The Century Quilt

SUMMARY

The speaker says that she and her sister used to adore their grandma's "Indian blanket." They'd go to sleep beneath the green blankets that the military had issued to their dad, and their grandma brought this blanket, along with her prescriptions and cane, when she moved in with them. The last time the speaker went to see her sister, she noticed the blanket on top of her sister's bed. This made the speaker think about how she'd hoped that the blanket would be passed down to *her*, and about how when she and her sister were kids they'd snuggle up inside the blanket and pretend to be chiefs and princesses.

The speaker has since found a new blanket for herself, one that she'd like to keep until her dying day. It's a quilt made up of six dark brown squares, two white squares, and one square that's the same yellowish-brown color as her mom's skin. Each of the quilt's squares also features an image of a leaf from a sweet gum tree, the lobes of which the speaker envisions gently stroking her to sleep (or into the silence of death).

The speaker expects that she'd have soothing dreams for a century beneath this quilt, just like her grandma must have had beneath her own blanket. Her grandma must have dreamed that she was once again a little girl in Kentucky alongside her yellow-skinned sisters, their grandpa's white relatives nodding when they crossed paths. When their dad got home from work at his store they would blast the player piano, and then all those lovely girls would dance around and laugh. And when the dancing stopped, the speaker's grandma probably dreamed of her daughter (the speaker's mom), a skinny girl following her dad (the speaker's grandpa) through his field in Oklahoma.

Maybe, beneath this new blanket, the speaker would have dreams about her own life: about her astounding childhood, her reddish-brown father's dignity, or her yellowish-brown mother's tenderness. And inside that dream of her own life, maybe she'd even encounter her son, or another child of hers who hasn't even been conceived yet. She'd name her blanket The Century Quilt, for its leafy design.

THEMES

HONORING FAMILY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

"The Century Quilt" is a celebration of family and cultural heritage. In the poem, the speaker remembers an "Indian blanket" that her "Meema" (or grandmother) used to have and which the speaker associates with happy childhood memories. While the speaker's sister inherits this particular blanket, the speaker eventually finds herself a new "quilt" that she hopes to hang onto for the rest of her days. This quilt, like her grandmother's blanket, represents her diverse ancestry: just as it's made up of individual squares of varying colors, the speaker herself is a patchwork of different people and cultures that result in a "pattern of leaves"—that is, the speaker's family tree. The poem thus speaks to the power of recognizing and honoring one's family, history, and culture, as doing so grants the speaker a sense of peace, connection, and belonging.

The speaker links her grandmother's "Indian blanket" with the warmth and happiness of her childhood. She and her sister "were in love with" their grandmother's blanket, the speaker says, which her grandmother brought with her when she "came to live with" the speaker's immediate family. As children, the girls used to "wrap" themselves up in the blanket and pretend to be "chieftains and princesses"—words that suggest the blanket thus represented not just the speaker's own happy youth, but also her connection to her grandmother's mixed heritage.

Indeed, the speaker envisions her grandmother "dream[ing] she was a girl again in Kentucky" under the quilt, thus linking it to her grandmother's past. She imagines her grandmother and "yellow sisters" (the speaker's great aunts) playing together, much like the speaker and her own sister many years later, while their "white grandfather's family" looked on. The speaker also wonders if her grandmother "dreamed about Mama" (that is, the speaker's mother and her grandmother's daughter).

The blanket, then, serves as a kind of link between and acknowledgment of diverse generations of family. As such, the speaker saw this blanket as a valuable heirloom, a piece of her history that preserves and honors her family's legacy.

While the speaker doesn't inherit this *particular* blanket, she does find a new one that represents varying parts of her cultural inheritance. She says that she's found "a quilt / [she'd] like to die under." In other words, this quilt has great personal significance to her, and she plans on holding onto it her whole life.

This significance, in turn, comes from its varying colors, which represent the different parts of the speaker's heritage: the "Six Van Dyke brown squares, / two white ones, and one square / the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks" represent the "brown" and "yellow" and "white" people who make up her ancestry.

The speaker says that "under this quilt" she might even meet her children, including ones who are "as yet unconceived." This implies that the blanket represents not only the people who came before the speaker, but the people who will come after

her as well. The speaker imagines the "sweet gum lea[ves]" on the quilt's pattern "caress[ing]" her "into the silence" of sleep and/or death. In other words, the thought of her entwined family and cultural heritage soothes the speaker. Seeing herself as part of "a pattern of leaves"—that is, being just one of a countless number of "leaves" on her family tree—gives the speaker a sense of pride in being made up of all these different people.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-45

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

My sister and ...
... Daddy by Supply.

