Homecoming

SUMMARY

The present completely ruled over the past, just as the water rises up out of the drainage system and floods the roughly cut paths we once walked along, near the house with the blinds.

It's so bizarre to think about how quickly the past we left behind has changed. We didn't have time to fully preserve things the way they were—the things that are now just memories.

Our now dried-up roots were used to nourish the younger generation of plants, which now float about on the wind. Thick weeds now sprawl over the path we once used to ceremonially take the virgins to the shoreline.

On the outskirts of town, near the old cemetery, there's a house that doesn't cast any shadow, filled with lifeless occupants.

There's nothing else to welcome us upon returning home after our long journey across the world, during which we kept hoping to one day come back.

THEMES

HOME AND NOSTALGIA FOR THE PAST

The speaker of "Homecoming" is someone returning to their homeland after a long time away only to find it irrevocably changed. The new "present" overshadows the speaker's past, leaving the speaker feeling unmoored and deeply disappointed that there's so little left of the "times before" to "greet" him. What's more, the speaker implies that the "present" is shallow and rootless compared to the world the speaker once knew. In this way, the poem speaks to the pull of nostalgia as well as the disillusionment and difficulty of returning to a home that has become unrecognizable.

Though the poem doesn't get into specifics, it's clear that the speaker has been away for a long time and felt homesick: the speaker has "paced the world / And longed for returning." The speaker also says they left before they had "properly arranged" their memories of home, implying that they felt compelled to leave without really being ready for it—perhaps driven by the need to seek new opportunities for themselves or their community.

Worth remembering is that the Gambia was suffering under oppressive British imperialism during Peters's youth. It's worth noting, too, that the poem uses "we" throughout—implying this is a *shared* experience, perhaps with others from the same generation who made the difficult decision to leave home. (Peters himself left Africa to study medicine in the UK, and it's possible he's alluding to that specific experience here.)

In any case, the home the speaker returns to looks and *feels* completely different from the place the speaker left behind. Now, the "present reign[s]," or rules, over everything—an image implying a sharp rupture with and erasure of the past. "Raw paths" have been covered over by "shallow floods," suggesting that no one has properly tended to the speaker's home in their absence. And the "water's edge," to which earlier generations led "virgins" (perhaps as part of a religious ceremony, or perhaps simply a nod to the speaker's lustful youth), is now overgrown with sprawling "weeds."

The poem implies intergenerational tension behind this shift too: the speaker's generation's "roots" have been leeched of all nutrients after "fe[eding] / The wind-swept seedlings of another age." That is, the speaker feels like their own generation was firmly rooted in place (maybe in the sense of upholding certain traditions) yet has been sapped of its strength in the process of trying to provide for the future. Now, that future (those "seedlings") floats aimlessly on the wind, lacking the grounding of the past.

As such, this homecoming isn't a happy one; what made home *home* no longer exists. The speaker's return is thus deeply "strange," and "all that is left to greet" them is a "house without a shadow / Lived in by new skeletons." The house stands as a testament to how the speaker's home has had its soul ripped out, lacking the life-affirming forces of community and tradition (just as a skeleton lacks a beating heart). This image also suggests a certain hopelessness; that this house has no "shadow" might imply that it, and the world it represents, has no real impact on its surroundings.

The poem's composition coincides with Peters's own return to The Gambia after his medical studies in England. He spoke of looking for his "roots," and wrote the poem around the same time The Gambia achieved independence. The poem's soul-searching, then, probably relates to Peters's struggle to understand the context of his *own* homecoming.

Where this theme appears in the poem:

- Lines 1-20

LINE-BY-LINE ANALYSIS

LINES 1-4

The present reigned ...
... with the shutters.

The poem's title helps to set up its context: the speaker has returned home after time away. The poem's opening lines then reveal that this home looks and feels quite different to the speaker.

Now, the "present reign[s] supreme": the speaker personifies the present as a kind of all-powerful ruler lording over the past. This emphasizes that the past is, well, the *past*—gone for good, firmly under the thumb of the present.

The speaker expands on this image with a simile comparing the way the present rules over the past to "the shallow floods over the gutters." Gutters are water drainage systems; the present here is like water overflowing out of those gutters and then spreading "[o]ver the raw paths" the speaker once walked along. In other words, the present is like a layer of water that *covers up* the past.

