

AQA English GCSE

Poetry: Worlds and Lives

On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955

– *James Berry*

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ON AN AFTERNOON TRAIN FROM PURLEY TO VICTORIA, 1955

James Berry

Brief Summary

James Berry's poem depicts a brief encounter between a Jamaican **migrant** and an English woman on a train in 1955. The two exchange polite conversation, which begins with small talk about the weather and a discussion of a spontaneously recited poem about racial brotherhood. The interaction highlights **cultural misunderstandings**, differences in background, and unintentional **prejudice**. Through reflections on city streets and memories of his father's banana field, the narrator considers the contrast between his Jamaican **heritage** and life in England, ultimately illustrating both polite **civility** and subtle **disconnection** in everyday interactions.



Synopsis

- The poem opens with a polite exchange between the speaker and a **Quaker** woman, beginning with small talk about the weather.
- The woman mentions that she recently recited a poem about racial brotherhood at a Quaker meeting.
- When the speaker asks which poem it was, she answers vaguely, prompting his quiet reflection rather than open disagreement.
- As she speaks, the speaker imagines **contrasting** scenes: an empty early-morning city street and his father's banana field in Jamaica.
- The woman asks where the speaker is from, and he replies that he is Jamaican.
- She mistakenly asks which part of Africa Jamaica is in, revealing her misunderstanding.
- The speaker responds **ironically** by asking whether Ireland is part of Lapland.
- The woman then wonders why he would leave such a sunny country, and he answers briefly and practically, without challenging her assumptions.
- The poem ends with the speaker noting the woman's sincerity and the ordinary social moment as others sit down around them.

Context

James Berry and the Windrush Generation

James Berry (1924–2017) was born in Jamaica and moved to England in 1948 as part of the **Windrush Generation**, which saw Caribbean **migrants** settle in Britain to help rebuild the post-war workforce. Many like Berry experienced **cultural displacement**, **prejudice**, and the challenge of navigating a new society while maintaining connections to their Caribbean roots. In the poem, his reflections on city



streets versus his father's banana field highlight this **contrast** between homeland and new life, showing the **dual perspective** of someone adapting to England while remembering Jamaica.

Social and Cultural Context of 1950s England

The 1950s in Britain were marked by **post-war reconstruction**, rationing, and increasing migration from the Caribbean. **Migrants** often encountered **ignorance** or **discrimination**, alongside genuine curiosity and civility from locals. Berry's poem reflects these everyday interactions, showing how cultural misunderstandings could occur even in polite, well-intentioned exchanges.



Literary Influences

Berry's poetry combines personal narrative with **observational realism**. He often uses **free verse** and **anecdotal** form to present authentic dialogue and reflection. His work is influenced by **oral storytelling** traditions from the Caribbean, alongside contemporary British social realism, allowing him to convey ordinary interactions while highlighting broader social issues.

The title "On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955"

The title situates the poem in a specific place (a train from Purley to Victoria) and time (1955), grounding the narrative in post-war London.

On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955

It immediately suggests movement, transition, and the intersection of different lives.

The specificity of the train journey signals an everyday, ordinary event, which becomes the lens for examining cultural differences and social observation.

Perspective and Tone

The poem is written in **first-person**, allowing the narrator to recount the encounter directly and convey personal thoughts and reflections. This perspective creates **intimacy**, as readers see both the polite exterior and the narrator's internal responses, including irony and subtle frustration. The **tone** is calm, observational, and slightly **ironic**, reflecting the polite **vener** of social interaction while also hinting at cultural misunderstandings. At times, the **tone shifts** to reflective, particularly when the narrator recalls his father's banana field, introducing **nostalgia** and contrast between past and present, home and displacement.



On an Afternoon Train from Purley to Victoria, 1955

Repetition of **“Nice day”** highlights polite small talk and ritualised English conversation.

The contrast between **“silence”** and **“loudly”** highlights her desire to be seen as virtuous. **“Racial brotherhood”** suggests she believes in equality, but this is later undermined by her ignorance.

The speaker pauses before responding, showing he is reflective and possibly sceptical about her claim. Repetition of ‘thoughtful’ conveys internal reflection and the speaker’s measured responses.

The contrasting images show his divided identity: life in England versus his Jamaican upbringing.