Right away, the speaker gives readers plenty of insight into her family and history, and these opening lines are filled with gentleness and nostalgia.

The poem begins with the speaker saying that as a child, she and her sister "were in love with" their "Meema's Indian blanket." "Meema" refers to the speaker's grandmother, while "Indian blanket" presumably refers to a kind of traditional American Indian blanket.

The speaker then contrasts this object with the "army green" blankets "issued to Daddy" by "Supply," implying that her father was in the military and that the speaker and her sister were not particularly well off (because they were sleeping under standard-issue army blankets). These blankets were likely functional but not particularly warm and cozy. As such, the "Indian blanket" would have been a welcome comfort to the speaker and her sister.

The mention of so many family members in so few lines and the use of affectionate, colloquial terms like "Meema" and "Daddy" establish the importance of family to the speaker. Readers will also notice that these lines are written in free verse (they have no set meter or rhyme scheme), which keeps the language casual and intimate, as though readers are simply listening to the speaker tell a story.

Finally, note the use of enjambment in lines 1 and 3:

> My sister and I were in love
> with Meema' s Indian blanket.
> We fell asleep under army green
> Issued to Daddy by Supply.

The lines flow smoothly and come to natural pauses, adding to the poem's thoughtful, reflective tone.

LINES 5-8

When Meema came ...
... I visited her.

The speaker's grandmother eventually "came to live with" the speaker's immediate family. On the one hand, this is another detail that suggests how close the speaker's family was. At the same time, the fact that the speaker's grandmother brought "her medicines" and her "cane" implies the grandmother's age and vulnerability. That is, it seems likely that she came to live with her family because her health was failing and she couldn't remain on her own.

The blanket thus not only connects the girls to their grandmother's *heritage*, but it also connects them to their last memories of the grandmother *herself*, to that precious period of time when she was living with them.

The speaker goes on to reveal that her sister ended up inheriting their grandmother's blanket: she says she "found [it] on [her] sister's bed / the last time [she] visited her." The speaker and her sister both seem to be adults in the poem's present. That they still spend time together despite no longer living under the same roof again implies the importance of family to the speaker.

LINES 9-12

I remembered how ...
... and princesses.

Seeing her grandmother's beloved "Indian blanket" on her sister's bed brings up childhood memories for the speaker. She recalls hoping that she herself would inherit the blanket from her grandmother, rather than her sister, but there's no clear sign of resentment or jealousy toward her sibling.

Instead, the speaker fondly remembers how, as children, the two would themselves up in the blanket and imagine themselves to be "chieftains / and princesses." The word "chieftains"—a word that describes the leader of a tribe or clan and is often linked with American Indian culture. It's as though in playing with the blanket, they were tapping into the past.

The imagery of the girls bundled up in the blanket playing also suggests the comfort and warmth of their childhood. The blanket isn't *just* a blanket, but also a symbol of the speaker's happy childhood, of her connection to her grandmother and her sister, and of her connection to her ancestors. The repetition of "how" reflect the fact that the blanket represents these multiple things at once.

Also notice how the popping /p/ consonance in these lines adds subtly evokes the playfulness of the children:

> I remembered how I'd planned to inherit
> that blanket, how we used to wrap ourselves
> at play in its folds and be chieftains
> and princesses.

The bouncy sounds here contribute to the overall easygoing tone of the poem, which is expressing feelings of connection and love.

LINES 13-17

Now I've found ...
... of Mama's cheeks.

After the stanza break, the speaker uses the word "Now" to indicate a shift into the present day.

Although she didn't inherit her grandmother's blanket, the speaker says, she has found a new "quilt" she says she'd "like to die under." In other words, she's found a blanket of her own that she is "in love with" and hopes never to part with.

She goes on to describe the quilt as being made up of differently colored squares, including:

> Six Van Dyke brown squares,
> two white ones, and one square
> the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks.

The differently colored squares of the quilt symbolize the speaker's diverse heritage. Van Dyke brown" is a particular shade of dark brown named after 17th-century Dutch painter Anthony van Dyck; t he "Six Van Dyke brown squares" suggests that many of the speaker's ancestors had dark brown skin. The "two white" squares might represent the speaker's white ancestors, while the "one" she compares fondly to the mixed "yellowbrown" color of her mother's "cheeks" suggests that her mother had mixed heritage.