And notice how the poem's enjambment mirrors that flooding, the text spilling over from one line to the next:

> Like the shallow floods over the gutters
> Over the raw paths where we had been,

The ambiguous phrase "raw paths" might imply that the speaker's home was previously rough or unshapen—or, perhaps, a place of raw *potential*. Now, however, that potential is out of rich, hidden under the water of the present. The use of the word "we" also reveals that the speaker isn't alone in this homecoming: there are others returning with the speaker (perhaps other members of the speaker's generation who left to pursue opportunities elsewhere).

"The house with the shutters," meanwhile, suggests that this is a specific place that the speaker used to see along those paths: it's not just *any* house with shutters, but "the" house. It's unclear if that flooding water also covers up that house or just the path that leads to it. Either way, the poem implies that the speaker can't easily reach it anymore. The mention of shutters might also subtly suggest a kind of closing-off—that this house from the past isn't *open* to the speaker.

This opening stanza establishes the poem's form: it's a quatrain, or four-line stanza, with an alternating ABAB rhyme scheme. That is, lines 1 and 3 rhyme (a slant rhyme, technically: "supreme"/"been") as do lines 2 and 4 ("gutters"/"shutters").

LINES 5-8

> *Too strange the ...*
> *... that we kept.*

In the second stanza, the speaker tries to capture the surreal, alienating feeling of returning home only to find everything changed. This change feels "sudden" to the speaker, suggesting that, though they've been away for some time, it hasn't felt like long enough for such a drastic shift.

The speaker says that "the times we buried when we left" have changed, making this shift all the more personal. Burial connotes death, and perhaps the speaker (and the speaker's generation/whoever else is part of the "we" who left around the same time) is saying that they had to let a part of their own culture—and themselves—die when they left. Alternatively, people may bury things to *preserve* them (like a time capsule). Either way, the speaker seems unable to dig up that once was.

The internal rhyme of "strange" and "change" in line 5 seems to speed up the line and emphasize just how bizarre this very different home feels to the speaker. Also note the enjambment here, which evokes the swiftness and suddenness of the change the speaker describes, denying the reader the chance to pause or catch their breath:

> Too strange the sudden change
> Of the times we buried when we left

The repetition of "The times," meanwhile, adds emphasis to those "times"—that is, to the speaker's own memories and history. These "times" belong to a part of the speaker's life that took place "before we had properly arranged / The memories that we kept." The speaker might be saying that they didn't have a chance to consider and metaphorically catalog their own memories of the past before leaving.

This lack of "proper arrangement" might also suggest that the speaker (and others like the speaker) left out of necessity and, perhaps, in a hurry. It's possible that the speaker left to escape violence or simply to seek out better opportunities. This was in fact the case in the poet's own life: Peters left Africa to study medicine in the UK.

Either way, these lines suggest that the speaker couldn't fully appreciate what *home* meant at the time they left. Perhaps, at that stage in their life, they didn't know what it was about the place that really made it home. Now, in hindsight, those memories seem precious—and starkly different from what's actually in front of the speaker.

LINES 9-12

> *Our sapless roots ...*
> *... the water's edge.*

Throughout the poem, the speaker has used the pronouns "we" and "our" to imply that they're part of a group of people returning to their home after time away. Here, the speaker implies even more specifically that this group refers to the speaker's *generation*, other people around the speaker's age who left home at the same time.

The mention of "roots" reflects the speaker's deep connection to their home. Sap, meanwhile, is essentially a tree's lifeblood, transporting vital nutrients throughout the organism. For the speaker's generation to have "sapless roots," then, suggests that something vital has been lost. Their vitality has been

sucked dry in the process of "feeding" the next generation of "seedlings," or delicate young plants—likely a metaphor for later generations.

These seedlings aren't strong, robust plants full of life and firmly rooted in the earth; they are delicate and "wind-swept." This image suggests that they lack the firm connections to home that characterized the speaker's own generation.