The speaker responds with irony, using humour to point out the mistake without open confrontation.

The woman simplifies migration to climate, showing a lack of understanding of economic or social realities.

The conversation ends as other passengers sit down, highlighting how the exchange was superficial and reinforcing the lack of real understanding.

Hello, she said, and startled me.

Nice day. Nice day I agreed.

I am a Quaker she said and Sunday

I was moved in silence

to speak a poem loudly

for racial brotherhood.

I was thoughtful, then said

what poem came on like that?

One the moment inspired she said.

I was again thoughtful.

Inexplicably I saw

empty city streets lit dimly

in a day’s first hours.

Alongside in darkness

was my father’s big banana field.

Where are you from? she said.

Jamaica I said.

What part of Africa is Jamaica? she said.

Where Ireland is near Lapland I said.

Hard to see why you leave

such sunny country she said.

Snow falls elsewhere I said.

So sincere she was beautiful
as people sat down around us.

Caesura in the first line mirrors the pause and startle of the narrator.

The woman introduces her religion, suggesting she sees herself as morally good. This also shows she is eager to present her values early in the conversation.

Free verse allows natural speech; enjambment reflects flowing thought.

Her vague reply ‘on the moment inspired’ suggests she cannot fully explain or justify her actions, making her sincerity questionable.

The speaker shifts inward, suggesting the conversation triggers personal reflection rather than connection. Reflective tone shows narrator’s nostalgia and sense of otherness.

This question exposes the woman’s ignorance and reinforces how the speaker is reduced to assumptions based on race.

The speaker’s short, factual reply shows the speaker’s restrained frustration and emotional control.

The woman feels morally satisfied and pleased with herself (“sincere”), believing she has behaved kindly, even though she has misunderstood the speaker and learned nothing new.



Structure

Form

- The poem is written in **free verse**, mirroring the natural rhythm of everyday conversation and internal thought.
- This conversational form reflects the casual setting of a train journey while allowing Berry to explore deeper ideas beneath polite small talk.
- **Enjambment** is frequently used to reflect flowing speech and wandering thought. This creates a sense of uninterrupted movement, much like a train journey itself.

Stanzas

- The poem is divided into **short, uneven stanzas**, which reflect shifts between dialogue, reflection, and memory.
- As the conversation develops, the **stanzas** lengthen slightly, mirroring how the exchange becomes more involved while still remaining **superficial**.

Short sentences and caesura

- Berry uses short sentences and **caesura** to show pauses, hesitation, and thoughtfulness: **“I was thoughtful.”** These pauses suggest the narrator is carefully choosing his words and internally processing the woman’s comments rather than reacting openly.

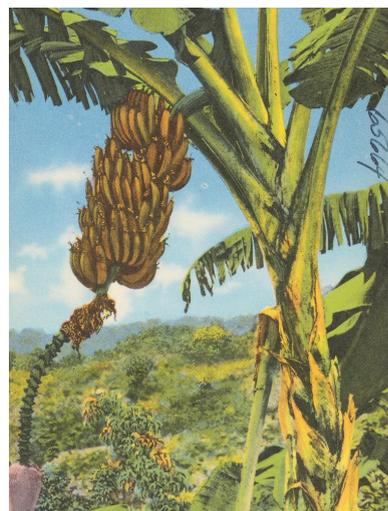
Language and Imagery

Dialogue and speech

Berry uses plain, realistic **dialogue** to reflect everyday English politeness. The simplicity of the speech makes the misunderstandings feel ordinary and widespread, reinforcing the idea that such interactions are common rather than exceptional.

Contrast and juxtaposition

The narrator imagines **“empty city streets”** alongside **“my father’s big banana field”**, sharply contrasting urban England with rural Jamaica. This **juxtaposition** reflects **cultural displacement** and shows how the narrator inhabits two worlds simultaneously.



Memory and reflection

The image of the banana field evokes personal memory, heritage, and emotional attachment. This inward reflection contrasts with the woman’s shallow curiosity, highlighting the depth of the narrator’s identity compared to her assumptions.



Themes

Migration and displacement

Berry presents the migrant experience as one of constant explanation and adjustment. The narrator's reflections and memories suggest an emotional distance from England, even while he participates politely in its **social customs**.