The speaker feels as if she is a bit like this patchwork of squares: made up of various disparate pieces that have been woven into a beautiful whole.

LINES 18-20

Each square holds ...
... into the silence.

The speaker ends the second stanza by describing the pattern on the quilt she has found, saying that "Each square holds a sweet gum leaf."

A "sweet gum" is a kind of deciduous tree with star-shaped leaves, native to North and Central America.

The speaker metaphorically compares the lobes of these leaves to "fingers" that will "caress [her] into the silence" of sleep and/or of death. While readers might think this is a frightening image, the word "caress" suggests tenderness and love. The speaker is comforted by the quilt and by the thought of her ancestors reaching out to welcome her when she dies. Wrapped up in this quilt, she does not feel alone or separate, but part of something greater than herself.

Sibilance adds to the comforting hush of this moment:

> Each square holds a sweet gum leaf
> whose fingers I imagine
> would caress me into the silence.

The soft, smooth sounds evoke the speaker's contentment as she imagines slipping away to sleep, and to death, wrapped up in this blanket, soothed by the reassuring "fingers" of her family.

LINES 21-25

I think I'd ...
... her yellow sisters,

The third stanza begins with the speaker saying that she thinks she'd "have good dreams / for a hundred years under this quilt." The quilt not only reminds her of her *past* (her childhood happiness and her diverse ancestry), but it also connects her to her *future*.

Imagining herself dreaming beneath her quilt, the speaker also can't help but see the parallels between herself and her grandmother. She imagines her grandmother under her own "Indian blanket," imagery that again reveals how the quilt makes the speaker feel connected to her family and past.

The speaker imagines her grandmother "dream[ing] she was a girl again" and pictures her grandmother's childhood in "Kentucky / among her yellow sisters."

The word "yellow" was once used to refer to light-skinned Black people of mixed African and white ancestry. (The poet's real-life grandmother did indeed grow up in Kentucky among many siblings and had both black and white heritage.)

The mention of her grandmother's "yellow sisters" also echoes the "yellowbrown" the speaker used to describe her mother's skin in the prior stanza, creating a thread between generations. These different colors—markers of the speaker's diverse racial heritage—blend together, no longer just "brown" and "yellow" and "white," but something new—"yellowbrown."

LINES 26-31

their grandfather's white ...
... giggled and danced.

The speaker reveals here that her grandmother's grandfather (that is, the speaker's great, great grandfather) was white. She mention's his "white family / nodding" at her grandmother and her grandmother's sisters "when they met."

The word "nodding" suggests formality, a kind of restrained recognition of familial bonds. In her grandmother's day, such bonds between Black and white families were undoubtedly complicated, even taboo. With this single word, then, the speaker hints at the difficulty that would have been inherent to the relationship between these families, but doesn't dwell on it.

Instead, the speaker zooms in on a particularly happy image of her grandmother's childhood, saying:

When their father came home from his store
they cranked up the pianola
and all of the beautiful sisters
giggled and danced.

The imagery here is playful and warm; the speaker imagines the grandmother's childhood as being pretty similar to her own, at least in terms of her grandmother's relationship with her siblings. They'd start up the "pianola" (a self-playing piano) and dance around when their father returned from working at "his store." (This is another real autobiographical reference: Nelson has said that her great grandfather owned a store.)

The use of several enjambed lines in a row evokes the fluid movement of the sisters as they dance through their family home together.

LINES 32-35

She must have ...
... his Oklahoma field.

Beneath her quilt, the speaker feels connected not only to the grandmother she knew in life, but also to versions of her grandmother and mother that she never met and that she can only imagine.

The speaker goes on to say that her grandmother, asleep beneath her blanket, "must have dreamed about Mama / when the dancing was over." In other words, the speaker imagines that after the grandmother dreamed of her own childhood, she then dreamed of her daughter (who, of course, would go on to become the speaker's mother).

The speaker describes her mother as a child, depicting her as "a lanky" (tall and awkward) "girl trailing after her father / through his Oklahoma field." The consonance of /m/, /l/, and /f/ sounds adds subtle musicality to these lines, emphasizing the beauty of the speaker's imaginings:

She must have dreamed about Mama
when the dancing was over:
a lanky girl trailing after her father
through his Oklahoma field.

In particular, the soft, muted /m/ sounds in line 32 seem to evoke the gentleness and tenderness the grandmother would have felt towards her young daughter.