It's possible to interpret the speaker's tone here a few ways:

- Perhaps the speaker feels guilty:
  - In *leaving* their home, the speaker and their contemporaries somehow denied that home its lifeblood (its "sap"); their absence effectively severed the branches (to borrow the tree metaphor) that connect one generation to another through customs, traditions, and beliefs, etc.
  - In other words, they weren't there to preserve and pass along their traditions. As a result, the new generation doesn't have the same rootedness as the old.
- Or, maybe, the speaker feels *resentment*:
  - It's possible that the speaker and their contemporaries left in pursuit of better opportunities with the ultimate goal of coming back and improving life for people at home.
  - The next generation fed itself on the speaker's efforts and yet shows no connection to or respect for the world the speaker *left* in order to *save*.

In either case, it's clear that these new seedlings are vulnerable and belong to another era—they're not borne of the same time and spirit as the speaker. And note how the sibilance evokes the sound rushing air as those seedlings float about: "sapless roots [...] wind-swept seedlings."

The next two lines follow the same thread: the speaker observes how "[l]uxuriant weeds" have grown over the place where "we" used to lead "Virgins to the water's edge."

- The mention of "Virgins" and water might suggest some sort of religious ritual or custom.
- Alternatively, it might simply nod to the speaker's memories of youthful romance.
- Either way, that the path to the water has been taken over by "weeds" represents the fact that such things are no longer accessible to the speaker.

Weeds, of course, also have negative connotations: they're undesirable plants that grow wildly and choke out other vegetation. Weeds are thus a symbol of neglect and abandonment. A path overgrown with weeds is a path that no one has tended to the past in the speaker's absence.

LINES 13-16

There at the ...
... by new skeletons.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker surveys more of the land they once called home, now focusing on "the edge of town." Near "the burial ground" is a house that casts no shadow and is "[l]ived in by new skeletons."

This is a surreal image that connotes a sense of deep sadness, alienation, and loss. This is also the second reference to burying/burial in the poem (the first being the reference to the "times" that the speaker "buried"). The mention of a burial ground reminds readers of the land's deep history and the speaker's connection to the past: many people have lived and died there. At the same time, this burial ground might suggest the death of the past itself: perhaps in the "burial ground" lie the bodies of those who upheld now-lost culture and traditions.

Looming over the burial ground is a house that casts no "shadow." There's something unsettling about this lack of a shadow that suggests the house is a kind of alien, unnatural presence. Not casting a shadow might also symbolize how little impact this house has on its surroundings. This might speak to the idea that the past has no effect on the present, or that the present lacks the heft and power of the past.

The house isn't lived in by people exactly, but by "new skeletons." In other words, the house, and perhaps the land more generally, is possessed by something/someone undead. It has lost its vital, life-affirming spirit. In other words, the speaker no longer recognizes the people that live in this homeland.

LINES 17-20

That is all ...
... longed for returning.

In the final stanza, the speaker sums up their sense of disillusionment and disappointment upon returning home. "All that is left" is the ghostly decay of a lost world—overgrown weeds, overflowing gutters, and a house occupied by skeletons.

These are the thing that "greet" the speaker and their companions when they get back. Greetings are meant to be celebratory and warm, yet this is anything but. Even the word "home-coming" suggests something ceremonial and significant, rather than this level of disappointment.

The lines "have paced the world / And longed for returning" might speak to how Peters and others of his generation traveled abroad for their education and work. In any case, there has been a restlessness about the speaker's way of life: *pacing* the world suggests that the speaker has been filled with anxiety or nervousness, ill-at-ease while away from home. The enjambment throughout this stanza captures this restlessness,

as though the poem itself can't settle down.

The speaker and the others like the speaker have "longed" to be home, but for one reason or another couldn't go back until now. This makes the speaker's "home-coming" all the more disappointing and painful. The poem thus ends on a downbeat note, capturing both a sense of guilt and a more general nostalgia for a past that, in all likelihood, is never coming back.

SYMBOLS

THE LUXURIANT WEEDS

In lines 11 and 12, the speaker describes leading "[t]he Virgins to the water's edge" along a path that's now covered in "luxuriant weeds." This sounds like some sort of religious or cultural ritual, but it also might just be the speaker's way of talking about youthful romantic dalliances.