Cultural misunderstanding

The woman's question – "**What part of Africa is Jamaica?**" – reveals **ignorance** masked as curiosity. Her assumptions reduce the narrator's identity, while his **ironic** replies highlight the imbalance of knowledge and power in the conversation.

Politeness and social concention

Polite small talk ("**Nice day**") frames the poem, showing how social rituals can hide **tension** rather than resolve it. The conversation remains pleasant on the surface but fails to achieve genuine connection.

Identity and restraint

The narrator withholds emotional reaction, choosing irony and silence over anger. This **restraint** suggests experience: he has encountered similar misunderstandings before and knows open correction would be **futile**.

Comparisons

Name Journeys – Raman Mundair

<p>Similarities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore how identity is negotiated through everyday language in England. In Berry's poem, the narrator's identity is questioned through apparently polite curiosity – "What part of Africa is Jamaica?" – while Mundair shows how identity is shaped and distorted through mispronunciation, describing her name as a "stumble that filled English mouths." Both poets present disconnection caused by cultural misunderstanding rather than overt hostility. Berry depicts a courteous but misguided conversation on a train, while Mundair's speaker reflects on how language repeatedly marks her as an outsider. In both cases, the speakers are required to adapt themselves to fit dominant cultural expectations. Both poems link external encounters to internal reflection. Berry's narrator silently visualises "my father's big banana field" alongside London streets, while Mundair reflects inwardly on memory, heritage, and belonging, showing how brief social interactions can trigger deeper reflection about identity.
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Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Berry presents misunderstanding through restrained dialogue and irony, allowing tension to remain understated. His speaker responds with controlled wit – “<i>Where Ireland is near Lapland</i>” – exposing ignorance without open confrontation. Mundair, by contrast, uses an assertive, expressive monologue to directly challenge cultural erasure and reclaim identity. Berry’s tone is quietly resigned, suggesting the speaker has experienced such encounters many times before. Mundair’s tone is more defiant and emotionally charged, as her poem actively resists misrepresentation rather than tolerating it.
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Homing– Liz Berry

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Both poems explore belonging and identity through language and place. In James Berry’s poem, the narrator navigates English politeness while privately holding onto memories of Jamaica. In <i>Homing</i>, Liz Berry explores how accent and voice are suppressed and later reclaimed, linking speech to belonging. Both poems use contrasting imagery to represent divided identity. James Berry juxtaposes London streets with a banana field, while Liz Berry contrasts constrained elocution lessons with the warmth and texture of home language. Both poets suggest that adapting to a new environment often requires silencing or reshaping parts of the self. Berry’s narrator moderates his responses and emotions; Liz Berry’s speaker hides their accent “<i>in a box beneath the bed.</i>”
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> James Berry presents adaptation as quiet endurance, with the speaker choosing restraint over confrontation. Liz Berry’s poem, however, moves towards reclamation and emotional release, encouraging the return of suppressed identity. Berry’s ending is unresolved and socially closed, as the conversation simply dissolves. <i>Homing</i> ends with a sense of renewal and belonging, offering hope where Berry leaves ambiguity and emotional distance.



Thirteen– Caleb Femi

Similarities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both poems examine everyday experiences of racialised scrutiny in public spaces. Berry’s narrator is questioned about his origins on a train, while Femi’s speaker is stopped by police because he “<i>fits the description.</i>” In both poems, identity is imposed rather than chosen. • Both poets highlight how polite or procedural language can mask discrimination. In Berry’s poem, the woman’s friendly tone and religious language of “<i>racial brotherhood</i>” conceal her ignorance, while in Thirteen, official police language disguises threat and suspicion. • Both poems show speakers who attempt to maintain composure during uncomfortable encounters. Berry’s narrator replies calmly and ironically, while Femi’s young speaker tries to remain compliant, showing how restraint becomes a survival strategy.
Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Berry presents the perspective of an adult migrant who is emotionally controlled and reflective, whereas Femi focuses on a child’s vulnerability, creating a more urgent and unsettling tone. Berry’s poem feels resigned; Femi’s feels tense and frightening. • Berry’s discrimination is subtle and conversational, ending without resolution as “<i>people sat down around us.</i>” In contrast, Femi’s poem escalates emotionally, ending with imagery of collapse and loss of innocence, offering a far bleaker conclusion.

