Your notes

GCSE English Literature: revision notes

Kayo Chingonyi: poems from Kumukanda

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Start here: the 15 poems and the exam

- For Cambridge IGCSE Literature in English in 2027, Paper 1 Section A (Poetry), the third option is 15 poems by Kayo Chingonyi from his collection Kumukanda (2017). You answer one question (25 marks) from a choice of two, and the poem is printed on the paper.
- The 15 poems: 'The Colour of James Brown's Scream', 'Broomhall', 'The N Word (I.)', 'Waves', 'A Proud Blemish', 'Andrews Corner', "Round Midnight', 'This poem contains gull song', 'Fisherman's Song', 'Some Bright Elegance', 'Curfew', 'Kumukanda', 'Grief', 'Kung'anda' and 'Baltic Mill'.
- These notes cover the collection and six of the poems in detail. Notes on the other nine poems are coming out soon (see the end of the notes).

The poet and the collection

- Kayo Chingonyi was born in Zambia in 1987 and moved to the UK when he was six. He is a poet who has also worked as a DJ, producer and critic, and music runs through his poems.
- Kumukanda (Chatto & Windus, 2017) was his first full collection. It won the Dylan Thomas Prize in 2018.
- The title is an **initiation** for boys in Zambia: they leave their community for a time and return as men. Chingonyi never went through it, so the book asks what makes a man, and where he belongs.

- Big themes: **identity** between Zambian heritage and British life, race, **masculinity**, music and dance, family, and grief for his mother.

'Kumukanda'

- Three six-line stanzas. In the first, the speaker says that because he hasn't danced among the other initiates, his father's people would think him "unfinished", a child who never crossed the river that boys must cross to "die and come back grown".
- In the second, he says he was raised "in a strange land, by small increments": he grew up through bathing his mother when she was too weak, choosing the clothes for her body after she died, and, at the graveside, a man who was almost a father shaking his hand when they both needed a hug.
- In the third, he imagines an "alternate self" who never left Zambia, and wonders whether they would understand each other at all. The poem shows that grief, not ceremony, made him a man.

'The Colour of James Brown's Scream'

- After a dedication to two people, it speaks to a legendary dance-music DJ ("today you are Larry Levan") and the dancers who still move "to the same sound" without knowing whose grave they dance on.
- On the dance floor, "machismo" is lost to the beat: any tough "road man" becomes a "sweetboy" when the right song plays. The speaker calls on Legba, a West African spirit of crossroads, to teach them to "shape-shift".
- Long free-verse lines that run on like a DJ's mix celebrate black music and dance history, and how music lets men drop the hard face of **masculinity**.

'Some Bright Elegance'

- The speaker has "little patience" for the people who stand around the walls of dance halls looking tough, and tells them to dance "not to be seen but free".
- He remembers the tap dancer Bojangles dancing for money as a six-year-old for a crowd that "wasn't lynching today": a shocking reminder of the racism behind the entertainment. He imagines the 1920s Savoy Ballroom and zoot suits, and tells the reader to dance for every time they've been followed by store detectives.
- It ends with street-corner dancers who "dance for their food" yet move as if it's only them and the drums. Dance is shown as joy, history and resistance at once.

'Fisherman's Song'

- Two eight-line stanzas, each asking a question. First, the "sadness for a fisherman" who pulls in his nets and finds what look like seaweed, "strange, underwater blooms", but are really "clumps of matted human hair" on a sour, acrid sea.
- The poem never says whose hair it is, which makes the image more horrifying: many readers link it to people drowned at sea.

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- Second, the fisherman, who loves a cheerful tune, must still sing lullabies to calm his children's night fears, since only "father's voice" can soothe them. It ends by asking "who will soothe the fisherman", the man everyone relies on.
- Short lines with a steady beat and repeated "-oo" sounds (blue, blooms, view, soup, tune, room, soothe) make it sound like a folk song or lullaby, which clashes with its dark content. It links to the collection's questions about **masculinity**: men are expected to comfort others but have no one to comfort them.

'This poem contains gull song'

- The gull's cry is "not song, as such" but a harsh, guttural sound, a music "we forgot how to understand".
- It is set against ordinary scenes of the modern city, but the speaker links the gull's cry to something ancient: a forgotten language and heritage that still survives, hidden, in us.
- **Free verse** that wanders from image to image like the gulls, with onomatopoeia and alliteration bringing out the sounds.

'Andrews Corner'

- A portrait of one London street corner in three numbered sections (I, II, III) of about eight free-verse lines each. It moves through a day and a night, and across generations of the people who use the corner.
- I: an old man stands still on the corner, angry that the street he fought for sixty years ago has gone: car stereos thump with bass, pubs close overnight, and buildings are rubble within a week.
- II: flowers are left for Tash, a fifteen-year-old killed when her older boyfriend, too drunk to swerve, hit a tree. Teenagers try to look grown up (girls in adult clothes, boys smelling of weed and aftershave), and friends trade insults about each other's mothers.
- III: the morning after. The alleys hold the litter of the night before, there was blood when a van pulled up the week before, joggers pass a dead pigeon, and a night bus takes tired ravers home.
- Sounds, smells and small objects show a place changing, and grief, danger and ordinary life sitting side by side. Like much of Kumukanda, it asks where young people learn to grow up when there is no **initiation** to mark it.
- It first appeared in Chingonyi's 2012 pamphlet Some Bright Elegance; quote from the version printed in your exam.

Coming soon: the other nine poems

- Notes on 'Broomhall', 'The N Word (I.)', 'Waves', 'A Proud Blemish', "Round Midnight', 'Curfew', 'Grief', 'Kung'anda' and 'Baltic Mill' are coming out soon.

Your notes

Key terms

Initiation	A ceremony that marks someone joining a group or becoming an adult.
Identity	Who you are, including where you come from and belong.
Masculinity	Ideas about how men are expected to behave.
Elegy	A poem of mourning; several poems in Kumukanda grieve for the poet's mother.
Free verse	Poetry without regular rhyme or rhythm.
Allusion	A reference to something outside the poem, such as Bojangles or Larry Levan.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What is kumukanda?
2. Where was Kayo Chingonyi born?
3. How old was Chingonyi when he moved to the UK?
4. Which prize did Kumukanda win in 2018?
5. In 'Kumukanda', how does the speaker say he grew into a man?
6. What did the man who was almost a father do at the graveside?
7. Who does the speaker imagine in the last stanza of 'Kumukanda'?
8. Where is 'The Colour of James Brown's Scream' set?

Answers

1. An initiation in Zambia through which boys become men
2. Zambia
3. Six
4. The Dylan Thomas Prize
5. By small increments, such as caring for his dying mother
6. Shook his hand
7. An alternate self who never left Zambia
8. On a dance floor, with a DJ

What to do next

Practise 12 questions on this topic

Try 3 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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