

"The Lost Word"

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"The Lost Word"

**B.A(Prog.) Ind Year
"The Lost World"**

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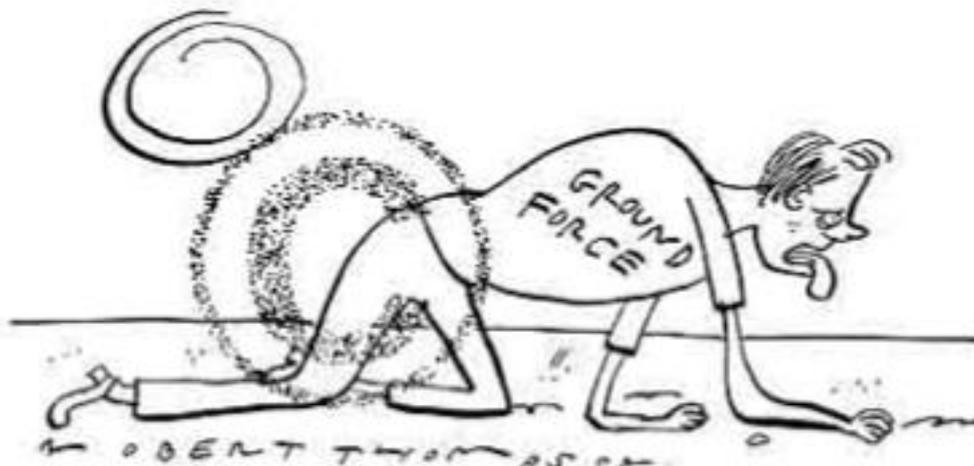
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Listening to the Poem "The Lost Word"

Let's start by first listening to the poem with absolute concentration on each word and see what it *does* to us. Be alert to what it does to us and then to what it *says* to us.

Here's the poem, let's listen to every word attentively:



What does the poem do to us? Makes us curious, a little disturbed, confused...a bit desperate too. What does the poet want to say?
The Poet?



The Poet , Esther Morgan



Esther Morgen is the poet of this poem. A woman poet writing about "her" "lost word". The question is : Is the poem talking about some word that is her own personal word? Or some woman's word? Or about all women? All humanity?

There is indeed a woman in the poem. And that she is searching is clear too! The poet may have written a diary if it were her own personal word. So perhaps it is the woman in the poem she is talking about...You and I may identify with her...It's the woman's poem! But yours and mine too! As well as the poet's...

To start with it is a "word" she has lost. Gradually the word evolves into a concept.

The poem demands another reading. This time, let's read the poem ourselves. Quietly, listening to it inwardly. Relating to it. Thinking...feeling...experiencing it. Going deeper into it...Words begin to throb and become action ...feeling...and yes, thought too... The poem grows in meaning and richness as you begin to participate in its world...

The Text of the Poem

AN EXERCISE IN A SILENT READING OF THE POEM

Here's the poem:

The Lost Word*
By
Esther Morgan

She's lost a word

and searches for it everywhere
behind the sofa, at the back
of dusty cupboards and drawers.
She picks through the rubbish sacks.
Under the carpet she finds lots of others
she'd forgotten she'd swept under there
but not the one she's looking for.
The trouble is it's small – only two letters
Though no less valuable for that.
She stands racking her brains
for the last time she used it
but all that comes to mind
are failed attempts
when her mouth was full
of someone else's tongue.

*From *New Writing*, ed. Penelope Lively and George Szirtes, Picador India, New Delhi, 2001

Questions and Explanatory Directions



Lost in memory?

There must be a number of questions arising in your mind while reading this poem!

First and Foremost:

Can one "lose" a word?

Does this have anything to do with memory? Why is the poet looking for the 'word' "behind the sofa, at the back/of dusty cupboards and drawers" etc. ? Is the lost word something concrete? Or is it an idea or a concept?

The poet makes us go through all the actions that we may go through in desperation to locate something. The setting of the poem is the home, obviously. When I lose a key or my identity card, don't I go through these motions suggested by the poem:

She picks through the rubbish sacks.