Either way, weeds are typically an unwelcome presence and suggest neglect and abandonment. That these weeds are growing thickly, sprawling out "luxuriantly" along the path to the water, thus symbolizes the neglect and abandonment of the speaker's past—of the world as it was before the speaker left, with all its traditions, beliefs, and so forth. The word "luxuriant" also suggests comfort, perhaps hinting that the modern world has overtaken older customs, traditions, and ways of life.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 11-12:** "Luxuriant weeds have grown where we led / The Virgins to the water's edge."

ROOTS AND SEEDLINGS

In lines 9 and 10, the speaker says:

> Our sapless roots have fed
> The wind-swept seedlings of another age.

These lines can be read as both metaphorical and symbolic. Readers can think of the roots as representing the speaker's generation/the past and the seedlings as representing the younger generation/the future. Together, these images represent the *relationship* between the speaker's generation and those who followed—between the past and the present/future. In doing so, these images symbolize the loss of tradition, culture, and connection over time.

Think about the deeper implications of these images: to be rooted in a place is to have a deep, solid connection to it. The image thus represents the firm, sturdy ties that the speaker's generation feels towards their homeland. But to be "sapless" is to be devoid of nourishment. These roots have been sucked dry of their lifeforce, implicitly because they've given their all to feed "another age." And yet, to be a "seedling" floating along on the wind implies fragility, naivety, and a total *lack* of connection to one's homeland. Ironically, then, the poem implies the speaker's generation sacrificed to feed a future that fails to reflect the ideals/beliefs/customs of the past—and is all the more vulnerable for it.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 9-10:** "Our sapless roots have fed / The wind-swept seedlings of another age."

THE SKELETONS AND THE HOUSE

In lines 15 and 16, the speaker describes an eerie, shadowless house occupied not by people but by "new skeletons." It's unclear whether these skeletons are meant to represent the death of the speaker's past or the soullessness of the present. Either way, the image represents the speaker's loss of home.

Symbolically speaking, houses usually connote safety, warmth, familiarity, and comfort. Here, though, the house is almost like a phantom or ghost filled with the newly dead. In this way, it symbolizes just how *alienated* the speaker feels from home; despite physically being back, this place doesn't feel like home anymore.

Where this symbol appears in the poem:

- **Lines 15-16:** "the house without a shadow / Lived in by new skeletons."

POETIC DEVICES

ALLITERATION

The poem uses alliteration here and there to add emphasis and music, and also to link certain words and ideas. In line 5, for example, note the sibilant alliteration of "strange" and "sudden." Part of what makes all this change so unnerving to the speaker, the shared sounds suggest, is that it happened so *quickly*. It didn't take long for the speaker's own home to become something utterly foreign.

That /s/ sound appears in the next stanza as well, with the alliteration of "sapless" and "seedlings." The sonic link between these words links the *depletion* of the speaker's generation (those "sapless roots") with the *growth* of the younger generation (represented here by those "seedlings"). That is, alliteration reflects the idea that the speaker's own roots grew dry in order to fuel the future.

This passage is full of more general sibilance as well, which combines with whooshing /w/ alliteration to evoke the very

"wind" on which those rootless little plants are swept along:

> Our sapless roots have fed
> The wind-swept seedlings of another age.

Where Alliteration appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "strange," "sudden"
- **Line 9:** "sapless"
- **Line 10:** "wind-swept seedlings"
- **Line 11:** "weeds," "where we"

ASSONANCE

There's not much assonance in the poem, and much of what does it appear is tied to the poem's broader rhyme scheme. That said, there are a few internal moments of assonance that lend certain images more intensity and link certain words/concepts together.

In line 5, for example, assonance/internal rhyme links the "change" in the speaker's home to the fact that it now feels so "strange" to be there. Later, the short, clipped /eh/ sounds of "memories that we kept" seem to add some speed and rhythm to the speaker's thoughts of the past. And in the fourth stanza, the repeated /ow/ sound builds up the passage's intensity:

> There at the edge of the town
> Just by the burial ground
> Stands the house without

The intense repetition of this sound might evoke the speaker's sorrow or disbelief at seeing the world they once knew so changed.

