed in the water? The poet, therefore, decides to sing him hymns from the Baptist tradition. (Another, more serious, sense of total immersion will emerge as they poem goes on, with the poet determined to immerse herself in her own unconscious mind.)

‘Back behind’ the water there is a large forest. The poet uses hyperbole, or deliberate poetic exaggeration, to emphasize its size, declaring that it consists of a ‘million’ fir trees. In the twilight, its green trees seem to have a ‘Bluish’ glow. The poet uses personification to further describe the trees, declaring that they ‘stand/ waiting for Christmas’. We imagine the trees as a massed army of soldiers, waiting – impatiently but also fearfully – for their mission to commence, waiting to fulfil their duties in a million Christmas living rooms.

### The poet contemplates the sea

The poet turns her attention away from the trees and finally begins to contemplate the sea itself, watching the shallows where waves ebb and flow above a bed of ‘gray and blue-gray stones’:

- The ocean, she says, ‘seems suspended’ above its bed of stones, as if this great body of water is not actually resting on the stones but hovering, somehow, above them: ‘The water seems suspended/ above the rounded gray and blue-gray stones.’
- The sea, the poet maintains, is always the same. For each evening it seems to be the same mass of ‘dark deep’ water; ‘swinging’ inward and outward in the very same fashion: ‘I have seen it over and over, the same sea’.
- Yet the poet also realises that each evening the waters off Great Village are only ‘slightly’ the same. For each evening finds their depths subject to different flows and currents, their surfaces agitated by different winds.
- The poet, in an inspired turn of phrase, describes how the waves go ‘swinging above the stones’, wonderfully capturing the regular, almost pendulum-like movement each wave exhibits as it surges inward and drains away again.
- The poet’s description of the water moving ‘indifferently’, meanwhile, powerfully reminds us that we’re dealing with an unthinking and inhuman force of nature, one that doesn’t care about any destruction it might cause.
- To the poet, the icy water exhibits total freedom as it moves ‘icily free above the stones’. It’s as if the water is immune to the laws of physics; it is no longer constrained by currents and weather conditions, but could flow anywhere at any time.

Beneath the stones there is ‘the world’, the layers of shingle, clay and rock leading down all the way to the earth’s crust. The water, as the poet so memorably puts it, moves ‘above the stones and then the world’.

## FOCUS ON TECHNIQUE

### A Poet of Precision

Bishop is very much a poet of precision:

- She notes, for instance, the ‘steeply peaked roofs’ of the fishhouses and that the gangways that lead up them are ‘cleated’ to prevent the wheelbarrows slipping.
- She notes that the buildings near the waterfront have moss growing only on their ‘shoreward walls’.
- She notes that the tree trunks on the boat ramps are laid at ‘intervals of four or five feet’.
- Such precision is even evident when she discusses the hymns she sings to the seal each evening. She’s careful to distinguish the Baptist hymns from ‘A Mighty Fortress Is Our God’, which is a hymn associated with the Lutheran tradition.

In ‘At the Fishhouses’ then, as in much of her poetry, Bishop comes across as a writer determined to be as specific and as exact as possible.

## THEMES

### MOMENTS OF EPIPHANY

When Bishop wrote the poem she was undergoing psychoanalysis in order to come to terms with her various childhood traumas. Indeed, as we noted above, it was her therapist who first suggested she return to Great Village, a location associated with some of the events that scarred her childhood. Psychoanalysis involves exploring the unconscious mind and bringing to light various traumatic memories and emotions.

Throughout the poem, then, the sea serves as a symbol for the unconscious mind. The sea, according to the poet, is ‘opaque’, meaning that it’s impossible to look into. The depths of the self, of the unconscious mind, are similarly obscure, are extremely difficult to experience or understand.

The sea, according to the poet, is ‘swelling’ or expanding and looks as if it is ‘considering spilling over’, as if might come bursting across the jagged rocks, flooding the entire village. This reflects how unconscious trauma can spill over into our conscious lives, often resulting in poor decisions and erratic behaviour. Such trauma can threaten to overwhelm our lives just as the sea, during a flood, threatens to overwhelm the land.

