

The thirty eighth year by lucille clifton

Literature



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Lucille Clifton's "The Thirty-Eighth Year" is a poem that expresses the speaker's frustration at being just "an ordinary woman" at the thirty-eighth year of her life. She laments this ordinariness of existence throughout the poem, stressing how she has fallen short of her own expectations. The seemingly simple poem also yields reflections on her mother's untimely death, her own motherhood, feelings of loneliness, the racial consciousness and the desire to return to the essentiality of the true self.

The poem begins with the statement of the speaker that at the thirty eighth year of her life she is an ordinary woman "plain as bread" and "round as cake". The two images drawn from day-to-day life successfully bring out the idea she wants to drive home. Plain, without any frills, just ordinary, that's her life. It is a life without any significant achievement. It is an existence at the base, common level. Its association with cake, a delicacy, is only in the shape - the roundness. She uses common, simple words very economically but she uses them quite subtly. Her sense of humor is quite obvious.

The expression "an ordinary woman" is used twice in the beginning of the poem itself and twice again in it, including the last line. Like her other poems, this brief note of lament by Clifton is meant primarily to be read aloud, to be sung. Despite the everyday nature of its language, its rhythmic musical quality is strikingly obvious.

The speaker expresses her reasons for dejection: she had expected herself to be smaller in form and more beautiful. Her African-American heritage is a persistent theme in Clifton's poems. Here the speaker gives vent to her feeling of frustration at not being wiser in African ways. She wanted to be more confident. She wanted a lot more from life.

The thought that she is about to be forty contributes to yet another feeling of

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misery for her. She is reminded of the fact that her mother dies at forty four. The memory of her mother who had a "sad countenance" perturbs her. She feels a wax of terror as she recollects how helpless and awkward she felt when her mother passed away in the onset of middle age. In comparison to her mother, the speaker feels inferior and that accentuates her depression. The thought that her mother left in mid-life possibly leaving a lot of dreams unfulfilled fills her with agony.

The speaker attempts a confessional talk to her departed mother revealing her secret attempts to help the latter complete the circle of life on earth through her own living self. Her own motherhood, for the speaker, is an extension of her mother's life. She tells her mother how she has succeeded in giving her African essence to a new generation. But none of this has succeeded in removing her inner feeling of being only an ordinary woman. She knows well that for an onlooker her life is "a perfect picture of / blackness blessed", but it fills her with remorse because she has not become what she aspired to. To make matters worse, she feels utterly lonely. The loneliness she feels prompts her to go to the roots of it and she delves deep. But a satisfactory answer is not there. She has a feeling that it could be the displacement. It could be the Africanness in her demanding a return to the motherland, to its ways of life. She strives to inject strength and confidence into her to go back to it. She feels the urge to reclaim her essence, break free, derive strength from her mother's true African spirit and reach out "into the shining dark".

The end note of the poem is the speaker's deep sense of failure and misery but in these, there is also the reflection of her preparedness to get back to her dreams and get them materialized. It is an optimistic poem. The speaker

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knows her state and knows the reasons and also the remedies. Though a little late, she can strive to catch up. She intends to do the same. That is what the poem conveys. Lucille's masterful artistry is present throughout this poem. It expresses her quest to find her true self, break free from social and personal restrictions and to realize her true dreams.