

**Prompt**

In the following poem Nicanor Parra describes the point of view of a young person who is torn between two worlds. Read the poem carefully. Then write a well-organized essay in which you analyze how Parra uses such elements as imagery, metaphor, and tone to convey the poet's complex views on how he remembers his youth.

"Memories of Youth"

All I'm sure of is that I kept going back and forth,  
Sometimes I bumped into trees,  
Bumped into beggars,  
I forced my way through a thicket of chairs and tables,  
With my soul on a thread I watched the great leaves fall.  
But the whole thing was useless,  
At every turn I sank deeper into a sort of jelly;  
People laughed at my fits,

The characters stirred in their armchairs like seaweed moved by the waves  
And women looked at me with disgust  
Dragging me up, dragging me down,  
Making me cry and laugh against my will.

All this evoked in me a feeling of nausea  
And a storm of incoherent sentences,  
Threats, insults, pointless curses,  
Also certain exhausting pelvic motions,  
Macabre dances, that left me  
Short of breath  
Unable to raise my head for days  
For nights.

I kept going back and forth, it's true,  
My soul drifted through the streets  
Calling for help, begging for a little tenderness,  
With pencil and paper I went into cemeteries  
Determined not to be fooled.  
I went round and round the same fact,  
I studied everything in minute detail  
Or I tore out my hair in a tantrum.

And in this state I began my classroom career.  
I heaved myself around literary gatherings like a man with a bullet wound.  
Crossing the thresholds of private houses,  
With my sharp tongue I tried to get the spectators to understand me,

They went on reading the paper  
Or disappeared behind a taxi.  
Then where could I go!  
At that hour the shops were shut;  
I thought of a slice of onion I'd seen during dinner  
And of the abyss that separates us from the other abysses.

### **Essay 1**

Nicanor Parra's "Memories of Youth" paints a terrifying picture to describe the complications one faces when imagination gets in the way of real life. Parra, seen as a young, unreliable narrator, uses nightmarish imagery and confusing tone to create a surreal world in which we can understand how the imagination can take over and confuse one's senses, when either surrounded or alone.

Parra's imagery gives the reader a vision of a surreal dream quickly turning into a nightmare when Parra is around others. As the poem begins, not much moves aside from the falling leaves, as Parra, described as almost in a trance, bumping into things. When he describes people as laughing, it seems to come from out of nowhere, and suddenly, "characters stirred in their armchairs like seaweed moved by the waves" (9) and Parra is made to "cry and laugh against [his] will" (12). The reader feels a sense of being suddenly attacked as Parra describes "a feeling of nausea" (13) that appeared too quickly to make logical sense. Already the nightmare has begun, and the reader is not sure if Parra's descriptions are real or described by a mad man. There begins to be "threats, insults, pointless curses ... macabre dances" (15-17). The quick imagery seems rushed and terrifying. We can understand through imagery, Parra's feels pressured by his surroundings due to his impaired mind and inner sickness.

When isolated, there is less imagery described by Parra and the dark, alone tone begins to become the major element. Parra describes his soul as "[drifting] through the streets, calling for help" (22-23), and the reader feels Parra's aching sadness. Even when Parra attempts to surround himself again, people "went on reading" (33) or "disappeared." Parra's last line, "I thought of ... the abyss" (37-38), makes us understand his true isolation. After separating himself from others, his damaged mind is left hopeless and alone.

Nicanor Parra communicates the darkness one faces when their imagination takes hold of their actual reality. Parra makes the reader understand the true terror and, therefore, isolation one can face when their mind is torn between real and imaginary.

### **Essay 2**

In the poem "Memories of Youth" by Nicanor Parra, Parra describes himself as a child who is beginning to grow older is confused on what he should do with his life.

Through the use of imagery, Parra describes a setting in which he provides an image of what seems to be the end of him. Parra wrote, "With my soul on a thread I watched the great leaves fall" (5). This quote describes his life hanging by a thread while the leaves symbolize all the good things in his life which fall out of his grasp. Parra can only watch as everything seems to slip away from him.

