

# CXC POEMS - A CONVERSATION

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## DREAMING BLACK BOY

### INTRODUCTION

I believe that we all dream when we are asleep. Most of these dreams have very little basis in reality. But there is another kind of dream which is based on our experiences. This is a longing, a hope or a *wish* for something that is lacking. You may dream of the day when CXC is finished so that you may have long periods of uninterrupted sleep. For those whose parents are working overseas you may dream of the holidays when your parents will visit or be home for good. What are some of the things that you dream of doing / being / having?

**Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** was a leader of the Civil Rights movement in the U.S.A. during the 1950's and 1960's. He lived in an environment that was similar to that of the boy in this poem. He had a dream that was memorialized in a famous speech. Among the things he dreamt was that his little children "will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character." In trying to fulfil this dream Dr. King was assassinated in 1968 at the age of 39.

Please read the full text of *I have a dream*.

You may find that reading about the horrific murder of the 14 year old boy, **Emmett Till** in 1955, puts the fears and concerns of the persona into context.

### TITLE

The title is appropriate as it prepares us for the aspirations of a boy who is black. The fact that his colour is mentioned in the title suggests that the poem is about a boy who suffers discrimination because of his race.

### CONTENT

The poem might be seen as a **wish list** which draws attention to the areas in which this boy sees the need for change. The word **wish** is used twelve times. (**Repetition**)

**Stanza one** places our young dreamer in his classroom. He longs for the attention of his white teacher who is in the habit of ignoring him (his eyes *go past* him) even when he does something outstanding, like scoring a goal. He knows that he probably contributes to his own lack of visibility in that even when he knows the answer, he *clams up*. He feels that since he is in the process of getting an education he should not behave like his *woodchopper* ancestors who were not educated. He uses this **simile** to show that he needs to be more confident, assertive and self assured.

**Stanza two** recognizes how important **education** is as a means of improving your status in society, and so the boy wants to be educated "to the best of tune up". Please pay attention to this **metaphor**. When musicians *tune up* their instruments, they are ensuring that they play at the right pitch. This boy is ambitious; he wants to be educated to the highest level possible. He knows that if you are educated, you should not feel that you

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have to “lick boots” (**metaphor**); that is to do something low, wrong, disgraceful or demeaning to impress someone in authority because you want a job or a promotion.

He wants to be free to travel all over the world without being humiliated by being told that there are certain places that he cannot enter because of his colour. “...no ...hotel keepers would make it a waste.” The word *waste* implies that he would be *wasting* time, effort and money if he cannot enjoy a trip that he pays for.

In **stanza three**, he wishes that “life wouldn’t **spend** [him] out opposing”.(**metaphor**) We have two choices when confronted with injustice, either to accept the unfair treatment quietly, or to oppose it. Clearly he will not accept and so he is hoping for a life in the future where there is justice and equality for all so that he will have no need to oppose. A person who is *spent* is a person who is tired. He wants to do productive things with his life; he does not want to spend his life fighting for rights that should be his without any effort on his part.

As a human being he is made with the ability to literally stand upright, but he wants to do more than the average human being, he will not be satisfied with mediocrity, he wants to excel. Note the **metaphorical** use of “**stretch**”. He admires Paul Robeson as an example of an African American who *stretched* metaphorically. Robeson excelled in several areas of his life. He was an outstanding scholar, actor, singer and activist for peace, racial justice and improved labour relations – hence the **allusion** to Robeson. “My inside eye a sun” (**metaphor**) speaks of his desire for brilliance, perception and understanding. If he does not have these qualities, he fears he will not be able to influence anyone into changing the status quo (the way things are). “Nobody wants to say hello to nasty answers.”

**Stanza four** begins with another important **allusion**. “Torch throwers of night” and the wish that “plotters in pyjamas would pray for themselves” (**alliteration**) are a clear reference to the nefarious (evil) activities of members of the **Ku Klux Klan**, some of whom actually claimed that in terrorizing black people and those who sympathized with them, by arson, torture and murder, they were carrying out God’s will.

The boy wishes that Klan members would “burn lights for *decent* times”(metaphor). Instead of committing acts of terror, he would like them to use their energies to *let their light shine* by promoting acts of *decency* that would make the world a better place. (Note that light is a **symbol** for Jesus and for Christian values.) He also wants them to pray for themselves. The stanza ends with his longing to be truly integrated into the society as people treat him like an alien, “as if I dropped from Mars”. (**simile**).

Perhaps **stanza five** evokes our sympathy more than any of the other stanzas. Here we see a child who is vulnerable because parents who should be protecting their children cannot fulfil this important role. Although they put up a façade (a pretense) of confidence (*bravados*) in front of their children, they too are scared. The boy knows it and so he makes the anguished lament: “I could suffer./ I could suffer a big big lot./ I wish nobody would want to earn / the terrible burden I can suffer.” (**repetition**)

His final wish expressed in the last two lines of the poem shows that the boy has a social conscience. He is not only concerned about himself, but he cares about all people.

### THEMES

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The poem explores themes of Race, Freedom, Justice, Equality, Childhood, Dreams and aspirations and Religion.

### TONE

The tone is *wistful* as the boy repeatedly expresses a longing for the things that will make his society a better place and make him safe and happy. He never demonstrates anger or resentment although slight *sarcasm* may be detected in: “Wish plotters in pyjamas would pray for themselves.”(lines 24 -25) There is also the element of *fear and despair* in his tone in the last stanza.

### MOOD

A mood of anxiety permeates the poem.

### LANGUAGE

The poet’s language and style reflect convincingly the way a child’s thoughts might flow. This is done through the use of repetition. This is not only seen in the frequency with which he uses the words “*I wish*”. Please also note the repetition of *and* in lines 9 and 10). Note also the deliberate childish simplicity in the expression “*nasty answers*”.

### LITERARY DEVICES

The poetic devices include Repetition, Metaphor, Simile, Alliteration and Allusion. These have been pointed out to you in the **CONTENT** section of this lesson. Please study them and say how they add to your appreciation of the poem.

### ACTIVITIES

- Identify the problems experienced by the boy in this poem.
- Apart from race, what are some other reasons that cause discrimination?
- Have you ever been guilty of discrimination, or been the victim of discrimination?
- Does discrimination occur in your home, society or school?
- Research Dr. Martin Luther King Jr; Paul Robeson; Emmett Till.
- What are the other poems on your CXC list that have similar themes?
- How are those poems different from **Dreaming Black Boy**?