

Identity crisis: juxtaposition in leningrad



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“ Leningrad,” a poem by Osip Mandelstam detailing the harsh reality in post-war Russia, examines the effect of the changes on the identity of the narrator, who is forced to consolidate his old memories of his hometown of Petersburg and the unfamiliarity of the new Leningrad following his return. This internal contrast is not only present in the theme of the poem, but also in its very structure, as Mandelstam relies on using opposition in his language to depict the internal disparity faced by the narrator. Juxtaposition is a technique at the core of Osip Mandelstam’s composition of the poem “ Leningrad”, which contrasts familiarity and change to illustrate the way personal identity is relative to surrounding.

Throughout the piece, Mandelstam uses words and phrases that give a sense of nostalgia and familiarity, but follows them with harsher phrases that give negative feelings. An example of this technique can be found in the first stanza, where it reads, “ These are my old tears, / my own little veins, the swollen glands of my childhood” (Mandelstam 1-2). The concepts of the past, belonging, and childhood are brought up, but placed next to words and phrases with a much more negative connotation, such as tears, veins, and swollen glands. This juxtaposition of the nostalgic and oftentimes quaint memories of childhood and home placed with other harsh phrases creates a picture of a bitter disconnect when the narrator returns to his hometown.

Mandelstam creates another contrast between seemingly harmless commands one might hear in childhood and negative experiences. In the second stanza, it reads, “ Open wide. Swallow / the fish-oil from the river lamps of Leningrad” (3-4). Just as children have much difficulty swallowing medication at the doctor, Mandelstam indicates that the narrator is having

an equally difficult time accepting the changes that have occurred in his hometown. This is seen in stanza three as well, where it states, " Open your eyes. Do you know this December day, / the egg-yolk with the deadly tar beaten into it?" (5-6). Mandelstam uses another command, and once again uses the egg yolk as imagery from childhood, and shows the negativity of his experience with the " deadly tar". His use of the typical memory of the past with the addition of a disturbing element demonstrates how his past has been clouded by the negative changes around him. Mandelstam's use of the technique of placing an innocent sensory command alongside an unpleasant experience gives the reader the visceral impression of the events experienced by the narrator.

The author uses juxtaposition another time in stanzas four and five, where he contrasts the former facets of his identity in his city with the idea of death. Impermanent aspects of identity, such as phone numbers and addresses, are mentioned. In stanza four, Mandelstam writes, " Petersburg! I don't want to die yet / You know my telephone numbers" (7-8). The narrator describes his unwillingness to let go of the past by stating that he does not want to die, despite the fact that the familiar things, such as telephone numbers from the past, have likely changed. The author also writes, " Petersburg! I've still got the addresses: / I can look up dead voices" (9-10). Mandelstam once again uses the familiarity of the addresses, and uses the phrase " dead voices", which likely describes friends and family who have either relocated or died during the time that the narrator was away. In the two stanzas, the narrator speaks of facets of his identity in specific relation to his hometown, such as phone numbers and addresses of himself and

loved ones, yet he also brings up the idea of death, forcing him to both literally and figuratively examine how the things and people he used to know are no longer there. The way of contrasting these ideas of familiarity and change within the same stanzas works to showcase the internal struggle the narrator faces when grappling with the changes around him.

The final two stanzas highlight the internal contrast that the narrator experiences by comparing his fond memories of the past with imprisonment. In the sixth stanza, Mandelstam writes, " I live on back stairs, and the bell, / torn out nerves and all, jangles in my temples" (11-12). This stanza implies that, although he hides from the past by living " on back stairs", the narrator still faces a constant and painful reminder of the drastic changes that have occurred in the place he had called home, akin to the constant sounding of a bell disturbing his mind. The final stanza takes on a similar view, reading " And I wait till morning for guests that I love, / and rattle the door in its chains" (13-14). This stanza intensifies the sentiments in the previous one by using stronger disconcerting imagery, such as that of rattling " the door in its chains". It is still indicated that the narrator longs for the familiarity of the past and his loved ones who were once there, but this passage conveys the way the past imprisons the narrator. Because the narrator is always forced to juxtapose the changes in the present with his fond memories of his past, he faces a crisis of identity.

What the poem " Leningrad" examines at the core is the idea of personal identity being tied to a sense of place and home, and the composition of this piece is integral to the illustration of this concept. The juxtaposition used throughout the poem creates a sense of disparity, which is indicative of the

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struggle of the narrator, who is forced to constantly contrast his own past memories with the new unfamiliar circumstances. The contrast used in the ideas and language of each stanza is not only helpful, but necessary to the full comprehension of the work. Osip Mandelstam's use of juxtaposition in the composition of "Leningrad" highlights the disaccord between the past and the present in order to illustrate the internal experience of the narrator and the way identity is affected by place and environment.