When Parra uses a metaphor, he makes the reader perceive him to be useless. Parra demonstrates this by writing, "At every turn I sank deeper into a sort of jelly" (7). Parra describes himself as a jellyfish who, in his perception, is useless and ineffective. Parra also uses a metaphor in

describing that growing up leads to the end of a childhood and foolishness that he carried through him in himself as a child. Parra wrote, "With pencil and paper I went into cemeteries" (24) as if when the childhood is gone, his life is over. When growing up, as Parra describes, he begged for tenderness from others but never received any and felt as though he was worthless as a child. However, when Parra grows older he views his childhood as something sacred to him and that growing up to just die was a waste of his worthless childhood.

An overall tone throughout this poem could be dramatic. An example would be when Parra wrote, "Unable to raise my head for days; for nights," or, "And of the abyss that separates us from the other abysses" (38). Being unable to raise his head for days should be something he should go to the doctor for. However, this was a case of melancholy which means he is able to raise his hand. Parra describes the onion and relating himself to the man and drowning people away, he describes an abyss, such as the ones at the bottom of the ocean, that separate him from other abysses, meaning ones full of people that talk and socialize, unlike Parra who has only an onion to be friends with.

Parra's complex views on how an imaginative outlook complicates life is portrayed in his poem "Memories of Youth." The sophisticated society looks down upon Parra as a child and alienates him from anywhere he attempted to gain attention, love, or affection. By not being able to be the child he wishes to be, Parra's life was misery as a child. He started his "classroom career" (29) with no childhood dreams and built himself towards a life as a grown up thinking of death.

### **Essay 3**

Nicanor Parra's "Memories of Youth" is told from the point of view of a young man attempting to find his place in society. The reader can infer some autobiographical content, given Parra's reference to "classroom career" (29) and the "literary gatherings" (30) he attends; however, even if the correspondence is not precisely one-to-one, the speaker describes similar difficulties in reconciling and imaginatively derived outlook with more prosaic societal norms. In other words, whether the reader sees this as the point of view of the artist, or merely as an alternative way of seeing the world, the poem details the fundamental incommensurability of the poetical imagination with a society that is impatient with difference.

The governing, structural metaphor for the conflict is found in the repetition of different iterations of "moving back and forth" (as this idea is literalized in the first line). Echoes of this idea can be found in the "seaweed moved by the waves" (9) of the people whom the speaker meets; the "dragging me up, dragging me down" (11) of the speaker by unsympathetic bystanders; the "exhausting pelvic motions" (16) that the speaker produces in response to the misunderstandings of others; and his going "round and round the same fact" (26). In each case, the connotation of the phrase or image is the same, namely the sort of disorder and confusion created when faced with two conflicting ideals, two conflicting poles of meaning. That this is true is implied by the notion of back and forth itself, an attempt toward resolution to one state or the other that ultimately fails, at least in the sense that the two alternatives fail to synthesize into a consistent alternative to either extreme.

This difficulty of fully integrating two ideals is a feature of the poem from first stanza to the last. Notice, for instance, how out of control the movement is in the first stanza-- "[bumping] into trees / [bumping] into beggars [...] [forcing his] way through a thicket of chairs and tables" (2-4)-- only to settle into a "sort of jelly" (7). The implication here is twofold: first and most obviously, the speaker is at the mercy of forces beyond his control, and two, rather than finding a balance between the two extremes, the issue is resolved only with paralysis, the speaker never able to reconcile the two. This

**Memories of Youth (1954)**  
**By Nicanor Parra (Chile)**

seeming irresolution is, again, echoed throughout the poem-- from a “[shortness[ of breath” (19); the inability to “raise [his] head for days” (20); to not knowing “where [he] could [...] go” (35). More than indecision, each of these connotes a psychological distress and cessation of forward progress. To put it simply, when ideas are fundamentally opposed, the logic of the poem argues that there may be no easy way of synthesizing the oppositions.

All of this, then, suggests how to read the extended metaphor that structures the poem. If one possesses a way of seeing the world so at variance with the rest of society, the kind of vision where even a “slice of onion” (37) is supercharged with imaginative possibility, then perhaps there can be no way for “spectators to understand” (32), as Parra is describing two ways of seeing the world that are “abysses” (38) apart. The poem, then, suggests that the non-conformist (generally) and the artist (specifically) are alienated from society not only due to a mutual lack of understanding, but also due to the fundamental nature of each group. Thus, no matter how much such an individual seeks to reconcile him or herself to prevailing notions of respectability, in the end, such gestures are essentially futile.