Where Assonance appears in the poem:

- **Line 5:** "strange," "change"
- **Line 7:** "arranged"
- **Line 8:** "memories," "kept"
- **Line 11:** "led"
- **Line 12:** "edge"
- **Line 13:** "town"
- **Line 14:** "ground"
- **Line 15:** "house without"

ENJAMBMENT

The poem uses enjambment in almost every line. As a result, the poem flows swiftly down the page in a way that evokes the rapid pace of change as well as the speaker's disorientation upon returning to a home that they don't recognize.

In the opening stanza, note how enjambment seems to mirror the way that the "water" of the present metaphorically "floods" the past:

> The present reigned supreme
> Like the shallow floods over the gutters
> Over the raw paths where we had been,

The lines rush across the line breaks in a way that evokes the rush of water out of those "gutters" and across the "raw paths" of the speaker's past.

In lines 5-6, note how enjambment again seems to mirror what's being described:

> Too strange the sudden change
> Of the times we buried when we left

There's no pause between these lines, which evokes just how "sudden" all this change feels to the speaker.

Enjambment also gives the poem a restless, fragmented feel in general. In the last stanza, for example, the jagged line breaks seem to convey the speaker's confusion and struggle to reckon with the reality before them:

> That is all that is left
> To greet us on the home-coming
> After we have paced the world
> And longed for returning.

Where Enjambment appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-2:** "supreme / Like"
- **Lines 2-3:** "gutters / Over"
- **Lines 5-6:** "change / Of"
- **Lines 7-8:** "arranged / The"
- **Lines 9-10:** "fed / The"
- **Lines 11-12:** "led / The"
- **Lines 13-14:** "town / Just"
- **Lines 14-15:** "ground / Stands"
- **Lines 15-16:** "shadow / Lived"
- **Lines 17-18:** "left / To"
- **Lines 18-19:** "home-coming / After"
- **Lines 19-20:** "world / And"

METAPHOR

"Homecoming" is short on concrete detail, instead relying mainly on figurative language to capture the speaker's disappointment and disorientation upon returning home.

The poem's very first line is a metaphor, in fact, and more specifically an example of personification: the speaker treats the "present" like a mighty ruler over the past.

Later, in line 6, the speaker mentions "the times we buried"—a metaphor that's open to multiple interpretations:

- On the one hand, these buried times might refer to

memories that the speaker had to part with or let die before leaving home. The past, then, is dead and gone.
- At the same time, people may bury something to keep it safe (like a time capsule). The speaker may have metaphorically buried their past in the hopes of keeping it safe until their return.
- In either reading, the speaker had to let go of something important in leaving.

One of the most striking and difficult metaphors appears in lines 9 and 10:

> Our sapless roots have fed
> The wind-swept seedlings of another age.

These lines likely refer to tension between the speaker and younger generations:

- Those "sapless roots" belong to those who left when the speaker did—perhaps to pursue better *themselves* in the hopes of ultimately creating a better *future* for those back at home:
    - Such people are "rooted" in their homeland in the sense that they're deeply connected to their home and past. At the same time, their roots are drained of "sap"—of their nourishing life force. They gave this sap up to feed the "wind-swept seedlings of another age"—that is, the younger generation.
- Yet the fact these seedlings—who represent a new era—are "wind-swept" suggests they are lost and caught in forces more powerful than them (like an uprooted plant on the wind).
    - Perhaps this is because the speaker's generation wasn't around to carry on certain ways of life. The phrase might also suggest that the younger generation lacks grounding respect for or appreciation of the ideas/traditions/beliefs of the past.

In the poem's most unsettling moment, lines 15 and 16 describe a "house without a shadow / Lived in by new skeletons." These skeletons, of course, are probably living people—but, to the speaker, they might represent the loss (or death) of the old way of life.

Where Metaphor appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The present reigned supreme"
- **Line 6:** "the times we buried"
- **Lines 9-10:** "Our sapless roots have fed / The wind-swept seedlings of another age."
- **Lines 15-16:** "the house without a shadow / Lived in by new skeletons"
- **Line 19:** "paced the world"

PERSONIFICATION

"Homecoming" uses personification in the very first line, when the speaker says:

> The present reigned supreme

This line depicts the present as ruling like a monarch over the speaker's home. This personification suggests that the speaker feels affronted, even attacked, by the world that they return to—like it's been taken over by an all-powerful ruler who's suppressing the past.

