

"the slave mother"
and "walking away"
essay sample



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“ The Slave Mother” and “ Walking Away” Essay Sample

In order to explore the theme of parent child separation I have selected two poems for further consideration. The first being “ The Slave Mother” written by Frances E W Harper and the second “ Walking Away” by C Day Lewis.

Although these two poems follow the same theme, which is parent child separation, they are very different because one of the poems, “ Walking Away,” has a very gradual natural separation and “ The Slave Mother” has a very brutal quick unnatural separation.

“ The Slave Mother”- Frances E W Harper (1825-1911) was a black woman who wrote the first novel to be published by an Afro-American woman. Harper was very young when her parents died and at this stage slavery in America had not been abolished. Frances Harper was brought up by relatives who were heavily involved in the Anti-slavery movement and women’s rights. As she grew older she was renowned for her speeches for the women’s rights campaign and the abolition of slavery. She used her own poems in her speeches to emphasise a point and this was usually the highlight of her speech. This is known as polemical writing.

“ The Slave Mother” tells us the story of a black mother and her son. In the times which the poem was written slavery was common among black people although Harper herself was born into a free household. This poem was written in the Ballads style and we can tell this by the way the poem starts straight in to the climax. There is absolutely no build up to the separation of the mother and her son. As soon as the poem starts you have the verse:

" heard you that shriek? It rose

so wildly in the air,

it seem'd as if a burden'd heart

was breaking in despair.

The first thing I noticed when I read this poem was the unusual beginning of the verse. I knew that something terrible was happening or about to happen but Harper does not immediately let us know what is actually going on in the poem.

In this poem it does take us quite a while before we can fully understand what is actually happening because I know myself I had to read it a few times until I understood it.

After the first verse the Mother talks about her son and she says

" saw you those hands so sadly clasped

the bowed and feeble head

the shuddering of that fragile form

that look of grief and dread."

Here the mother describes the beginning of this horrendous event. The use of " bowed" and " sadly" reveals how depressed the mother is. We can tell that Harper is trying to make us sympathise for the mother by using the words " fragile" and " feeble." She is describing the mother as being terribly

weak and the son wont be able to survive without his mother. This also gives us an indication of how strongly Harper feel about slavery. What makes this poem so effective is the fact that this type of injustice actually did happen at this time. Every word and phrase that Harper uses is carefully chosen for example " pale with fear". This illustrates how the whole shocking and frightening experience has affected the mother.

The next stanza uses a paradox-

He is not hers, although she bore

for him a mothers pains;

He is not hers, although her blood

is coursing through his veins!

Then there is a continuation of the paradox in the next verse:

He is not hers, for cruel hands

may rudely tear apart

The only wreath of household love

that blinds her breaking heart.

These are the initial verses when you find out exactly what is happening. The repetition of the paradox emphasises how much parent child separation is going against nature, as well as showing the trauma that this child and his mother are suffering.

In the next verse there is a metaphor used to describe the mother's life.

" a fountain gushing ever new

Amids life desert wild.

I think the use of the metaphor is used to describe how much the mother needs her boy just as we would need water to survive in the desert.

The last few verses of the poem are very emotional. They are all about the mother's love for her son. There are many metaphors in these verses. For example " his lightest word has been a tone

Of music round her heart,

Their lives a streamlet bent in one

Oh, Father! Must they part?

In this verse I thought the metaphor " their lives a streamlet bent in one" was a very moving sentence. This depicts the mother and the son's raw emotions and that their thinking pattern is along the same line as the mothers. This would be another phrase, which emphasises how unnatural the separation between them has been.

The very last verse of the poem is an extremely reflective verse. It also echoes the first verse and many of the same words and phrases are used.

For example-

" heard you that shriek? It rose

so wildly in the air,

it seem'd as if a burden'd heart

was breaking in despair.

And the last verse is

" no marvel, then, those bitter shrieks

disturb the listening air;

she is a mother and her heart

is breaking in despair.

Above is my analysis of " The Slave Mother." I will now move on to C Day Lewis's piece " Walking Away" and I will try to establish similarities and differences between the two poems.

Walking away:

I am now going to write about a poem called " Walking Away" which was written by a poet called C Day Lewis. This poem is a dedication to his son Sean and I think that he wrote this to express his feelings about his son growing up and then leaving home. The poem was written about mid 20th century.

Although both " Walking Away" and " The Slave Mother" are about parent child separation we can clearly see contrast between the two poems just by looking at the first line of " Walking Away".

"Walking Away" starts off slowly by going back eighteen years ago, which is the first time the father watches his son, play a game of football where as in the "Slave Mother" the opening verse is very sudden and traumatic and we can also see how much more natural the separation is in "Walking Away" compared with "The Slave Mother" which has a very unnatural and unusual separation. We can even tell by the simile that is used in walking away how slow the separation is-

"then, like a satellite

Wrenched from its orbit, you go drifting away

Behind a scatter of boys,"

The word "drifted" in this simile I would associate with being a slow movement.

In the next verse the phrase

"You go walking away from me towards the school

With the pathos of half-fledged thing set free into a wilderness"

The first thing that stood out was the difference between the two poems. "The Slave Mother" is about the boy being captured and his freedom was removed but in "Walking Away" the boy has been set free. Another point about the quotation was although the boy has been set free he is not fully ready to enter the real world yet as stated in the quotation to enter into the wilderness.

The next verse we see the phrase " eddying away" and then the simile " like a winged seed loosened from its parents stem." Eddying away is another phrase used to describe the gradual separation between the Father and son. Another comment on how slow the separation the use of the simile " like a winged seed loosened from its parents stem." The verse also mentions how nature gives and takes. I liked this because it uses the word nature as opposed to " The Slave Mother" where everything is unnatural.

In the next verse C Day Lewis " I have had worse partings, but none that so Gnaws my mind still." My interpretation of this is that he had lost people through death but this one although it wasn't through death it has been the hardest to cope with.

Then in the last two lines of the stanza C. Day Lewis says, " selfhood begins with a walking away and the love is proved in the letting go." I thought these lines were very emotional for the poet because he is saying that his boy will begin his own life and the father shows his love even though it is difficult to let go.

After reading the two poems and writing this essay the one I prefer is " Walking Away". I found it quite easy to understand and the phrasing used was very genuine and heart felt. The poet conveys very skilfully his great depth of emotions and feelings as a result of separation from his son.