Once Upon a Time – A Selection of Analysis

**Structure of the Poem**

*Slow Paced*

The poem moves in a slow pace. The poem uses repetition and quotations to maintain a sense of deliberateness through out the poem.

*Personal monologue explaining personal experiences*

The entire poem has the man talking to his son. There are no other voices in the poem, and the son remains mute throughout the entire poem. The man explains to his son about the change that has taken place in African society and asks him to help him changing himself.

*First Person Narrative*

The poem is in first person narrative and the poet uses the word ‘I’ to depict an autobiographical narration of the man.

*Lots of Punctuation and Rythming*

*Begins on a negative tone and ends with a positive one*

The man is constantly complaining and lamenting on the change he sees in his culture as well as himself. But in the end of the poem, we still see that the man still sees the ‘ray of light’ in his son, who has not been affected by this negative change and asks him to help him unlearn what he has learnt and regain his child-like innocence once again

**Themes**

*Childhood*

The child in the poem is a symbol of innocence, purity, enthusiasm, happiness and genuineness lacking in society. The child represents the group of people who have not been affected or ‘spoilt’ by Western Culture and abode by there own culture. The poet, struck by a sense of self-loathing and regret, turns to his son in his time of need and asks him to help him unlearn whatever he has learnt and help him regain his child-like innocence.

*Innocence*

Innocence is a fading aspect in the man’s society. People always appear deceitful and cunning. The child, however, is a picture of innocence and acts without any malice or ulterior motive. The man wishes to gain this innocence from his son, though he fails to realize that innocence is not learnt, but a state of mind. Once it is lost, it is gone forever.

*Racism*

The western culture, language, and way of life made a huge impact on the people of Africa. According to them, African culture and religion were inferior to their own, and thus tried to change them, all the while thinking they were doing them a favour instead of disrupting their original way of life. This self-proclaimed superiority left the British colonizers feeling that they were better than everybody was, and all the other cultures were lower to their own.

*Regret*

The man is forced to adapt to the society he is living in and becomes fake, formal, and everything he despises. He feels a deep sense of regret and self loathing, and when he looks into the mirror, he sees his ‘teeth like snake’s bared fangs’ , indicating that he is frightened of himself and all that he has become. This forces him to confide these worries to his son, and asks for his assistance in bringing about a positive change in him.

*Negative Change*

Gabriel Okara shows very well in the poem how, when people change, and adapt, it is not always positive. The once enthusiastic and friendly society of Africa now treated its own people like strangers and looked at each other with suspicion and hostility. Every man and women was influence but the formal and impersonal western culture and therefore changed their own culture and behaviour in sync with the west.

*Being ‘fake’*

An indication of being fake and insincere is spread throughout the poem. Lines like ‘but now they only laugh with their teeth’, ‘ice-block-cold eyes’, ‘now they shake hands without hearts’ indicate the insincere attitude of the people. The empty, meaningless, hollow greeting that are said only as a formality, the many ‘faces’ the man puts on according to the occasion are other indicators of this fact.

*Hollow Greetings*

Greetings and pleasantries make up a vital part of communication in western culture. When the Africans adopted their style of greeting, they were merely words, with no meaning. These simple mutterings replaced the African’s original way of greeting, which contained more genuineness and affection. .

**Analysis of the title**The title of the poem, 'Once Upon A Time', has special relevance to  
the beginning of every fairy tale, like Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella,  
Snow White, Rapunzel, and others. It was probably chosen by Okara, as  
the man in the poem expresses his desire to go, 'back in time', and  
regain his child-like innocence.  
  
**Reference to 'I' in the poem**The reference to 'I' in the poem has been interpreted by me, as a man  
speaking to his young son. However, in no point in the poem is it  
mentioned that the speaker is male, which you very well mean that  
the 'I', is a reference to Gabriel Okara herself, talking to her son.  
However, due to the lines 'Once upon a time, when I was like you',  
have made me conclude, that it is a man who is speaking.

<http://anilpinto.blogspot.com.es/2008/11/once-upon-time-notes-by-poonam-vaidya.html>