Here, as throughout the poem, the language remains informal. Enjambment ("Mama / when" and "father / through") adds smoothness to the line. In all, the poem unfolds like a swirling, comforting memory.

LINES 36-40

Perhaps under this ...
... my mother's ochre gentleness.

In the poem's final stanza, the speaker imagines a future of her that will be much like her grandmother's past.

Just as her grandmother dreamed of her (the grandmother's) childhood beneath her "Indian blanket," the speaker might dream of her own "childhood of miracles" under her quilt. The word "miracles" reflects the joy and wonder of the speaker's childhood, and it suggests that her very existence—a testament to all those who came before her—is miraculous.

The speaker then describes her "father's burnt umber" (or dark brown) "pride" and her "mother's ochre" (or brownish yellow) "gentleness." By again associating her parents with specific colors, the speaker emphasizes the importance of her diverse racial heritage. In "dream[ing] of [her]self," the speaker must also dream of all the people who contributed to her becoming: her mother and father, her grandparents, her "brown" and "yellow" and "white" ancestors.

Notice the use of repetition in lines 38-40:

of my childhood of miracles,
of my father's burnt umber pride,
my mother's ochre gentleness.

This anaphora (the repetition of "of my"/"my") adds a sense of building rhythm to the poem, while parallelism suggests the ways in which the speaker's "childhood of miracles," her father's "pride," and her mother's "gentleness" all go hand in hand. In other words, the parallel grammatical structures suggest that what made the speaker's childhood so "mirac[ulous]" (or wonderful) was her family and what they were able to instill in her: a sense of "pride" in her heritage and a "gentleness" which is apparent in the way she thinks about her family.

For the speaker, to "dream of [her]self" is the dream of her entire family—those she knows and those she can only imagine. For the speaker, the past and the future are all braided into her present sense of self.

LINES 41-45

Within the dream ...
... pattern of leaves.

The quilt connects the speaker not only to her past and her ancestors, but also to her future and to the future of her family—something that will outlast the speaker herself.

The speaker goes on to say that in this "dream of [her]self," she might meet her "son / or [her] other child, as yet unconceived." The word "unconceived" means that the speaker hasn't become pregnant with her second child yet; basically, the quilt ties her to parts of herself she doesn't even know!

The poem then wraps up with the speaker saying that she would call this quilt "The Century Quilt, / after its pattern of leaves." The word century (which means a hundred years) suggests just how much history is encompassed by this simple

object. And the speaker is connected to all of it—she is part of this larger "pattern," the "leaves" of which might symbolize the speaker's family tree.

That tree is made up of distinct individuals, but those people also all come together to form a whole, just as the squares of the quilt are sewn together to create something warm and beautiful.

SYMBOLS

THE QUILT AND BLANKET

The "Indian blanket" and quilt both symbolize the speaker's diverse family and heritage. They also serve as links between the speaker's past, present, and future.

The "Indian blanket" more specifically represents the speaker's happy childhood and her connection to her grandmother's side of the family:

- She and her sister "were in love" with the blanket, the speaker says, and she remembers them wrapping themselves up "in its folds" and pretending to be "chieftains and princesses" as kids. The blanket thus evokes lovely memories of childhood.
- And the blanket doesn't just connect the speaker to her own past, but also to her *grandmother's*. The speaker pictures her grandmother dreaming under the blanket, seeing herself alongside her "her yellow sisters" and "their grandfather's white family." The speaker thus links the blanket with her grandmother's (and, of course, her own) ethnic history.

When the speaker doesn't inherit her grandmother's blanket, she finds a new one and imbues it with significance by picturing herself dreaming beneath it just like her grandmother once dreamed underneath her "Indian blanket." The quilt she has discovered as an adult represents all the "brown," "white," and "yellow" ancestors that make her who she is:

- In fact, the quilt is meaningful to the speaker *because* it is made up of differently colored "squares" of fabric. Each square in the quilt, like each person in her family tree, contributes its own specific hue.
- The thing that distinguishes a quilt from an ordinary blanket is that it is often composed of many disparate scraps and pieces; it isn't just a single thing, but one thing composed of many squares. Likewise, the speaker isn't just "brown," "white," or "yellow," but rather a mixture of her "father's burnt umber" (or dark brown) and her mother's "ochre" (or yellowish brown).

