Komunyakaa's Poems of Sorrow and Guilt

Yusef Komunyakaa was born in 1947, in Bogalusa, Louisiana. He served in the Vietnam War. Komunyakaa began writing in 1973, after achieving his bachelor's degree University of Colorado Springs. Many of Komunyakaa's poems are about his life experiences. The poem "Blackberries" written by Yusef Komunyakaa is about childhood innocence. The poem "Facing It" also written by Yusef Komunyakaa is written about memories and sorrows of the Vietnam War. Komunyakaa won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994 ("Yusef Komunyakaa"). The author develops his emotions of guilt and sorrow through his poems "Blackberries" and "Facing It" even though the poems are about entirely different aspects in the author's life.

The poem "Blackberries" by Yusef Komunyakaa, published in 1992, had many meanings, but the main point was the author's feelings of guilt. The plot of the poem is the author reminiscing about his childhood. As the poem processes, we realize the author is regretful of his adulthood. Even though the poem is about blackberries, the underlying theme of the poem seems to be looking for forgiveness shown through the use of symbols and allusions. Guilt is hinted throughout this poem by using symbols. For example, "They left my hands like a printer's or thief's before a police blotter" (Line 1-2). This statement states the author is guilty about something because he using the symbol of a thief being caught. This relates to when the thief is fingerprinted after he is brought to jail. Another example of guilt in the poem comes from the broken line about "needful as forgiveness" (13). In the line previous the statement is the word,
almost, and then the next stanza begins. I believe the author wants to emphasize the guilt on these lines. Together, these statements would read, almost needful as forgiveness (12-13). The author is saying he needs to be forgiven. The author brings up an image of mud frogs hiding from daylight. This symbolism is hiding from the real world because he is guilty or ashamed. Even though in the poem he is seeing the frogs, they directly relate to the author himself. The final example of symbolism of guilt would be "The big blue car made me sweat" (19). Sweating is a sign of being nervous, or guilty. The car makes the author nervous, because it reminds him of the past.

During this poem the author eludes to biblical references using examples that relate to asking for forgiveness. The author reminiscence about how the blackberries remind him of home: "The damp ground was consecrated" (5). The author is alluding to the Garden of Eden, from the bible. To Komunyakaa the blackberries' ground was sacred, holy, and reminded him of back when he was an innocent child, far from the stain of sin. Another allusion is in line 6, "Where they fell among a Garland of Thorns." The author is referring to the crown of thorns Jesus wore at the time of his crucifixion. Once the speaker comes back to reality by the end of the poem, he realizes the thorns are stinging his hands. This could symbolize the burden he is carrying, especially when he is longing for his childhood again.

Innocence is a main theme throughout the poem. Symbolism is used to show the author's need for innocence again: "Terrestrial sweetness" (4). This is a symbol for a beautiful morning, before anything sinful can happen, something truly beautiful without flaws. Another example of innocence versus guilt, "My bird dog Spot/ eyed blue jays and thrashers. The mud frogs/ in rich blackness, hid from daylight" (13-15). Dogs are happy, exciting animals. This symbolizes the author seeing himself happy and free, but the frogs on the other hand are hiding from the
daylight. This relates to the life of the author. The symbolism of a dog is during childhood, when he was young, free, and innocent. The frogs symbolize during present adulthood, full of regrets and hiding from the daylight, or the truth.

Another poem by Komunyakaa written about guilt is "Facing It," ultimately, this poem is about the author's memories and sorrows from of his times in the Vietnam War. Memorials are used for many reasons, remembering the passed away loved ones is a common use. An article written by Sally Minogue and Andrew Palmer, "Public war memorials are sites of intense ideological negotiation, expressing the meaning of specific wars and their losses, whilst also speaking to private grief." The main character in Komunyakaa's poem is actually the Vietnam Memorial. He feels the intense meaning of the war memorial, because it brings him back to his past.

Another main theme in the poem is when the author emphasizes his ethnicity, "My black face fades, hiding inside the black granite" (1-2). This statement connects to the theme about race. He is referencing to his skin color, noting he is different, African American by emphasizing the word black in two repetitive lines. He relates himself to the memorial; to the author the memorial and himself become one because they are both recalling the past, the death of the war. The memorial means a lot more to the author than just stone with names. Komunyakaa misses the soldiers left behind. He also wonders why he was not killed, while all the others died. The speaker is sad and lonely standing at the monument. He says, "Damnit. No tears/ I'm stone. I'm flesh." (4-5). This line states that the persona has an emotional struggle in his past. The memorial just brings back old memories which make the persona feel guilty and sad. He emphasizes the exact number of soldiers killed during the war: "I go down the 58,022 names/ half-expecting to find/ my own in letters like smoke." (14-16). This powerful statement emphasizes the reality of
the great loss. He is shocked that his own name is not on the wall with the dead. The names remind the author of the individuals lost, but most of all it reminds him of experiences and memories with friends who died in the war. The author of the poem feels guilty because he was left alive, while the other soldiers died. The memorials reminds him of his guilt from the War.

Komunyakaa is bothered by the fact that the names do not affect other people the way they affect him. This is state by line "Names shimmer on a woman's blouse/ but when she walks away/ the names stay on the wall" (20-22). To conclude, this poem is about the author regrets and remembrance of the Vietnam War and the soldiers. Yusef Komunyakaa says, about his own poem, "Actually, "Facing It" was the second poem that I wrote, and it was a real surprise to me. It was a poem that just ended itself, and I couldn't go any further." It was easy for Komunyakaa to write this poem because it came from his heart. He put all his guilt and sorrows into words in this poem.

Comparing the two poems, the author is again in a dazed state, which could be the way the author handles strong emotions. Both poems are reflecting the past. "Blackberries" is a memory of the past being innocent and joyful experiences. During the poem, "Facing It", the author remembers the haunting past and all the death and sorrow that came with it. "Blackberries" main theme is guilt and grief. The author is regretful and feels sorry for himself. This contrasts the poem "Facing It," where the author is sorrowful for the others who died. The significance is the change in the author himself, developing from selfishness into compassion for others. The author directly states both emotions in his poems.

Another point of contrast is during the author's dazed state in the poem "Blackberries" he goes back to childhood sweetness, versus the poem "Facing It," where he dazed back to memories from the war. During both poems, the author makes references to skin color. The
significance is he sees himself different from the rest of society. Komunyakaa makes this reference in much of this poetry.

To conclude, "Blackberries" is a poem about the author longing for the innocence of childhood again, because he is guilty of the present. "Facing It" is about the Vietnam War, the speaker is sorrowful for the soldiers who died, and the memories of the war haunt him. These poems are similar because they reference the significance of the author’s skin colors, and throughout the poem his is in a dazed state to handle the strong emotions. Komunyakaa’s development of character and emotions are shown through his poems by relaying his life experiences.

Works Cited


