

Ocean Vuong: Threshold and Telemachus

"I pull my father out of the water, drag him by his hair..."

Threshold is positioned as a singular poem in the collection, a prologue or jumping off point. It describes a fragmentary memory from Ocean's childhood, kneeling outside the bathroom door while his father showered inside. The poem's most important image is of water clouding the outline image of his father, almost as if he's not really there. The only part of the memory that Ocean remembers clearly is the sound of his father's song; and it's this that will draw Ocean into the 'quest' to find his absent father.

The first poem in part one of the collection, *Telemachus* unfolds like a dream sequence of Ocean pulling a man's body from the sea. The man could be Ocean's father, but he has been shot in the back. When Ocean turns the body over, all he sees in the man's dark eyes is the image of a cathedral that burned to the ground years before Ocean was born. The poem ends with Ocean embarking on his own journey to find his absent father. Just like Telemachus from the ancient Greek story of Odysseus, he yet has far to go, and his chance of success is far from certain.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. Which is the closest in meaning to 'threshold'?

- (a) Doorway
- (b) Boundary
- (c) Ending
- (d) Keyhole

2. What description does Ocean give to the water striking his father?

- (a) Tracer shells
- (b) Anchor lines
- (c) Guitar strings
- (d) Brush strokes

3. How does Ocean feel at the start of the poem?

- (a) Like a beggar
- (b) Open to the rain
- (c) Lost and alone
- (d) Like a pilgrim

4. What shape does his father's shadow seem to take?

- (a) A colt
- (b) A lion
- (c) A tiger
- (d) A shark

5. What is the missing word: *Listen for my _____ breath...*

- (a) Taut
- (b) Clutched
- (c) Clasped
- (d) Snatched

6. In *Telemachus*, Ocean drags the body out of the water by his...

- (a) Arms
- (b) Ears
- (c) Hair
- (d) Legs

7. How did the man die?

- (a) Exhaustion
- (b) Shot in the back
- (c) Poisoned
- (d) Drowned

8. What happened to the city the man came from?

- (a) Nothing
- (b) Buried in a landslide
- (c) Destroyed in an earthquake
- (d) Bombed in a war

9. What image does Ocean see in the man's eyes?

- (a) A grove of trees
- (b) Exit wounds
- (c) A cathedral
- (d) His own face

10. What is the missing word: *the _____ work of drowning:*

- (a) Faithful
- (b) Hopeless
- (c) Painful
- (d) Inevitable

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does Ocean Vuong remember his father in *Threshold*? What images does he use to describe him? What does this imagery tell us about his father, or about their relationship?
2. What effect(s) does his father's voice have on Ocean?
3. More than once, this poem makes reference to paying a 'cost' or paying a 'price'. What do you think this cost might be?
4. How does these poems help to establish the 'narrative' of the poetry collection?
5. What does the poem *Telemachus* reveal about Ocean's relationship with or feelings towards his father?
6. These are the first two poems in the collection, and both contain hints of violence. Where can you sense the presence of 'violence' in the two poems so far?

Poetry Study: *chronology and structure*

"I didn't know the cost... was to lose your way back."

Night Sky with Exit Wounds is written in three untitled sections preceded by the poem *Threshold*, which serves as a prologue to the collection. As the title of the poem suggests, it is an entry point, a boundary the reader must cross to enter into Vuong's story; his quest to understand more about his father, his complicated relationship with his father, his own family history, and, ultimately, to understand himself.

The collection does not follow a strictly linear time-line and poems take place at different points across the poet's life and at different stages of the 'journey' he is on. However, there is a loose organizational structure to the collection. The first section deals with events Ocean remembers from his childhood and early life – and occasionally explores events that happened before he was born (especially the events of the Vietnam War). The second section recounts his struggles with identity as a teenager, his coping with life as an immigrant in the United States, his loneliness, and his own emerging sexuality. The third section takes place more recently, featuring events that take place in Ocean's adult life (this collection was published in 2017, when he was 27 years old). He continues to explore themes of family, sexuality, and his personal identity. He also begins to write more explicitly about becoming a writer, and what it means for him to be a poet. While a few poems are written from other points of view (he sometimes writes as if he was his mother, once in the form of a letter by his father written from prison, and occasionally by people from outside of the family), mostly he writes from an intimate, first-person perspective making his poems personal, reflective, and even confessional at times.