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-2
- Lines 5-6
- Lines 7-8
- Lines 9-12
- Lines 13-20
- Lines 21-27
- Line 36
- Lines 44-45

THE LEAVES

The "pattern of leaves" on the speaker's quilt symbolizes the speaker's family. Each "square" of the quilt features an individual "sweet gum leaf" (a sweet gum being a kind of deciduous tree with star-shaped leaves); together, all these individual leaves make up a beautiful "pattern," or design. Likewise, the speaker's family tree is made up of individual people with vastly different histories. All these people have come together within the speaker.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-20:** "Each square holds a sweet gum leaf / whose fingers I imagine / would caress me into the silence."
- **Lines 44-45:** "I'd call it The Century Quilt, / after its pattern of leaves."

POETIC DEVICES

IMAGERY

The speaker uses imagery to vividly illustrate her own heritage.

When describing the new quilt she's found, for example, she says it has "Six Van Dyke brown squares, / two white ones, and one square / the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks." By describing the quilt's colors, and by comparing one of the colors to that of her mother's skin, the speaker suggests that the various squares that make up the quilt represent the various people who make up the speaker's heritage.

Another moment of striking imagery comes in the final stanza, when the speaker describes:

> [...] my father's burnt umber pride,
> my mother's ochre gentleness.

These lines are on one level figurative; pride and gentleness don't *literally* have colors. But the speaker seems to combine her parents' identities with their skin colors, in turn emphasizing the legacy and importance of their own family and

heritage.

Where Imagery appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-20:** "Six Van Dyke brown squares, / two white ones, and one square / the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks. / Each square holds a sweet gum leaf / whose fingers I imagine / would caress me into the silence."
- **Lines 23-27:** "under her blanket, / dreamed she was a girl again in Kentucky / among her yellow sisters, / their grandfather's white family / nodding at them when they met."
- **Lines 29-31:** "they cranked up the pianola / and all of the beautiful sisters / giggled and danced."
- **Line 34:** "a lanky girl trailing after her father"
- **Lines 39-40:** "of my father's burnt umber pride, / my mother's ochre gentleness."
- **Line 45:** "after its pattern of leaves."

ASYNDETON

The speaker uses asyndeton a few times throughout the poem. In general, this device makes the poem come across as casual and conversational. The language here is never stiff or formal, and this adds to the poem's sense of tenderness and intimacy.

As an example, take likes 9-11:

> I remembered how I'd planned to inherit
> that blanket, how we used to wrap ourselves
> at play in its folds [...]

Asyndeton and repetition (of the word "how") make the poem quick and lyrical at this moment. And, as these lines show, asyndeton also works well in a poem that's so focused on memory. The lack of conjunctions and smooth, flowing lines might evoke the way that memory works, with one thought seamlessly triggering the next.

Where Asyndeton appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-11:** "I remembered how I'd planned to inherit / that blanket, how we used to wrap ourselves / at play in its folds"
- **Lines 24-27:** "dreamed she was a girl again in Kentucky / among her yellow sisters, / their grandfather's white family / nodding at them when they met."
- **Lines 37-40:** "I'd dream of myself, / of my childhood of miracles, / of my father's burnt umber pride, / my mother's ochre gentleness."

ENJAMBMENT

The poem's frequent enjambments help create its easy-going, fluid rhythm.

The poem is pretty evenly divided into enjambed and end-stopped lines. A lot of enjambed lines in a row might feel breathless or syntactically slippery, while a lot of end-stopped lines in a row might feel flattened or matter-of-fact. By contrast, this poem's ebb and flow between enjambed and end-stopped lines create a sense of balance. Because the speaker is expressing pride in her heritage and the love she feels for her family, the poem doesn't need to feel difficult, intense, or strained. And the easy rhythm of the poem reflects the good feelings the speaker associates with her upbringing.

There are a few places in the poem where there are more than a couple of enjambed or end-stopped lines in a row, such as in lines 9-12:

> I remembered how I'd planned to inherit
> that blanket, how we used to wrap ourselves
> at play in its folds and be chieftains
> and princesses.

