

Kayo Chingonyi: *How To Cry, Alternate Take, A Proud Blemish, Orphan Song*

"We sit, lumps in throat, wait on tests. They don't know what's wrong she says..."

In an interview with Nicholas Wroe (for the Guardian after the publication of *Kumukanda*) Kayo admitted: *"the death of parents is something that makes people grow up sooner than they otherwise would expect."* These poems are part of a moving sequence in the second half of the collection that deal with bereavement, grief, and coping with loss. They are autobiographical in that they concern the deaths of Kayo's father (when he was six, the event that catalysed his move from Zambia to London) and mother when he was thirteen years old.

How To Cry recalls the process of healing after a bereavement. Although, as time passed, Kayo felt as if he knew how to process his loss, suddenly, in the middle of a bustling market street, an intense feeling of grief strikes unexpectedly. In *Alternate Take*, Kayo thinks all the way back to images of his father's funeral and how he has carried the consolations of the day (*"I am sorry for your grieving/your trouble/your loss"*) with him all these years. *A Proud Blemish* takes readers through his mum's battle with cancer, and his difficulty in letting her go. And *Orphan Song* beautifully reimagines death not as the end of life, but as a waystation on a journey into the unknown.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. In which market was Kayo shopping when he suddenly felt like he needed to 'bawl'?

- (a) Retford
- (b) Romford
- (c) Broomhall
- (d) Billingsgate

2. And he's outside of which shop?

- (a) Aldi
- (b) Dixon
- (c) Argos
- (d) Woolworths

3. Which Bemba words mean 'little brother'?

- (a) Kumu Kanda
- (b) Kung'anda
- (c) Mwaice Wandu
- (d) Limo Sine

4. What was Kayo's father's nickname?

- (a) Long John
- (b) Tall Harry
- (c) Little Tom
- (d) Big George

5. There are days I think I'm only a _____

- (a) Vector
- (b) Spectre
- (c) Picture
- (d) Tincture

6. Which word from *A Proud Blemish* means 'split'?

- (a) Diminutive
- (b) Ire
- (c) Riven
- (d) Vitiate

7. Which is NOT a shoe size mentioned in *A Proud Blemish*?

- (a) Eight
- (b) Nine
- (c) Ten
- (d) Eleven

8. What is the 'proud blemish'?

- (a) A caesarean scar
- (b) A birthmark
- (c) A tattoo
- (d) None of the above

9. Who will greet me when I _____?

- (a) Land
- (b) Arrive
- (c) Alight
- (d) Disembark

10. Who does Kayo imagine meeting in the afterlife?

- (a) Kenta
- (b) Sasha
- (c) Smokesta
- (d) Legba

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does Kayo convey the power of grief in *How To Cry*? What emotional and physical effects does grief have on him?
2. *Alternate Take* is written as if speaking to his little brother, who died when he was very young. How does this device allow him to explore ideas about fathers and sons in this poem?
3. What do you think makes *A Proud Blemish* such an emotional poem? How does Kayo use poetic techniques to bring out the emotion of this poem?
4. In the collection *Kumukanda*, *Orphan Song* is placed at the end of a sequence of poems about Kayo's father and mother (such as *A Proud Blemish*, and *H-O-R-S-E*, in which he imagines playing basketball with his father). Do you think the placement of this poem is important? What is Kayo trying to achieve with this poem? How does he do it?
5. Collectively, what do the poems in this section add to *Kumukanda* as a collection? What issues does Kayo raise? What themes is he exploring? Do the poems connect in any way to the other poems you have studied? How?

Important Theme: *masculinity*

“I’m tired of this strength. Let me be bereft...”

