

My Grandmother

by Jackie Kay

Jackie Kay



Jackie Kay is a Scottish poet and novelist. She was born in Edinburgh in 1961 to a white Scottish mother and a black Nigerian father. She was adopted by a Scottish white couple and brought up in a suburb of Glasgow.

The following poem is about Kay's grandmother, who lives in the Highlands, the beautiful mountainous region in the north west of Scotland.

In the 18th and 19th century many people in the Highlands were forced to leave their homes to make room for sheep farming and their houses were burned down. This is one of the reasons why only very few people live there today.

The native language of the people in the Highlands is Gaelic, a Celtic language that is not related to English. However, English has become the dominating language and fewer and fewer people in the Highlands speak Gaelic.

Map of Scotland



Pre-reading vocabulary

Scottish pine	type of tree (<i>Föhre, Kiefer</i>)
to plough	<i>pflügen</i>
plaid	large thick woollen cloth with a typical pattern (<i>schottisch kariertes Stoff</i>)
shawl	<i>Tuch</i>
clan	originally a large group of related people (<i>Klan, Stamm</i>); in Scotland, each clan has its own plaid with its typical pattern
croft	small farm
Gaelic	Celtic language (<i>Gälisch</i>)

My Grandmother

My grandmother is like a Scottish pine,
tall, straight-backed, proud and plentiful,¹
a fine head of hair, greying now
tied up in a loose bun.²
Her face is ploughed land.
Her eyes shine rough as amethysts.
She wears a plaid shawl
of our clan with the zeal³ of an Amazon.
She is one of those women
burnt in her croft rather than moved off the land.
She comes from them, her snake's skin.
She speaks Gaelic mostly, English only
when she has to, then it's blasphemy.⁴

My grandmother sits by the fire and swears
There'll be no darkie⁵ baby in this house

My grandmother is a Scottish pine,
tall, straight-backed proud and plentiful,
her hair tied with pins in a ball of steel wool.
Her face is tight as ice
and her eyes are amethysts.

Discussion

What do we learn about Kay's grandmother?
How does our picture of her change in the course of the poem?

Text production

Jackie Kay shows us two very different sides of her grandmother in the above poem. Think about a person you would like to write about, for example a friend, a boyfriend/girlfriend, an enemy, a parent, a grandparent, a celebrity, a teacher etc. Write down words and things that describe that person (what does s/he look like? What does s/he typically do?) and that show us two different aspects or two different sides of him/her.

Now write a poem about this person. The poem should be between 10 and 30 lines long.

¹ plentiful – reich(lich)

² bun – Haarknoten

³ zeal – Begeisterung

⁴ blasphemy – Blasphemie, Gotteslästerung

⁵ darkie – Schimpfwort für einen schwarzen Menschen