When the poet finally begins to confront the ocean directly, she presents its waters as a strange and highly dangerous substance. This bizarre depiction of the sea wonderfully suggests the treacherous nature of the unconscious mind. The sea is depicted as being painful, bitter and burring, as being filled with tormenting slate-grey flames. This reflects how the unconscious mind is filled with potentially dangerous memories and emotions. To enter or even touch the sea is to risk tremendous physical pain. To confront the unconscious mind, similarly, is to risk tremendous psychological pain.

### Metaphor, Simile, Figures of Speech

The poem features a number of memorable similes and metaphors:

- The rust stains on the capstan are compared to ‘dried blood’.
- The fish scales on the wheelbarrows are compared to ‘coats of mail’, and we can imagine how these layers of interlocking silver might resemble the mail armour worn by a medieval knight.
- The old man’s vest and thumb are marked with fish scales, which the poet, using a fine metaphor, compares these to ‘sequins’. (Sequins, we remember are small shiny discs sewn to clothing for decoration.)
- The waters off Great Village are compared to grey transmuted flames. (‘Transmutation’ is a term in the ancient art or science of alchemy that describes the transformation of one substance into another.)

But confront it the poet must. For these burning waters represent not only the dangers and traumas that lurk within the unconscious, but also the self-knowledge that can be found there: ‘It is like what we imagine knowledge to be’. Like someone wading into a sea of flames, then, the poet must enter and explore her own unconscious mind. For it’s only by doing so that she can gain the self-knowledge she so desperately craves.

The poet imagines this strange burning water flowing out from springs within the rocks of the sea-bed. Once again, then, the burning water serves as a metaphor for self-understanding. For self-understanding must come from the very depths of the psyche, just as the watery fire comes from the very bedrock of the world. And it can only be ‘drawn’ or ‘derived’ from the depths of the unconscious with the greatest of mental efforts.

These rocky springs from which the burning water issues are compared to breasts and mouths, to the ‘cold hard mouth of the world’, to ‘rocky breasts’. The burning water, then, is ‘drawn’ or ‘derived’ from these springs like milk issuing from the breast of a nursing mother.

We can, if we’re focused and determined, acquire the self-knowledge the poet speaks about. But no sooner have we understood our psyches than our psyches have changed again. Any self-knowledge we acquire, therefore, will always be ‘historical’, will always be slightly out of date. This is why the poet presents the burning water of knowledge as not only ‘flowing’ but also ‘flown’. It flows or circulates like any liquid. But then it flies away, evaporating into the air, suggesting how self-knowledge, if we acquire it at all, will always be relevant only for the briefest moment.

## Ghazal

The sky is a dry pitiless white. The wide rows stretch on into death.  
Like famished birds, my hands strip each stalk of its stolen crop: our name.

History is a ship forever setting sail. On either shore: mountains of men,  
Oceans of bone, an engine whose teeth shred all that is not our name.

Can you imagine what will sound from us, what we'll rend and claim [5]  
When we find ourselves alone with all we've ever sought: our name?

Or perhaps what we seek lives outside of speech, like a tribe of goats  
On a mountain above a lake, whose hooves nick away at rock. Our name

Is blown from tree to tree, scattered by the breeze. Who am I to say what, [10]  
In that marriage, is lost? For all I know, the grass has caught our name.

Having risen from moan to growl, growl to a hound's low bray,  
The voices catch. No priest, no sinner has yet been taught our name.

Will it thunder up, the call of time? Or lie quiet as bedrock beneath  
Our feet? Our name our name our name our fraught, fraught name.

### Annotations

**Ghazal:** an Arabic and Persian verse form where a poem is constructed as a chain of couplets, each of which ends with the same word or phrase

[7] **rend:** rip or tear apart

[18] **fraught:** full of or containing something, usually something undesirable, such as dangers or difficulties