The three enjambed lines in a row seem to evoke the open and imaginative space the children occupy as they play and imagine themselves to be "chieftains and princesses." Likewise, the enjambments in lines 28-31 ("When their father [...] giggled and danced.") echo the playful, breathless action of the sisters dancing around and laughing.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "love / with"
- **Lines 3-4:** "green / issued"
- **Lines 5-6:** "us / she"
- **Lines 7-8:** "bed / the"
- **Lines 9-10:** "inherit / that"
- **Lines 10-11:** "ourselves / at"
- **Lines 11-12:** "chieftains / and"
- **Lines 13-14:** "quilt / I'd"
- **Lines 16-17:** "square / the"
- **Lines 18-19:** "leaf / whose"
- **Lines 19-20:** "imagine / would"
- **Lines 21-22:** "dreams / for"
- **Lines 24-25:** "Kentucky / among"
- **Lines 26-27:** "family / nodding"
- **Lines 28-29:** "store / they"
- **Lines 29-30:** "pianola / and"
- **Lines 30-31:** "sisters / giggled"
- **Lines 32-33:** "Mama / when"
- **Lines 34-35:** "father / through"
- **Lines 36-37:** "quilt / I'd"
- **Lines 41-42:** "myself / perhaps"
- **Lines 42-43:** "son / or"

PERSONIFICATION

The poem uses personification in lines 18-20 as the speaker describes the pattern on the new quilt she's discovered:

Each square holds a sweet gum leaf
whose fingers I imagine
would caress me into the silence.

The "fingers" here refer to the lobes of the star-shaped sweet gum tree leaves that decorate the quilt. The speaker imagines those "fingers" gently stroking her. Personifying the quilt emphasizes the speaker's personal connection to it. Like a soft human touch, it has the ability to help her drift off to sleep.

Personification also suggests that the quilt isn't *just* a comforting object in and of itself; it's comforting *because* it reminds the speaker of her family and her ancestors, of the weaving of countless generations that led to her being born. The fingers of the "sweet gum leaf" are the fingers of her ancestors reaching through time and space, reminding her that she is part of a "pattern," that she isn't alone. This is why she is able to so peacefully imagine drifting off "into the silence" not just of sleep, but also of death.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Lines 18-20:** "Each square holds a sweet gum leaf / whose fingers I imagine / would caress me into the silence."

CONSONANCE

There's not much consonance in the poem, whose language for the most part is casual and conversational. The few moments of consonance that *do* pop up, however, add subtle musicality and emphasis to certain images.

Note, for example, the bright /p/ and gentle /l/ sounds in lines 10-12 as the speaker recalls her childhood:

[...] how we used to wrap ourselves
at play in its folds and be chieftains
and princesses.

The lyrical sounds here reflect the warmth and playfulness of this memory.

Later, sibilance creates a gentle, soothing tone as the speaker imagines how the leaves on her quilt "would caress me into the silence."

And in lines 37-40, humming /m/ sounds suggest warmth and comfort of the speaker beneath her blanket, dreaming of her family and childhood:

I'd dream of myself,
of my childhood of miracles,
of my father's burnt umber pride,
my mother's ochre gentleness.
Within the dream of myself
perhaps I'd meet my son

These soft, gentle sounds also contribute to the poem's overall tone of contentedness.

Where Consonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 10:** "wrap"
- **Line 11:** "play," "folds," "chieftains"
- **Line 12:** "princesses"
- **Line 14:** "die under"
- **Line 15:** "Dyke"
- **Line 16:** "white ones," "one"
- **Line 18:** "square," "sweet," "leaf"
- **Line 19:** "fingers"
- **Line 20:** "caress," "silence"
- **Line 23:** "Meema must"
- **Line 34:** "lanky girl trailing," "after," "father"
- **Line 35:** "Oklahoma field"
- **Line 37:** "dream," "myself"
- **Line 38:** "my," "miracles"
- **Line 39:** "my," "burnt umber"
- **Line 40:** "my mother's"
- **Line 41:** "dream," "myself"
- **Line 42:** "meet my"
- **Line 44:** "call it," "Century Quilt"

REPETITION

The poem uses many different forms of repetition throughout. All this repetition is in keeping with the poem's focus on feeling connected to one's history and family. That is, the repetition creates a sense of continuity and connection between the speaker and her ancestors.

In the second stanza, the frequent repetition of "square[s]" calls attention to the idea that there are many *different* squares on this quilt, just as there are many different people who have, in one way or another, made the speaker who she is:

Six Van Dyke brown squares,
two white ones, and one square
the yellowbrown of Mama's cheeks.
Each square holds [...]

Parallel language in lines 22-23 draws attention to the parallels between the speaker and the speaker's grandmother:

I think I'd have good dreams
for a hundred years under this quilt,
as Meema must have, under her blanket,
dreamed [...]

The repetition underscores the fact that the speaker's attachment to this new quilt has to do with the ways it connects her to her family—and to her grandmother in particular. Their stories echo through time within *each other*.

