

What does the  
language of grace  
nichols' have to tell  
us about her culture  
essay



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Grace Nichols' poetry revolves around her culture and the foundations from before she moved to England. She was born in Guyana, then moved to a place where her lifestyle was dramatically changed. Here she could not share her culture. This may have caused a stronger standpoint on her feelings as she has had a chance to reflect on what her background is and what her roots are about. Culture is something that you share with your community, young and old, whether it is something that has only lasted within your generation or throughout hundreds of years.

It is something that is cherished and protected, but is also shared throughout other cultures. Nichols has used her idea of culture as a way to express her feelings about her history, which has caused her to create her own personal, strong opinions. Nichols uses poetry to express her own culture because it is something that everybody would be able to understand in his or her own way. It lets the reader become involved with the poem and allows them to have their own opinion and thoughts on each and every part. The language of a poem can tell us a great deal of what the readers own opinions are and what he/she feels.

In this case it is Nichols' culture. Throughout her poems she chooses to use her poems language as a mixture of English and Creole. This allows Nichols to get her messages across in her own personal way, but at the same time letting the reader witness what Nichols is really trying to say. Creole gives rhythm and a deeper meaning to her poems by referring her language back to her culture. Throughout Nichols' poems, nature is used extensively as a basis of her culture. She does this as a way of describing what her culture represented and how nature played such a large part.

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Throughout almost every one of her poems she refers to it in some way, and uses it to describe what her ancestors went through, and what they stood for. The poems *Sugarcane*, *This Kingdom* and *In my Name*, all represent different ways of representing nature in her culture. The poems use nature as a way of getting across the fact that it was not only used to protect their culture against the overseers, but also used as a weapon against them.

Grace Nichols' *Sugarcane* represents a major part of Caribbean history and culture, the sugarcane plant.

This is the reason that the slaves are suffering, as the overseers use them and the plants to bring in income for themselves. The first line of the poem can be thought of as the most important, which is also significant to Nichols' culture: "' There is something about sugar cane'" Nichols uses these words in a format as if she is talking to the reader. These two lines are written in a way as if it were a start of a conversation, by informing the reader, about sugarcane. This creates a compelling nature to the first lines of her poem and makes the reader wish to continue reading.

The use of sugar cane as a milestone in her culture is also shown later in the poem: "' just before the hurricane strike smashing him to pieces'" (lines 25-28) The use of the onomatopoeic word ' strike' causes aggression and placed on its own brings more effect. This causes the reader to be compelled by the poem as if he himself were witnessing the hurricane. This creates an idea of what the slaves were going through and the kind of destruction and hurt they experienced. Here Nichols is relating to part of her culture, nature. This can be perceived as the sugarcane being harvested, chopped down harshly.

Alliteration is also shown in the words “ strike” and “ smashing”. This causes a violent sound, as the slave being destroyed by the overseer, with the hurricane being a metaphor for the overseer. The use of the word ‘ smashing’ could be seen as the slaves being classed as inhumane, as humans do not smash. It can also be seen as the slaves being perceived as being a fragile object, being destroyed easily. The sugarcane is also shown as a cause of the slaves demise, pain and suffering in the fourth section of Sugarcane: “” the crimes committed”“

This can be seen as the sugarcane being the main problem for the slaves as it has caused death and suffering for them, and the sugarcane committing a crime for being there for the slaves to die over. Therefore the sugarcane existing in their lives is causing them pain. The pain would be non-existent if the sugarcane was not present. The use of Creole in Sugarcane can also tell us about Nichols’ culture. She has used Creole to keep her culture alive in her poems and creates a real sense of what her culture is. This is shown throughout Sugarcane: “” he shiver”“ (line 18)

It is also used to give the poem a rhythm; rhythm being another main interest, and part of their culture. Personification is used throughout the poem to give the sugarcane a human quality. This allows the reader to see how the slaves were treated as if they were to be compared to the plant: “” his skin thick only to protect the juice inside himself”“ (lines 9-12) Both the slave and the plant itself can be the focus of this stanza. Firstly the sugarcane has juices, and a hard shell to protect itself from predators, but can also be seen as the slave is really soft and kind inside.

But the slave also has to be perceived by the overseers as tough and hard so they are not taken advantage of. Throughout Sugarcane Nichols uses the poem to tell about the slaves situations in Guyana. The word 'art' is used to as something that cannot be learnt straight away and not something that you can just have, but you have to live through it. It is used in the poem to show that what happened in Guyana has to be realised over time and not straight away. Nichols is trying to teach us about the slaves 'growing up': "Growing up is and art"

Then again, the slaves having absolutely no freedom, choice and power but also the slaves having no control over the sugar cane growing. Nichols tries to get across the blankness of life to the reader and realise what she feels so strongly about. The slaves only have power over the sugarcane and nothing else. But this is also what they destroy: "he don't have any control of" (lines 30-31) The slaves only have control of the sugarcane but this is also what the overseers depend on to make a living out of, so in some ways the slaves also have control over the overseers.