# Tease It Out

1. The speaker describes the plantation on which she works and the hardships she must endure:
  - The plantation on which the speaker works is vast. What phrase indicates this?
  - What does the condition of the speaker's hands suggest about the manner in which she is being treated by her owners?
  - **Class Discussion:** What image does the speaker use to convey the danger that her people might forget their original heritage and identity?
2. The speaker imagines what it would be like for her people to rediscover their identity.
  - What do you think they would 'rend' or rip up if this happens?
  - 'Can you imagine what will sound from us ...?' Describe in your own words the kinds of sounds the speaker and her people would make at this moment.
  - **Class Discussion:** The speaker considers the possibility that the identity she longs for exists 'outside of speech'. Can you list some of the non-verbal elements that might shape this identity?
3. The speaker considers the possibility that her original African identity may not in fact be recoverable:
  - Describe in your own words the metaphor the speaker uses in line 9 to illustrate this. Is it an effective comparison in your opinion? Give a reason for your answer.
  - **True or False:** The speaker imagines all her fellow slaves calling out in unison. How does she characterise the sound they would make?
  - What line indicates that white Christian society is ignorant when it comes to understanding the African American people?
4. The ancestor imagines once again that she and her people might rediscover their 'name', their original African identity.
  - **True or False:** The speaker imagines that their 'name' will crash like thunder from the skies above.
  - **Class Discussion:** What do you think the speaker means by the 'the call of time'? What does it suggest about the effect that rediscovering their identity will have on the speaker and her people?
  - Do you think the poem ends on a note of hope? Give a reason for your answer.

## Exam Prep

1. **Personal Response:** Which of the following emotions do you think define this poem: despair; longing; joy; rage? Give a reason for your answer.
2. **Class Discussion:** 'The ghazal form in Eastern poetry is often associated with frustrated desire, which is reflected in the ancestor's longing to reclaim her lost identity'. Discuss this statement as a class.
3. **Theme Talk:** "Ghazal" uses striking imagery to highlight the manner in which the African American people were stripped of their identity and power'. Write a short essay in response to this statement.
4. **Exam Focus:** 'The poetry of Tracy K. Smith constantly finds new and very effective ways of talking about race and African Americans' historical sufferings.' Write a short essay in response to this statement, making reference to 'Ghazal', 'I Will Tell you The Truth About This' and 'The Greatest Personal Privation'.

## Language Lab

1. **Class Discussion:** This poem, as the title indicates, is a ghazal, a form of poetry that involves a series of couplets each ending with the same word. What impact does this repetition have as you read the poem? Would you agree that it powerfully reinforces the poem's theme? Give a reason for your answer.
2. In Stanza 2, Smith presents us with the nightmarish vision of a ship sailing backwards and forwards forever across an ocean of 'bone'. What does this image suggest about history in general and the Atlantic Slave Trade in particular? Do you find it an effective analogy? Give a reason for your answer.
3. The poem's opening line features an instance of pathetic fallacy, which occurs when human emotions are attributed to the natural world. To what does the speaker attribute her white owner's cruelty?
4. Stanza 4 features a most striking simile. To what does the speaker compare the identity that she and her people long to rediscover? What does the comparison suggest about how easy or hard rediscovering this identity will be?



# Ghazal



## LINE BY LINE

This powerful poem confronts the Atlantic Slave Trade, which took place from the 16th to the 19th centuries. During that time, at least 12 million Africans were abducted, enslaved and shipped to the Americas. Many of them, like Smith's own ancestors, were put to work in the cotton fields of the southern United States. In 'Ghazal', Smith imagines one such ancestor and makes her the speaker of the poem, giving voice to this long-ago woman's suffering, hopes and dreams.

The ancestor is working in the cotton fields, picking the cotton buds from one stalk after another: 'my hands strip each stalk'. The plantation on which she works is vast, with 'wide rows' of cotton plants stretching on as far as the eye can see. The conditions under which she labours are terrible. The sky above her is a 'pitiless white', offering no cloud-cover from the midday heat. The cotton rows, she claims, 'stretch on into death', suggesting that she will be forced to work on this plantation until she dies. The ancestor also describes her hands as being 'famished', which suggests that her owners provide her with minimal rations.

The ancestor, as she labours in the fields, thinks about 'our name', about the names her family members might have had when they were still living free in Africa. But these names of course were taken away from the ancestor's family when they were enslaved because their white owners quickly renamed them Jack or Tom, Mary or Beth. And over time, as the generations passed, their original African names were forgotten completely. But the term 'name' refers also to their African language, culture and identity as a whole. The speaker worries the longer her people spend in slavery, the more they will forget this original heritage. The ancestor uses a powerful image to capture this process of forgetting, claiming that that she is stripping not only cotton but also her own name. With every day, every hour, she spends working in the fields her African identity is further eroded.