After winning the Dylan Thomas Prize for poetry, Kayo Chingonyi spoke to Nicholas Wroe of The Guardian about the collection *Kumukanda*. The word means ‘initiation’ in Luvale, and the book explores how Kayo negotiated his own passage to manhood. Part of this involved coping with the death of his parents (his father when he was six, his mother when he was thirteen) and learning how to deal with complex emotions. In this interview, Kayo talked about the prejudicial perceptions of young Black men, saying: *“Black men are particularly racialised and some of the ways they are viewed prejudicially prompt moments of having to grow up quickly. As a kid I was never in trouble with the police, but certain interactions with them were fraught because of stereotypical notions held on both sides. Those were moments where I had to learn to carry myself in a certain way, which was not the way a child should be learning to carry himself.”*

Kayo is alluding to the kinds of assumptions made about young Black men, ideas he previously touched upon in *calling a spade a spade*. In his early acting career, for example, he was constantly offered roles like *“lean dark men who may carry guns”*, calling attention to the typecasting of Black men in the media as gangsters, murderers, or criminals. This pigeonholing is a real issue for young Black men seeking role models in the media. Who is there to look up to when Black men are constantly portrayed as victims or perpetrators of crime or violence, rappers, or footballers? Black men in music are frequently stereotyped through rap culture as aggressive, misogynistic, or money obsessed. In education, Black men are not encouraged to be literate or articulate. These stereotypes barely scratch the surface of assumptions made about young Black men in society.

The semi-autobiographical representation of himself Kayo Chingonyi presents throughout *Kumukanda* offers an alternative to what is commonly plastered across the media and what wider society has been conditioned to accept about young Black men. For example, in *How To Cry*, Kayo admits to deep emotions that are impossible to repress. In *A Proud Blemish*, he crafts images of himself in vulnerable situations, especially concerning the care of his terminally ill mother, and his difficulty in coping after her death when he was thirteen. Even many years later, he admits to emotional depths of grief; while walking in Romford Market he is suddenly overwhelmed by a wave of bereavement that makes him want to *“fold, as an overloaded trestle-table folds.”* In the collection’s title poem, *Kumukanda*, he admits to having *“literary pretensions”*, and reminds us that hidden in his backpack is a *“tattered A-Z, and headphones that know Prokofiev as well as Prince Paul.”* Above all, these poems remind us that there is complexity in the Black male experience, as there is in the experiences of young people of any race or ethnicity.

Activity

How does Kayo Chingonyi offer a complex vision of masculinity in the poems you’ve read from *Kumukanda*? What kind of man does he strive to be? How does he accept or reject certain aspects of ‘manhood’? Create a character profile of Kayo as he presents himself in the poetry collection. Include quotations from the poems that connect to issues of manhood and masculinity.

Poetry Study: *alliteration/consonance and assonance*

"I'm tired of this strength. Let me be bereft..."

Accomplished poets like Kayo Chingonyi know that words stimulate through sound. Our ears react with the pleasure of listening to familiar or unfamiliar words arranged in new patterns. Little children love listening to the sound of parents reading, even if they are too young to understand the story. Sometimes people have been known to listen to poems in a language they cannot understand; the sentences sound real and arouse feelings regardless. In ways like this, poems can be understood on an emotional level. Just sounds and patterns of sound create imaginative connections and meanings.

Throughout Kumukanda, and especially in the selection of poems in this lesson, Kayo strengthens the sonic aspects of his writing to create effects. Alliteration is one of the earliest formal features of English poetry. Repeating an initial consonant sound used to be called head-rhyme. Consonance differs from alliteration only in that it repeats sounds within words as well. In general, poets look to strengthen either hard consonants or soft consonants (and vowels, which is called assonance). There are 8 types of alliteration/consonance, each of which can be categorized as hard or soft. In general (although not always), hard consonant sounds are good at creating strong or negative effects whereas soft consonance and assonance is good at creating more subtle, or more harmonic effects. Consonance and assonance both contribute to the tone and mood of a poem and evoke emotions in the reader:

Soft Consonance and Assonance		Hard Consonance	
Sibilance: S, soft C, SH, Z, (CH)		Dental: D, T	
Nasal: M, N		Plosive: B, P	
Aspirant: H		Guttural: G, K, hard C, (X)	
Liquid: L, R, W			
	Fricative: F, TH, V, (J)		
Assonance: A, E, I, O, U, Y			

Analytical Writing Practice

As well as conveying auditory imagery, sound is one of the primary ways writers create emotional effects in poetry. In general, hard sounds are good at creating negative effects while softer sounds create more pleasant harmonies. Choose a moment from the poems in this section that you think evokes a particularly strong emotion. Write an analytical paragraph about this moment, including a comment about the contribution of sound to the creation of emotion.