

I used to live here once by jean rhys

Literature



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Stepping stones and rivers have traditionally been symbolic of the journey of life. Rivers are also important as boundaries and crossing them often signifies the passage from one world to another. The crossing of river Jordan into the Promised Land, for instance, is a crucial element of the Bible (Ferber, 2007, p. 170). The stepping stones, that are at first harder to cross and easy afterward are also symbolic of the passage of life. This is the first hint that the speaker may be coming from a different land or even a different plane of existence. The emphasis on the “glassy” sky is yet another symbolic clue. Glassy has connotations of an unnatural or artificial material, as it is man-made. It can also signify a certain deadness of the subject, an absence of expression as in the phrase “glassy eyes”. The absence of life, and the distance she feels from manmade objects further intensify the suggestion that the speaker is already dead. The narrator also mentions several objects of the landscape that she finds missing, suggesting a rather long absence. There was now a road that had replaced the pave and the pine tree she knew was gone. The pine tree is often used to symbolize immortality and its disappearance is yet another subtle indicator of the narrator’s death. Instead of the pine tree, there is now a mango tree under which two children are playing. The entire image is deeply symbolic of a new life. Other than imagery like the stones or the tree and verbal symbols like “glassy”, Jean Rhys also uses color symbols as well as symbolism in the action. For instance, the grey eyes of the boy who looks right through the speaker are a sudden contrast to the previous color-scheme of yellow and green. The symbolic value of the life-giving green and yellow, the joy of the clear “blue day” is replaced by the cold grey of the boy’s eyes and this is emphasized in the boy’s speech, “Hasn't it gone cold all of a sudden [?]” as well as the <https://assignbuster.com/i-used-to-live-here-once-by-jean-rhys/>

action of the children who, in a manner of speaking, leave her out in the cold. The narrator's instinctive reaching out towards the children is also symbolic of her desire to belong. She does not want to be the unacknowledged outsider. This short story on the theme of death can be read in an alternative manner also. It can be read as an outsider's return to her homeland which she finds changed beyond recognition. A. C. Morell interprets the story as "It relates a brief, emotionally significant incident during Jean Rhys's return after many years of exile to her old home in Dominica. [...] What she knows is that she has brought on the cold. Her strangeness inspires mistrust if not fear in children. [...] And there can be no return home to her warm and colorful West Indian world" (1979, p. 237). Seen in this light, "I Used to Live Here Once" is still a story of loss and death, except a more symbolic nature than physical death. That the speaker realizes for "the first time" (that she is an outsider) also supports this view of the story.