Under the carpet she finds lots of others

she'd forgotten she'd swept under there

but not the one she's looking for

Is it true that when we are looking for something, we often find everything except what we are looking for?

Desperation, Restlessness, Anxiety build up in the lines in the middle of the poem:

The trouble is it's small – only two letters

Though no less valuable for that.

Do you think there is drama in this poem? See, the way there is action and plot and a climax too in the poem. The climax in the poem is the declaration that it is a two letter word that the poet is looking for! Something that is very precious to her...

She stands racking her brains

for the last time she used it

It's been long since she used this word...It's so long that she cannot recall it...But she knows she has lost it . She looks for it because she wants it desperately. She misses it. It has to come back to her. She is incomplete without it!

but all that comes to mind

are failed attempts

She has tried several times and failed. That is all that she can remember, her failure! But she does try to find it. She has had no opportunity to use it for a long time. There is another reason...

when her mouth was full

of someone else's tongue

How could she use it when her mouth was constantly full of "someone else's tongue"! Has there been a loss of her own language, the language of her own gender, her caste, her race, her motherland? The loss of her identity?

The poem becomes something of a riddle the answer to which lies within the poem, playing hide and seek with us, perhaps also with the poet herself! Because the poet is, after all, writing a poem, not a riddle to puzzle us. The poet is at a loss for words and is seeking a sharing of a condition, an experience. The poem appears to be an exploration of some loss or a search for something lost! The loss of a mere word? The poem draws the reader deeper into its folds...

Another poem by Esther Morgan

ANOTHER POEM BY ESTHER MORGAN IN HER OWN VOICE:

(TO DEMONSTRATE HOW THE POET CONCRETIZES AN ABSTRACT CONCEPT)

Let us listen to another poem in the voice of the poet, Esther Morgan herself, a poem called "The Voice". In this poem too the poet seems to give a concreteness to an abstract concept.

An Exercise in Comprehension.

Now, let us try to understand how a poem begins to open its meanings to the reader each time one goes back to it .

- Look at the pictures below.





- Are they identical?
- Don't you experience them differently as you move from one to the other?

Your mind moves closer into the frame when you go to the second one and you will see more! You will perhaps see more *under water* than above! Your own mind has got activated... first, it is in harmony with the picture and then together the picture and you begin to make more meaning!

That is what happens on reading the poem again...Each reading offers more meaning and ...

The Poet on Her Poem

THE POET ON HER POEM

Here, we need to ask, why after all does a poet write? Let's listen to what our poet Esther Morgan has to say:

The Poet, Esther Morgan : Why I Write

As to why I write, I try not to think about this too much as it can undermine the writing

process itself. However, I can describe the feeling I get when working on a poem I know is going somewhere. I imagine that most children have a den at some point in their lives: whether it's in a bedroom, or at the bottom of the garden, or in a nearby wood or disused shed, it's the place where you go to be alone, to dream, or read, or comfort yourself. It is private territory, a space which allows you to have your own thoughts. Writing a poem to me is like making a den out of words: I have a sense of secret imaginative shelter, somewhere that I can possess for myself and tell the truth about the world as I experience it.

Explanation and Discussion of the Poem



(Viewed on 21 July 2009 at 04:00 pm)

At the end of the poem, lies a **NEW BEGINNING...Something was lost but something is found too! A new meaning of life is found in the very expression of loss!**

Says the poet, Esther Morgan herself :