The ancestor meditates on history, which she views as a sorry tale of suffering and exploitation. She uses a powerful, nightmarish image to convey history's horrors. She thinks of a ship sailing back and forth 'forever' between two continents. The two continents are separated not by a conventional ocean but a vast pit of human bones. On the shore of each continent there are 'mountains of men', vast piles of living human bodies that are shipped back and forth across the bony sea. The ancestor then focuses on the engine of this imaginary ship, which is presented as a vast and grinding mechanism. Everything that belongs to her family, and to her people as a whole, has been fed into this engine and shredded. This powerfully captures how the ancestor's people were deprived of their liberty and dignity, of their customs and religion, of their original African way of life.

Only one thing, the ancestor suggests, has passed through the engine's mechanism unscathed. And that is 'our name'. For the ancestor believes there is still some aspect of her African identity that has survived enslavement and exploitation. She dares to hope that it might yet be rediscovered and reclaimed. The ancestor imagines what such a rediscovery might be like for herself, her family and her people. They would 'rend' or rip up the identity they were forced to adopt as slaves, renouncing the English names and the Western way of life that were imposed on them. They would 'claim' once again their original African heritage, the identity that is the only thing they 'ever sought' or wanted. The ancestor envisages that this would be a great moment of celebration for her people. She imagines them erupting in songs and cheers of jubilation as they celebrate this reconnection with their African past.

The ancestor considers the possibility that the identity she longs for exists 'outside of speech'. Perhaps she's referring to American English speech, the speech she and her people were forced to adopt when they were enslaved. This suggests that the ancestor's original identity can only be reclaimed by renouncing English and learning (or re-learning) the African languages her people would have originally spoken. Or perhaps

the ancestor is referring to speech in general. This suggests that the ancestor's original identity can't be reclaimed simply by engaging with African languages. Such a reclaiming would actually involve a radical change of lifestyle. It might require the adoption of African dress, diet, customs, religion and so on.

The ancestor considers the possibility that her original African identity may not in fact be recoverable, that it has been lost forever. She uses a beautiful metaphor to describe this. Her identity is compared to ripe buds of cotton on a plant. The passage of time, meanwhile, is compared to a stiff breeze. The breeze removes the buds from the plant and scatters them, blowing them hither and thither. The passage of time, similarly, scatters the poet's African identity, making it impossible to rediscover: 'Our name/ is blown from tree to tree, scattered by the breeze'. The poet, however, cannot be certain that this is the case: 'Who am I to say what...is lost?' Perhaps her identity might still be out there awaiting rediscovery, like buds of cotton 'caught' amid the grass of some distant field.

The ancestor, as she labours in the cotton field, imagines all her fellow slaves calling out in unison. They would begin, she imagines, with a moan of despair. Their voices would then rise together to a 'growl' of anger before culminating in a 'low bray' of defiance. Perhaps the ancestor is imagining her fellow slaves rising up against their overlords. Or perhaps she's imagining them defiantly expressing their uniqueness and individuality in the face of their terrible circumstances.

The ancestor imagines once again that she and her people might rediscover their 'name', their original African identity. She imagines that their name might sound like thunder rising from earth. She imagines that sound like the 'call of time' itself, like some vast resounding echo that emanates through the universe. This suggests, of course, that rediscovering their African identity will have an immediate and profound effect on the ancestor and her people. Their lives will be altered in a sudden and very dramatic fashion. But the ancestor also imagines the 'name' might be a 'quiet' sound, an almost imperceptible background noise. This of course suggests that rediscovering their African identity will have a more subtle effect on the ancestor and her people. Their lives will be altered in ways that are important, though perhaps less obvious to the outside world.

## FOCUS ON STYLE

### Form

A 'ghazal' is an ancient Persian and Arabic form of poetry. The rules that govern this form are extremely rich and complex. Smith follows two of these constraints. Her poem is written in couplets or two-line stanzas and each couplet ends with a refrain or repeated phrase ('our name'). The ghazal form in Eastern poetry is often associated with frustrated desire, which is reflected in the ancestor's longing to reclaim her lost identity. The form, with its repeated refrain, is suited to obsession and fixation, which reflects the ancestor's obsessive desire to reclaim her identity, the only thing she has 'ever sought'.

## RACE AND HISTORICAL SUFFERING

This is one of several poems where Smith speaks on behalf of history's forgotten victims. In this instance she gives voice to one her own ancestors, a woman who worked and suffered on one of America's many slave plantations. This focus on forgotten voices, this desire to let history's victims speak again, is also evident in 'The Greatest Personal Privation' and 'I will tell you the truth about this'.

