

Conventional poetic structures: tradition in gardening in the tropics

[Profession](#), [Poet](#)



In the poetry collection *Gardening in the Tropics*, Olive Senior instructs readers in the traditions of the Caribbean, like the traditional uses of Annatto and Guinep in her poem 'Annatto and Guinep' and the traditions of immigrants in her poem 'Stowaway', while abandoning the conventional poetic structures of meter and rhyme in most of her poems. She emphasises the importance of Caribbean traditions in order to teach readers and to highlight the effect a lack of tradition poses on the region today. However, in some of her poems in which she stresses the theme of tradition, there is evidence of these poetic structures, as seen in 'Marassa: Divine Twins' and 'Meditation on Yellow'.

In the poem 'Annatto and Guinep', found in the section 'Nature Studies', Olive Senior teaches readers about the traditional uses of the plants, without the use of meter and rhyme. Senior starts the poem by saying that in today's society, no one appreciates Annatto and Guinep like those before did. She lists the various ways they were used before in an attempt to teach readers the customary uses, 'Country people one time used annatto/ to colour their food [...] As for Guinep: that's worse./ Only children confess they love it.' She explains how those before cherished the two, and again, she lists the various ways they were used by the Arawaks. She urges readers to 'give a thought' to annatto and Guinep and to remember our ancestors before us as we use them. In the end, she references the traditional Taino story of the Sun and the Moon. Despite the lack of conventional poetic structures, Senior was still able to relay the importance of these traditions to the readers. These traditions highlight the effect colonialism and neo-colonialism has on the

Caribbean today; we focus more on items from countries abroad, like apples instead of guinep, which makes us forget our roots.

Similarly, the lack of conventional poetic structures is also seen in her poem 'Stowaway', even as she highlights the traditions of immigrants. The poem details the travel of a stowaway as he ventures to a 'promised land'. A stowaway usually faces dangerous situations as they are onboard the vessel illegally, and are constantly fearful of being caught. In the first line, the immigrant says, 'There's this much space between me and/ discovery,' indicating he is close to being caught by a crewmate. This was a traditional way Caribbean people used to get to the United States. They would board vessels illegally, hide for days without food and water, and if they did not get caught during the journey, they would make it to the country. By highlighting this dangerous tradition, Olive Senior emphasises the colonial mindset and the effects neo-colonialism has on Caribbean people; they would rather brave perilous journeys to reach the United States than stay in their region. She does not use rhyme or meter, as these poetic structures would give the poem too much rhythm and minimise the seriousness of this tradition.

However, in some of her other poems, like 'Meditation on Yellow', as she explores Caribbean traditions, meter and rhyme are present. In this poem, the persona expresses the frustration and hardships she and her ancestors have always experienced because of foreigners. It is almost like a tradition of the Caribbean people to serve others and to be oppressed by foreigners. In the first part of the poem, she details the slavery and injustice the Indigenous people endured by using trochee meter, 'But it was gold/ on your

mind/ gold the light/ in your eyes/ gold the crown/ of the Queen of Spain...' In the second part of the poem, she lists the ways Caribbean people serve foreigners by using anapest meter, ' I've been slaving in the cane rows/ for your sugar/ I've been ripening coffee beans/ for your morning break...' In the end, the persona finalises that the Caribbean people just wants a break from the constant slaving after foreigners by using rhyme, '...making me feel/ so mellow/ in that Caribbean yellow...' By using meter to discuss the traditional injustices the people faced, the persona's frustration was perfectly emphasised, while using rhyme brought a rhythmic feeling to the poem. Senior even alludes to a traditional Taino female deity Attabeira, '...our mother Attabeira.' In the poem, she describes the tradition of slavery in colonial times and post-colonial times, with the use of conventional poetic structures, and notes the similarities to the readers to show that Caribbean people have always faced oppression.

Moreover, in her poem ' Marassa: Divine Twins', she tells readers of the African traditions while using conventional poetic structures. These African traditions have impacted the Caribbean culture and still do. Senior teaches readers about these traditions through their deities, one being the Haitian Marassa twins. The twins are identical and mirror images of each other, yet they are opposites that complete each other, and this is reflected in the poem. They speak as one in the poem, often confusing readers as they relate their life using the anapest meter, ' I am day you are night/ You are left I am right...' This stanza gives the poem rhythm and makes readers feel as though the twins are playful children. Rhyme is also seen in this stanza with

the words 'night' and 'right', which adds to the rhythm. This poem, like the other poems in this section entitled 'Mystery', teaches readers about African traditions that are still present in the Caribbean. She describes these traditions in this poem by using the conventional poetic structures to create a rhythm that is often present in the African culture.

Although Senior strays from conventional poetic structures in most poems, she still conveys her teachings of Caribbean traditions in an effective manner. Senior said in an interview, 'Poetry matters because it is a tool for helping us to discover who we are.' These poems emphasised traditions in order to teach Caribbean people about their heritage; some poems in her collection even use conventional poetic structures to do so.