In practical terms, this likely means that the ideas, customs, attitudes, and so forth that the speaker grew up with have been usurped, overtaken by new ideas, new customs, and new attitudes—ones that the speaker doesn't seem particularly ready to embrace.

Where Personification appears in the poem:

- **Line 1:** "The present reigned supreme"

SIMILE

"Homecoming" uses one simile, which is itself folded together with the metaphor/personification of the first line:

> The present reigned supreme
> Like the shallow floods over the gutters
> Over the raw paths where we had been,

These lines evoke the sheer *extent* of the change that has taken place in the speaker's home. The present, as opposed to the more familiar past, now rules over the land, which the speaker views as a kind of destructive shift. The *way* that the present dominates the speaker's home is like a flood that's washed away older traditions and beliefs. What's more, this flood is "shallow," perhaps indicating that a culturally rich—and ancient—way of life has been erased by something with less depth and meaning.

Also note how this figurative flood spreads over the "raw paths" upon which the speaker used to walk. This suggests that new ways of life have actively cut the speaker off from the old.

Where Simile appears in the poem:

- **Lines 1-3:** "The present reigned supreme / Like the shallow floods over the gutters / Over the raw paths

where we had been,"

VOCABULARY

Reigned Supreme (Line 1) - Ruled all-powerfully.

Gutters (Line 2) - A channel system constructed to direct water flow (e.g., away from a house).

Sapless roots (Lines 9-10, Line 9) - Roots of a tree or plant lacking in sap, a nutrient-containing liquid that circulates through a plant's veins.

Seedlings (Lines 9-10, Line 10) - Young plants.

Luxuriant (Line 11) - Lush and abundant.

FORM, METER, & RHYME

FORM

"Homecoming" is made of five quatrains (four-line stanzas), for a total of 20 lines. Each stanza is self-contained; while there's plenty of enjambment *within* stanzas, it never appears *between* them. Each stanza also explores a different aspect of this vastly changed home.

On the one hand, the poem feels steady and controlled even as the speaker is clearly disoriented and disillusioned. But this form also makes the poem feel like a series of fragmented *episodes* that might evoke the speaker's feelings of confusion and alienation.

METER

The poem doesn't use a regular, steady meter. Instead, its language feels natural and flows freely. This, in turn, adds to the poem's thoughtful, nostalgic tone: readers might get the sense that they're hearing the speaker's inner thoughts as they come.

RHYME SCHEME

While "Homecoming" doesn't have a regular meter, it does use quite a bit of rhyme. The first three stanzas set up a regular alternating rhyme scheme:

ABAB CDCD EFEF

In other words, in each stanza lines 1 and 2 rhyme with each other, as do lines 2 and 4. Some of these are half or slant rhymes ("supreme"/"been"; "age"/"edge") but there's still clearly a pattern happening.

Yet once the reader hits stanza 4 ("There at the edge of the town"), that pattern disappears! There's still rhyme, but it no longer falls in predictable places. Take lines 13-16:

There at the edge of the town
Just by the burial ground
Stands the house without a shadow
Lived in by new skeletons.

"Town" and "ground" basically rhyme, creating a couplet; the next two lines don't rhyme at all. And in stanza 5, there's an echo between "home-coming" and "returning" but not "left" and "world."

This seeming randomness actually reflects the poem's whole point: readers get used to one pattern only to have pulled out from under them. This "sudden change" echoes that which happens in the speaker's homeland.

SPEAKER

Lenrie Peters left Africa to study medicine in the UK and returned around the time that this poem was written. As such, it's possible to read the speaker as being a representation of the poet himself. This adds richness to the poem (and might help clarify some details), but that's not the only reading!

What readers know for sure is that the speaker sees themself as part of group: the "we" of the poem. Most likely, this places the speaker as part of a generation of people who went through a similar experience: leaving "home" and returning to find it changed beyond recognition.

The speaker also doesn't like the change that has taken place and mourns the loss of the past they once knew. The speaker might feel responsible for this change or resentful of it (or both): the "sapless roots" of the speaker's generation, as the third stanza points out, have nourished the "wind-swept seedlings of another age" (a kind of lost generation out of touch with its past).