'Ghazal', like 'The Searchers' and 'The Greatest Personal Privation', highlights the theme of racial hatred and inequality. It reminds us of the millions of Africans that were victims of the Atlantic slave trade. It reminds us that these individuals lost not only their liberty but also their names and very identities. It reminds us, too, of the brutal conditions they were forced to endure amid the 'wide rows' of cotton where they worked.

The poem, it must be noted, presents an extremely bleak view of history, one quite different to the optimistic outlook that features in many western history books. Here, history is presented as a cruel and inhuman force, one that brings brutality and destruction to countless individuals and to entire countries and civilisations. History, as we've seen, is associated with oceans of bone, with vicious, all-consuming engines and with mountains of human bodies.

## THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

'Ghazal', like several other poems by Smith, highlights the relationship between the personal and the political. The greatest injury endured by the ancestor and her people was the loss of their 'name', of their African identities. Indeed, this name, the ancestor declares, is all that she and her people 'have ever sought'. She wonders, in stanza four, what it might take to rediscover this identity. She wonders, in stanzas three and six, what such a rediscovery might actually be like, imagining jubilation and the different effects such reclaiming might have on her people.

But the ancestor also worries that her name might never be recoverable. We see this with the repetition of 'fraught' in the poem's final line, which suggests that the whole idea of identity is bound up with difficulty and uncertainty. The ancestor's African identity, as we learned in stanza one, is being eroded more and more the longer she and her people spend in America. There is a real danger that their identity will disperse and dissipate forever like blossom in the wind.

'Ghazal', while centred on the African experience, also brings to mind the suffering of other displaced peoples throughout history. We might think, for instance of Jews, Ukrainians or even of the Irish experience during the Famine times. It reminds us that so many nations were stripped of their culture and identity and had to struggle to regain their 'name'.

## TRACY K. SMITH SAMPLE ANSWER

**‘Smith frequently uses startling and imaginative imagery to convey her sense of wonder and her desire to find meaning in life.’ Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with reference to the Tracy K. Smith poems that are on your course.**

One of the most striking features of Tracy K. Smith’s poetry is the sense of wonder it exhibits at both cosmic and everyday phenomena. Again and again her poems are distinguished by a search for meaning, as she poses questions about the vastness of space, about what happens when we die and about what the future might hold. She explores these questions using highly imaginative imagery which never ceases to surprise and startle the reader. Here I will discuss these topics as they feature in ‘The Universe is a House Party’, ‘Don’t you wonder, sometimes?’, ‘The Universe as Primal Scream’, ‘The Museum of Obsolescence’ and ‘It’s Not’.

Good opening paragraph. The student clearly establishes the subject of the essay and outlines his argument.

Good topic sentence. It clearly sets up the theme and topic of the paragraph.

In ‘The Universe is a House Party’, Smith demonstrates a sense of almost spiritual wonder as she considers the Universe revealed to us by science. For instance, Smith uses a **paradox** to describe the mystery of the expanding Universe, in which everything that exists is ‘Drifting to the edge of what doesn’t end’. This wonder is also evident when she focuses on the background radiation that underpins the entire Universe, imagining what it might look and sound like. Smith’s gift for **imaginative imagery** is evident when she suggests that this radiation, if we could see it, might look like a ‘conflagration of suns’. Using a vivid and highly **unexpected simile**, Smith suggests that this radiation might resemble the ‘bass throbbing’ from a nearby house party: ‘like the kind of party/ Your neighbors forgot to invite you to: bass throbbing’.

Good writing. The student didn’t just say ‘a simile’. Instead he demonstrated exactly what kind of simile is present in the work.

A strong and specific reference to poetic technique.

Both ‘Don’t you wonder, sometimes?’ and ‘The Universe as Primal Scream’ evoke a similar cosmic sense of wonder. In ‘Don’t you wonder, sometimes?’, the poet gazes up at the night sky and imagines that a Being of pure light exists out there in the depths of space, presiding over both the Universe and our human existences. Smith’s imagery is once again most vivid and unexpected, as she visualises this God-like entity as a being resembling the popstar David Bowie: ‘like/ Some thin-hipped, glittering Bowie-being’. She memorably visualises this ‘Starman’ ‘swaying’ and ‘hovering’ in the depths of space as he looks down on humanity.