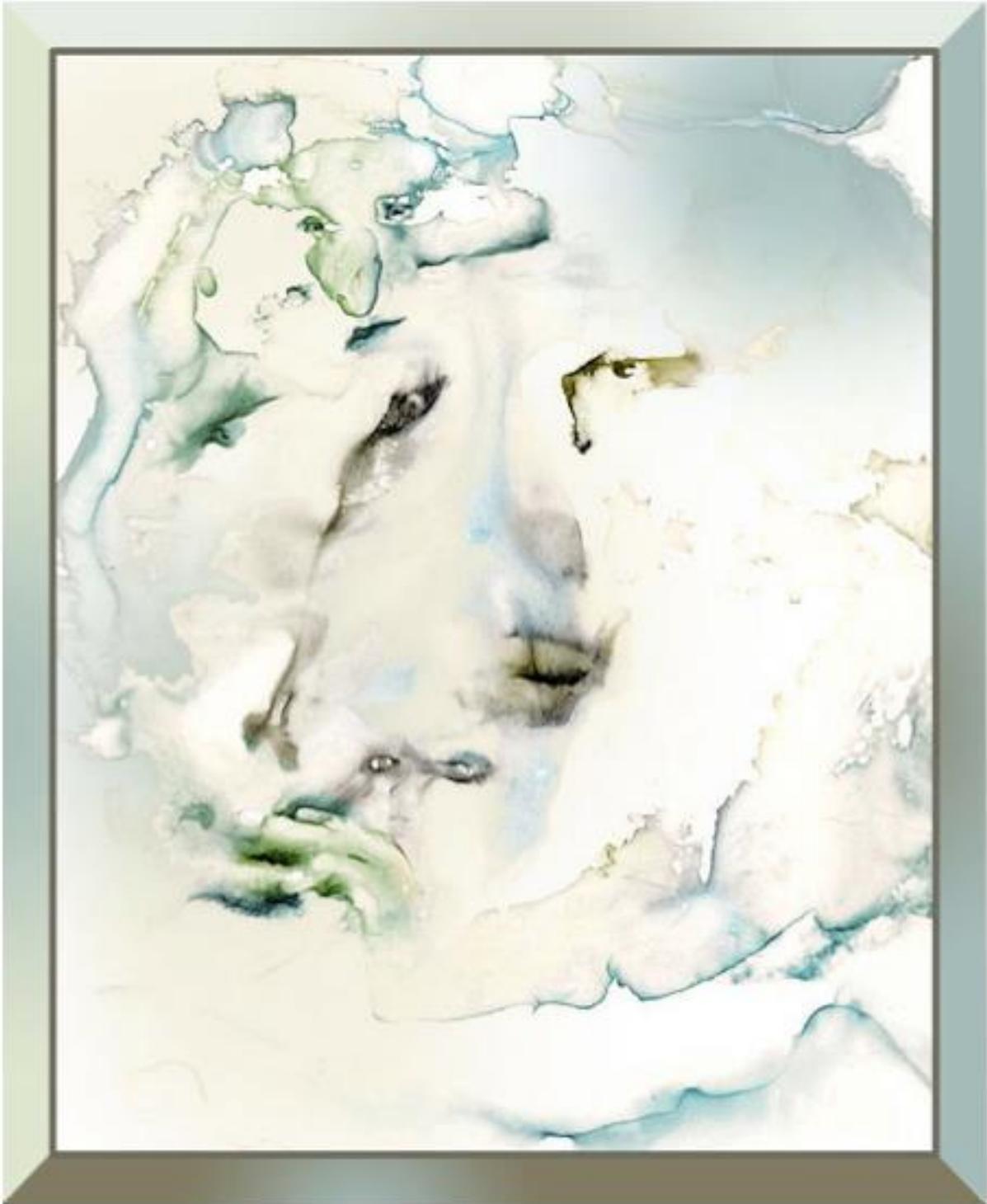
"...it was one of those rare poems that came quickly. I remember having the idea about making a lost word a literal object and then the poem flowed from that original idea. I didn't do much editing which is unusual for me."

However, we do want to know what the woman in the poem has lost...There are various possibilities...

There is no clear picture of the narrator in the poem! No identification of a self...

Is there an identity crisis...?

Look at the image below...Where is the Self?



http://www.engl.niu.edu/mcllm/MCLLM_Images/IdentityCrisis.jpg
(Viewed on 21 July 2009 at 04:00 pm)

The missing word

ME
BE
IF
AM
MY
NO AH

What after all are those two letters that go into making that precious word she has lost?

Some word perhaps that represents her identity?

Her language?

Her inability to speak some language?

Her inability to say "no", and thereby submitting to the will of others all the time...?

Pick any two or three words from the above list

and try to interpret the poem in different ways accordingly.