In the last stanza, the speaker returns to the phrase "under this quilt," again suggesting the importance of wrapping herself up in memories of her family. In lines 37-41, the poem uses more parallelism (and anaphora), sandwiched between another repeated phrase:

> I'd dream of myself,
> of my childhood of miracles,
> of my father's burnt umber pride,
> my mother's ochre gentleness.
> Within the dream of myself

The grammatically parallel phrases in between the repetition of "dream of myself" seem to suggest that for the speaker, to dream of herself is to *also* dream of her family. She is innately connected to those who came before her, and those who will come after her.

Where Repetition appears in the poem:

- **Line 2:** "blanket"
- **Line 7:** "blanket"
- **Line 10:** "blanket"
- **Line 15:** "squares"
- **Line 16:** "square"
- **Line 18:** "square"
- **Line 21:** "dreams"
- **Line 22:** "under this quilt"
- **Line 23:** "under her blanket"
- **Line 24:** "dreamed"
- **Line 32:** "dreamed"
- **Line 36:** "under this quilt"
- **Line 37:** "dream of myself"
- **Lines 38-40:** "of my childhood of miracles, / of my father's burnt umber pride, / my mother's ochre gentleness."
- **Line 41:** "dream of myself"

VOCABULARY

Meema (Line 2, Line 5, Line 23) - An affectionate term for the speaker's grandmother.

Supply (Line 4) - The department in charge of giving members of the military their supplies.

Chieftains (Line 11) - The leaders of a tribe or clan.

Van Dyke brown (Line 15) - A specific shade of dark brown, named for the 17th-century Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck.

Yellowbrown (Line 17) - Brown with a yellowish tinge.

Sweet gum leaf (Line 18) - A sweetgum is a kind of deciduous tree with star-shaped leaves, which is native to North and Central America.

Caress (Line 20) - Touch softly or tenderly.

Pianola (Line 29) - A self-playing piano.

Lanky (Line 34) - Tall and thin (and, usually, a bit awkward).

Burnt umber (Line 39) - A specific shade of dark, reddish brown.

Ochre (Line 40) - Brownish yellow.

Unconceived (Line 43) - The speaker is saying she might dream of a child she hasn't yet conceived, or become pregnant with.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"The Century Quilt" is a free verse poem made up of 45 lines broken into four stanzas of varying lengths. Each stanza break corresponds with a subtle shift in the poem's trajectory:

- The first stanza recounts the speaker's memories associated with her grandmother's blanket.
- The second stanza shifts to the present as the speaker describes the new quilt she's acquired.
- The third stanza moves into the realm of the imagination as the speaker pictures first herself and then her grandmother dreaming beneath the quilt.
- The fourth stanza ties everything together, linking the speaker's family history with both her present self and future generations. In this way, it suggests that the speaker is part of a "pattern," a flowing whole of which her life is only a small part.

The poem's lack of formal structure keeps it feeling personal and intimate. The poem, like the speaker herself, can't be boxed into a single, rigid identity.

METER

The poem is written in free verse and doesn't have a regular meter. As with its loose form, this *lack* of meter makes the poem feel intimate, easygoing, and conversational. The poem's language reflects the soothing, comfortable state of mind the speaker is in. Its flowing lines also seem to mimic the way someone may drift between thought, image, memory, and imagination.

RHYME SCHEME

Like many contemporary poems, "The Century Quilt" does not follow a rhyme scheme. This *lack* of rhyme, like the poem's lack of meter, keeps things from feeling overly strict or artificial. Instead, the language flows smoothly and conversationally. The reader feels almost like they're inside the speaker's mind or sharing in an intimate conversation. The lack of formality thus seems to lessen the space between speaker and audience,

between poem and reader.

SPEAKER

The speaker of this poem is Marilyn Nelson herself. The poem references many specifical details from Nelson's background: her father was in the military; her maternal grandmother, whom she called "Meema," had mixed racial heritage and grew up in Kentucky with many siblings; and her maternal grandfather was Black and worked on a farm in Oklahoma.

The poem, then, is deeply personal, and it speaks to Nelson's own desire to acknowledge, connect with, and celebrate her family and diverse ancestry. To that end, she mentions her grandma's "yellow sisters" (a reference to their light skin tone) and "their grandfather's white family." She also describes her mother's "yellowbrown [...] cheeks" and "ochre" (or brownish yellow) tenderness and her father's "burnt umber" (or dark, reddish-brown) "pride."