If the slaves did not work then the overseers could not live either. This 'control' over the sugarcane causes the plant to be seen something special to the slaves: "who stick him in the earth in the first place" This can be seen as the slaves nurturing and caring for the cane, as if the cane was their child. The child would be the thing that the slaves stuck 'in the earth'. The structure and layout of the poem can also tell us about the lives of the slaves and their culture. It is also structured in long strands and elongated. There are two ways this can be interpreted.

Firstly it can be the shape of the sugarcane - long and thin. Secondly it can be seen as life being dragged out. This is best shown in the fourth section of the poem: "' Slowly Pain- Fully" This gives an image of being dragged out, but with pain as the slaves life was. The word ' painfully' is separated onto two lines to add to the meaning of the word and how the pain is dragged out. This is also repeated on lines 61 to 63. Repetition also represents and emphasises the slaves' struggle of agony and pain, with their everyday life being the same day-in, day-out, everlasting. This is emphasised by her use of Enjambment.

This shows that sugarcane was written from a stream of consciousness. This would cause Nichols to show her true feelings about her culture and slavery. The slaves are shown throughout Nichols' other poems as the sugar cane was in the poem Sugarcane, being slowly destroyed by the overseer, being taken advantage of as in In My Name, being looked down on as in Waterpot. In her poem This Kingdom, Nichols also uses nature as a reigning part of her culture, as the sugar cane was in sugar cane. Standard English is used in this poem instead of Creole so that the message is clearer to the English cultured reader.

Firstly, using the island itself shows that the slaves consider the island as a beautiful place of worth: "' and the sea circling all is a spectrum of blue jewels"' (lines 15-17) The use of the words " blue jewels" as a metaphor, to signify the sea, tells us that they think that the island itself is a great, precious part of nature, that its full of opportunity, even though they are trapped to toil and suffer. By placing " all" on it's own Nichols has perceived the island as being everything the slaves know, as it is all they have seen.  
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Nichols uses nature as a metaphor for the slaves and their deeds in revolt against the overseers: "Soft winds can turn volatile" This suggests change, and uses nature as a symbol of their destruction against the overseer. The use of "volatile" on a separate line underlines the fact of the chaos they will bring. It also gives it more depth and meaning as it creates more significance for the reader. This was also shown in Sugar cane but as the overseers destroying the slaves. The slaves also use the one thing that they are closest to as they have the power over nature. They can use it against their enemies, the overseers: "' can merge with rains "' can turn hurricanes"' (lines 22-23)

This shows that the slaves see themselves as having the power to change things, that they have the ability to use their culture, nature as an advantage against them. The use of repetition in 'can' is used as almost a statement, telling us that they are certain that they will take revenge. Throughout the poem the use of revenge continuously tells the reader that the slaves will be able to break free and destroy the overseers. It constantly gives us the impression that the slaves can be exceptionally dangerous: "' Mountains can erupt sulphur springs bubbling quick and hot"' (lines 24-27)

The use of the metaphor of the slaves being classified as volcanoes signifies that the slaves lie dormant for years on end but can suddenly erupt and attack. The use of a volcano brings an idea of great power and destruction into the poem, giving the reader an accurate idea of how the slaves thought. The use of sibilance in 'sulphur' and 'springs' creates the fearsome aura of the situation of terror and imminent destruction.

Another reference to the slaves being a part of nature themselves is how Nichols' has perceived the slaves as being thought of as insects: "' And we he rage growing like the chiggers in our feet"' I think that this refers to the slave threatening to be attacking in groups, as a force as ' we' is used. The use of insects shows that the slaves will take over as one, eating away and corroding the empire the whites have made over their land. The fact that Nichols uses half the poem to describe how the slaves will destroy the overseers dominating kingdom tells us how certain the slaves had been of breaking free of their grasp.

The slaves longing to see the overseers lose power: "' And the white man no longer at ease with the faint drum eat"'(line 35-38) The use of the " drum" would cause fear in the overseers as it is foreign to them and they would not understand it. The drum is also a piece of the slaves culture, and so the slaves use their culture as a weapon against the overseers. The drum can also be thought of as a means of communication as well as trying to get the whites attention. The use of ' beat' on its own causes more aggression to the verse, as if it were striking fear into the overseers. A similarity between This Kingdom and Sugarcane is the reference to the crops themselves causing their pain.