Connecting all three sections are poems about Ocean's relationship with his father, a character who looms large and casts a shadow over Ocean's life and work. His father is a source of confusion and pain; he was violent towards Ocean's mother and displays erratic and unpredictable behaviour. Nevertheless, Ocean needs to know more about his father and yearns for moments of connection with him. The 'quest' to be reunited with his father forms the narrative spine of the collection. In *Threshold*, Ocean recalls hearing his father singing in the shower, and tries to spy on him through the keyhole. He's wants to see more of the man in this moment of private and vulnerable expression, a side of himself he normally hides. In *Telemachus*, Ocean imagines his father dead after being shot in the back fleeing a burning city. He takes it upon himself to try to revive the man, but knows that this might not be in his own best interest. This sums up Ocean's complicated feelings towards his father that will develop over the course of part one.

Analytical Writing Practice

Explore an image of Ocean's father from *Threshold* or *Telemachus* in a paragraph of analytical writing. What image of Ocean's father do you get from these poems? What else is Ocean looking for when he searches for his father? How do these poems introduce the theme of searching for the absent father so effectively?

Poetry Study: *enjambment and dropped lines*

"I was alive. I didn't know

there was a better reason."

Vuong is a **free verse** poet, a form popular amongst American (and other) poets in the 20th and 21st centuries. Free verse provides an almost unlimited number of ways for writers to work as it does not have a set rhyme scheme or meter. Unlike metered poems, free verse poems do not have a syllable count per line. Syllables measure how long a word takes to say and what parts of a word are stressed (accented); by writing in free verse, Vuong implies that lines should be spoken naturally, and emphasis should fall where natural patterns of speech indicate. The form allows emotion to guide the reading of each poem and, on a thematic level, creates a sense of defiance against structures that can be related to the individual resisting society, or other forms of restriction.

That's not to say that free verse poems have no underlying logic or structure. A free verse poet simply uses other devices (rather than rhythm and rhyme scheme) to create patterns in each poem. For example, *Threshold* is written in short verses of two lines each (called **couplets**). Furthermore, in both *Threshold* and *Telemachus*, Vuong employs **enjambment**, created when he runs a sentence across two or more lines. Enjambment is intrinsically connected to the idea of movement. It creates a sense of flow, whether physical flow or the flow of time. For example, *Threshold*'s second and third verses describe a scene of Ocean's father in the shower, crafting an image of falling water outlining his shape. Enjambment in these lines easily conveys the flow of falling water, which Vuong describes like '*guitar strings*', '*rain*' and, later, calls a '*downpour*.' Additionally, *Threshold* recounts a memory, and enjambment serves to evoke the way a memory might oscillate and move in the mind. Finally, enjambment creates a sense of 'pull' as our eyes move more easily down the page when reading. As the first poem of the collection, *Threshold* exerts its own sense of force on a reader who is 'pulled' into Vuong's journey as he transports himself through the keyhole and back in time in search of his father.

Connected to his use of enjambment is a visual technique called **dropped lines**. This occurs when Vuong places an initial line in the regular place on the left of the page, but the following line is offset or indented. The result creates a gap (or **caesura**) within the verse. For example, the first verse of *Threshold* looks like this:

In the body, where everything has a price,
I was a beggar. On my knees,

Vuong continues this pattern through the rest of the poem. Dropped lines create a range of ideas, often linked to the action of the poem in which they appear. In this case, the lines evoke the sense of distance between Ocean and his father. Separated by the bathroom door, Vuong's vision is restricted by the keyhole through which he strains to see. There is also a distance in time between 'now' and the action of the poem, which is a fragmented memory from Vuong's childhood. Specifically, in verse three the dropped line visually resembles the '*broken guitar strings*' that Vuong uses as an image of water impacting and rebounding from his father's body.