Here the quote more than adequately supports the point being made.

In ‘The Universe as Primal Scream’, meanwhile, the poet’s awe at the Universe is mingled with a sense of dread. The Universe is depicted as a cruel master that never ‘let[s] us keep anything/ For long’, that teases us with happiness only to cruelly snatch it away again. In a series of **memorable metaphors**, the Universe is compared to a ‘Wizard’, a ‘thief’ and a ‘great/ Wind’ that will sweep away our lives. Smith’s imagery, as is often the case, **draws on popular culture**, as the poem’s conclusion evokes the screams of the ape-like early humans in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It is an image that presents the Universe as a vast and unbearable noise, besides which the little ‘racket’ of our lives seems mean, pathetic and inconsequential.

Good writing. The adjectives and word-choice clearly present the student’s understanding of the poem’s setting.

‘The Museum of Obsolescence’, meanwhile, exhibits a sense of wonder that we often associate with science fiction as she contemplates what the distant future might hold for humanity. Smith imagines an incredibly advanced society, a world of interstellar travel and cyborgs that are part human and part machine, that have ‘hearts// Ticking through [their] shirts’. Smith’s **vivid imagery** is again evident as she depicts exhibits such as ‘green money, and oil in drums’, and a room where one of the few remaining non-cybernetic people ‘sits on display’. Superficially, at least, this society resembles

a perfect world, a utopia. Illness, for instance, has become a thing of the past. The museum contains 'Books' about war, suggesting that such violent conflict, too, is unknown in this futuristic society. But there are also aspects of this society that are less appealing. Love, for instance, is an obsolete concept, one that our cyborg descendants can't quite comprehend. There is a sense too that despite all the advances, humanity hasn't changed all that much.

The search for meaning, as I noted above, is another important theme in Smith's poetry. 'The Universe is a House Party' describes how we search for meaning using science and scientific instruments. Smith, drawing on her father's work with the Hubble telescope, describes how 'We grind lenses to an impossible strength' and use them to study the universe, desperate to understand the future and humanity's place in the world.

Here the quotation is effectively incorporated into the student's own sentence.

Here the topic sentence clearly picks up on the point discussed in the previous paragraph.

'Don't you wonder, sometimes?' and 'The Universe as Primal Scream' demonstrate a more spiritual search for meaning. In the former, Smith dares to imagine that a God-like entity like the 'Starman' cares deeply about each of us and is 'aching to make us see' the universe in a new way. Such a being, she imagines, might permit us to return to the happiest moments in our lives and relive them all over again. 'The Universe as Primal Scream' is marked by a similar spiritual yearning. The poet, in an extraordinary image, imagines her apartment building taking off and rising until it enters the afterlife, whatever that may be. The poet is eager to discover what awaits us after death, whether that be reunion with our loved ones or an eternity of oblivion: 'Let the heaven we inherit approach'. The poet's **gift for assonance** reinforces the imagery, the repeated broad vowel sounds in 'a door opening onto the roiling infinity of space' creating a solemn musical effect suited to the vastness of the cosmos.

Effective use of quotation, which demonstrates good knowledge of the theme.

Appropriate reference to the sometimes overlooked technique of verbal music.

Again, an effective topic sentence, one that clearly establishes what will be discussed in this paragraph.

In 'It's Not' Smith exhibits what we might describe as a traditional spirituality, daring to believe that there is an afterlife where our loved ones might continue to exist forever. Death is memorably **personified**, not as a evil and menacing figure, but rather as one who gives each human being the gift of a 'ride beyond the body'. The poem is notable for its swimming imagery; Smith depicts the afterlife as an ocean in which her father's spirit is bobbing 'like an eternity'. Equally memorable is the image of the trees 'Heavy with fruit', an image of ripeness and readiness that reinforces our sense that the father had led a rich and productive life.

Effective reference to poetic technique.

To read the poetry of Tracy K. Smith, then, is to embark on a most fascinating journey. This is a poet who opens our minds to wonderful possibilities and new ways of thinking about the world around us and beyond. As we read Smith's poems, we share her sense of wonder and her desire to find meaning in life. Our imaginations are stimulated by the startling images that are a powerful feature of her work.