SETTING

The poem takes place in the speaker's homeland after the speaker has been away for some time. This place is a far cry from the world the speaker left behind, and the speaker bristles at the loss of the "times before."

In fact, this home now seems filled with a sense of decay and neglect. The only signs of life are "luxuriant weeds" and a house occupied by "new skeletons." The paths the speaker walked have been covered up, and the speaker feels like there's nothing comforting and familiar there to "greet" them upon their "home-coming."

Though the poem doesn't mention any specifics, it could be based on Peters's return to the Gambia after studying and working in England. The poem also implies that the world of the speaker's past was more tied to custom and tradition than the world the speaker returns to (as with its mention of leading

"Virgins to the water's edge"—perhaps a reference to a ritual of sorts, though also perhaps simply a reference to youthful indiscretions.)

In any case, part of the poem's power comes from keeping things non-specific location. There are gutters, paths, houses with shutters, a burial ground—but that doesn't really tie the poem down to one particular place. Many readers around the world might find common ground with the way the speaker's home has changed beyond recognition.

CONTEXT

LITERARY CONTEXT

The influential African Poet Lenrie Peters was born in 1932 in what is now Banjul, The Gambia. Peters studied science for two years in Sierra Leone before traveling to England to study at Cambridge University. Peters later trained as a surgeon and also worked for the BBC before returning to The Gambia in 1969.

These experiences undoubtedly informed the speaker's perspective in "Homecoming." In fact, they inform much of Peters's work. In 1965 Peters published writing his semi-autobiographical novel *The Second Round*, which features a doctor returning to his native Sierra Leone after studying in England. The protagonist of Lenrie's novel, like the speaker of "Homecoming," feels estranged from and disenchanted by his homeland, which he believes has abandoned its traditional values.

"Homecoming" itself was published in Peters's second collection, *Satellites*, in 1967. Many of the poems in this collection similarly explore themes related to personal history, tradition, modernity, and African identity. Readers might want to check out "Wings my ancestors used," "We have come home," and "The rhythms of the past" for comparison.

Peters went on to become a highly influential West African poet and to play a pivotal role in Gambian political and intellectual life. He died in 2009 in Dakar, Senegal.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Because of its strategic location on Africa's western coast, The Gambia was deeply affected by the trans-Atlantic slave trade; an estimated three million people were enslaved over 300 years. Britain and France also fought for control over the region, establishing the country's present borders after a conference in 1889. From this year until 1965, Britain indirectly ruled "British Gambia" as a colony and protectorate. The country's interior was also divided into 35 different chiefdoms, reflecting its tribal past.

Peters has spoken of feeling disconnected from that specific history: "I don't belong to a tribe, you see. My family has been detribalized for nearly four generations." And when "Homecoming" was written, The Gambia was undergoing major political and cultural changes: the country achieved independence within the British Commonwealth in 1965 and full independence as a republic in 1970. The vastly shifting landscaping depicted in "Homecoming" likely reflects such major political and cultural changes happening in Peters's home country.

Though Peters played a central role in Gambian intellectual life—serving, for example, as the president of the board of directors of the National Library—he was not strictly a nationalist. Peters was a Pan-Africanist (loosely speaking, this is the idea that Africans of different countries need to unite in order to overcome the disadvantages caused by the legacy of colonialism). He viewed decolonization, and the future development of African nations, as an Africa-wide project.

MORE RESOURCES

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

- A Tribute to Peters — A speech written on the occasion of Peters's death in 2009 by Tijjan Salah (http://wow.gm/africa/gambia/banjul/post/to-my-late-friend-dr-lenrie-peters-the-gambian-vessel-emptied-of-its-poetry)
- An Interview with Lenrie Peters — Listen to Peters in discussion with The Gambia National Library. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezPY02fb-5M)
- Peters's Life Story — Check out a more in-depth look at Peters's life. (https://www.encyclopedia.com/education/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/peters-lenrie-1932)
- History of The Gambia — Learn more about Peters's home country. (https://www.britannica.com/place/The-Gambia/History)

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Howard, James. "*Homecoming.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Nov 2021. Web. 29 Nov 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Howard, James. "*Homecoming.*" LitCharts LLC, November 12, 2021. Retrieved November 29, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/poetry/lenrie-peters/homecoming.