To the speaker, the quilt is a physical manifestation of the ways all these different people are ultimately connected.

SETTING

There isn't a fixed physical setting in this poem, as it takes place inside the speaker's memories and imagination.

Readers might think of the poem as beginning in the speaker's childhood, shortly after her grandmother moved in with the speaker's immediate family. The mention of "army green" and "Supply" implies that the speaker's father was in the military and that the speaker's family wasn't rich (given that she and her sister were sleeping under military-issued blankets). Still, this home seemed to be a place of warmth and joy, evidenced by the speaker and her sister playing in the "folds" of her Meema's blanket.

Later, when the speaker imagines her grandmother lying beneath her blanket and dreaming of her own childhood, the speaker constructs a setting based on what she knows about her grandmother's upbringing. She describes her grandmother as a little girl "in Kentucky / among her yellow sisters." The speaker pictures them "crank[ing] up the pianola" (or player piano) when their father returned from work and then imagines "all of the beautiful sisters / giggl[ing] and danc[ing]." The speaker even goes on to imagine her grandmother imagining her own someday daughter (the speaker's mother), "a lanky girl trailing after her father / through his Oklahoma field."

Of course, the speaker is remembering and envisioning all this from the vantage point of the present. The imagined setting gives the reader a sense of why this quilt is so meaningful to the speaker (in that it represents such different parts of her own history).

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

Celebrated American poet, translator, and children's book writer Marilyn Nelson was born in 1946 in Cleveland, Ohio. Her father, Melvin M. Nelson, served in the U.S. Air Force—something Nelson alludes to here with the reference to "army green" blankets "issued to Daddy by Supply." Because of his job, the family moved frequently, and this may have informed the longing for a connection to an anchoring family history present in "The Century Quilt."

"The Century Quilt" was published in 1985 as part of Nelson's second collection of poems, *Mama's Promises*. The poems in this book often focus on the experiences and concerns of motherhood (as readers can see in the titular poem, for example). And while Nelson has said that she generally avoids writing about her own life, much of this collection draws from her personal experiences. This particular poem, of course, clearly references Nelson's specific background and ancestry.

In general, Nelson's poems often tackle questions related to Black history and ancestry, family, and spirituality. Nelson discovered poetry at a young age and was enamored with influential Black poets such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Brooks. She earned a bachelor's degree at the University of California-Davis, later going on to earn a Master's and a Ph.D. While working at a university library, she also came across such influences as LeRoi Jones, Theodore Roethke, and Edna St. Vincent Millay.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

While many of Nelson's later books of poems, such as *A Wreath for Emmitt Till* or *Carver, a Life in Poems*, take inspiration from the lives of historical Black figures whom Nelson never met, the poems in *Mama's Promises* are based on Nelson's own life experiences. "The Century Quilt" alludes to many details from Nelson's background:

- Nelson's father was a member of the Tuskegee Airmen, the first group of Black military pilots in the U.S. Air Force.
- Her maternal grandmother was born in Kentucky and had six younger siblings. Their parents were of mixed Black and white heritage (hence the poet's reference to her grandmother's light-skinned sisters), and their father indeed owned a "store."
- Nelson's maternal grandfather, meanwhile, was born into slavery; he escaped and fought for the Union in the Civil War and eventually settled on a farm in Oklahoma.

Nelson herself grew up at a pivotal time in American history. She was eight years old when the Supreme Court ruled racial

segregation in schools unconstitutional in the landmark case *Brown vs. Board of Education*. (She later wrote a children's book, titled *Mrs. Nelson's Class*, which depicts her mother, a Black schoolteacher, and her second-grade white students as they adjust to integration).

Nelson also came of age at the height of the civil rights movement, and, like many Black people of her generation, she found inspiration, beauty, and pride in her heritage.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Conversation with Marilyn Nelson — In this interview, Nelson talks about her journey to becoming a writer, her artistic influences, her family, and more. (https://imagejournal.org/article/conversation-marilyn-nelson/)
- What Is a Quilt? — A video talking about the history and significance of quilts. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OwcFH_tkIs)
- Nelson's Life and Work — A biography of Marilyn Nelson from the Poetry Foundation. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/marilyn-nelson)
- An Interview with Nelson — Lauren K. Alleyne interviews the poet for the summer 2021 issue of The Fight and The Fiddle. (https://fightandfiddle.com/2019/01/17/the-poetics-of-listening-an-interview-with-marilyn-nelson/)

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