In This Kingdom Nichols refers to the perishing of the plants as a way of revenge to cease the slavery of her people, so there will be no more crops to slave over: "' plantations can perish"'(Line 32, This Kingdom) In sugar cane this also shown in a subtle way, not revealed to the reader immediately: "' the crimes committed"' (Lines 74-76, Sugarcane) This shows that the

sugarcane has created the slaves pain. From being there to be harvested, <https://assignbuster.com/what-does-the-language-of-grace-nichols-have-to-tell-us-about-her-culture-essay/>



they had been the cause of this. Grace Nichols' poem, In my Name uses nature throughout this powerful poem to tell the reader of the mother's respect and remaining love for her rape child.

Nature is used to tell about her love still for the child, but also nature is used to tell the reader of the overseers' evil. From the second line the poem uses nature as a start point for the poem: "' belly an arc of black moon'"(lines 2-4) Reference to the mothers ' black moon' is a cliché and an oxymoron to show that the child is of mixed race. This would add to the mothers' pain and suffering, to give birth to a child that would not be accepted in the society and the fact that it would have to go through the same agony from such a young age.

To try and stop the pain, her blood, her name, her love, and all things natural is the only thing that the mother is able to offer to the child: "' in my name in my blood'" This brings the reader much closer to what the slave is going through, by being told precisely what she has left to bestow, and what she still has to undergo. The child like a seed as it is being planted and grown. It is placed even closer to nature itself, to grow knowing its culture: "' to receive you my curled bean'"(lines 11-12) The " curled bean" may possibly also be seen as the shape of the foetus, to be received from the womb.

The use of nature throughout the poem to describe the child itself shows that nature in her culture is just as important as her own child. This is shown on the whole at the end of what could be seen as the first stanza of the poem, just before the atmosphere changes to talk of the rapist: "' my bastard fruit my seedling my sea grape my strange mulatto my little bloodling'"(lines 15-

19) The use of ' my' throughout this stanza creates a personal feeling towards her child, that the white society will not take her away, and that they will not put her through what has been done to her and her livelihood.

By constantly using words linked with nature, this could also be seen as her trying to protect her culture. She does this by using a part of nature in each line. Nature is not only used by Nichols as a way of representing the slaves themselves, but also as a means of attacking the overseers as it was in This Kingdom. The overseers are described as insects and reptiles, usually seen as evil and dangerous beings: "' Let the snake slipping in deep grass be dumb before you"' (lines 20-21) The use of sibilance here is not as effective as the previous uses, but still Nichols has created a sense of evil and destruction by using " s".

The snake is perceived as the overseer, in deep grass as if it were about to pounce and attack the child. The use of the snake is also a Biblical reference to the snake being the devil, as true evil. The mother wishes the overseer to be dumb towards the child, as she does not want it to be affected by the whites. She wishes for the whites are to be silenced by the blacks instead of vice-versa. This is also shown in line 24: "' Let the evil one strangle on his own tongue"' This shows the overseer being silenced, and by the ' evil one' being silenced by himself.

The overseers have caused their own destruction, by causing the slaves pain. This destruction is also written about in This Kingdom. The overseer being a centipede shows another example of this: "' Let the centipede writhe and shrivel in its tracks"' (Lines 22-23) This is another way of saying that the

mother wishes for the overseer to cease his evil against her and the slaves and end the slavery. In My Name has reference to the river Niger: "I've pooled the river nature" (Line 29) The river is a place where her roots are, but can also be seen as the river being a part of nature, and nature being her roots.

This is once again a reference to how important nature is to Nichols' culture. The poem is structured in a way to show the slaves feelings for her child, as well as the slaves. At the beginning of the poem the lines are short, as if talking to a child, but as the slave begins to speak of the slaves the lines become long. This creates a serious, intense atmosphere filled with anger directed towards the rapist. The lines also contain even more words, which allow the reader to see the true anger of the slave mother.

This poem is like many others of Nichols' as it shows an immense anger towards the whites, and gives the reader a perspective of the pain that they caused. In My Name however, shows this in a deep, powerful and personal way, and in many ways it causes the reader to appreciate the pain more than any of the other poems. This is also shown, as she includes no use of Creole. This is so the reader can have a deeper relation with the poem and can understand it more. In conclusion, Nichols has found a way to express her feelings about her culture, and its history.

She has used poetry as a way to show the deepest feelings, many of which come straight from conscience to paper with her use of enjambment. Her use of language involves the reader and invites them into what her ancestors experienced and what her culture involved. She reveals the hope, pain and

endurance her ancestors experienced and how they prevailed. Nature is just one of the parts of her culture which she expresses in her poems, of which she uses language to express. Other than nature she also reveals her own portrayal of woman, her thoughts on slavery or her interpretation of dignity and repression.