For example: If the lost word is **ME**, let's see what the poem means:



ME: A Conceptual Identity

Well, first of all if **ME** is lost, we realize - the word "me" is not a mere word, it suggests the loss of self as an object of "I". In other words, is the poem a story of an identity crisis? Of not being able to locate a self?

The word is what it stands for, what it means. Me is my self. What if it is lost?

What are you without your self? An empty body? A machine without any self-realization or any consciousness of the self? What are you without "me"?

I-Me-Myself

What are you without your self? An empty body? A machine without any self-realization or any consciousness of the self? What are you without "me"?



<http://www.sojones.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/06/identity-crisis.jpg>
(Viewed on 21 July 2009 at 12:16 pm)

A Note on usage of

"I/Me/Myself..."

In earlier times, according to traditional grammar, we could simply say, "The first person singular pronoun is "I" when it's a subject and "me" when it's an object," but now few people know what that means. Let's see if we can apply some common sense here. The misuse of "I" and "myself" for "me" is caused by nervousness about "me." Educated people know that "Ashok and me are going down to the market," is not elegant speech, not "correct." It should be "Ashok and I" because if I were going down to the market alone I would never say "Me is going. . . ." If you refer to yourself first, the same rule applies: It's not "Me and Ashok are going" but "Ashok and I are going."

But the notion that there is something wrong with "me" sometimes leads people to "overcorrect" and avoid it even where it is perfectly appropriate. People will say "This work had to be done by both Kamla and I" when the correct statement would be, "This work had to be done by both Kamla and me." Trying even harder to avoid the lowly "me," many people will substitute "myself," as in "The boy threw stones at him and myself."

"Myself" is no better than "I" as an object. "Myself" is not a sort of all-purpose intensive form of "me" or "I." Use "myself" only when you have used "I" earlier in the same sentence: "I am not particularly fond of oranges myself." "I kept half of it for myself."

You wouldn't say, "They sent the cheque to I," so you shouldn't say "They sent the cheque to my wife and I" either. And you shouldn't say "to my wife and myself." The only correct way to say this is, "They sent the cheque to my wife and me."

On a related point, those who continue to say "It is I" have traditional grammatical correctness on their side, but they are vastly outnumbered by those who say "it's me!" There's not much that can be done about this now. Similarly, if a caller asks for Usha and Usha answers "This is she," her somewhat old-fashioned correctness is likely to surprise one.

Coming back to the poem "The Lost Word"

Now, let us choose the word "No" as the "lost word" and interpret the poem accordingly.

No : Saying 'no' is a refusal skill

If the woman of the poem has lost the faculty of saying "no", she may be totally denying her self the right to have her own opinion. By extension of this, she does not assert her own self and merely says yes to everything told to her or asked of her. The poem makes her look for the lost word..."no" that will give her back her self and her dignity as an individual

Here's what Esther Morgan says :

The poem definitely has a conscious gender dimension. Both my books are interested in and investigate silence, and at the heart of that is my experience of being a woman. Even growing up in a post-feminist environment, I found as a young woman the need to conform, to agree overwhelming at times, particularly in the realm of sexual politics (hence the sexual nature of the final image). I come from a family where politeness, not rocking the boat was regarded highly, and behind this were family tensions which I felt at the time but didn't fully understand. These centred around my mother who was very depressed when I was small, and a difficult relationship between her and her mother, my grandmother, whom we saw most days as I was growing up. I learnt early to use language carefully, to

If the "Lost Word" were to be "if" or any other, how would you interpret the poem?

The poem could actually be called

"The Lost World", do you agree?

Let's look at the ending of the poem:

but all that comes to mind

are failed attempts

when her mouth was full

of someone else's tongue.

The woman of the poem speaks someone else's language...When she does not even have her own language, how can she recall that two-letter lost word so vital to her Being! It's not the word that she has lost, she is herself lost, isn't she?

The Language of the poem

- Simple vocabulary but complex experience.
- Use of phrases such as "picks through", "swept under the carpet", "no less valuable", "racking her brains", "failed attempts", "someone else's

tongue"...all these show the poet's skill at idiomatic use of language.

- No obvious rhythm but dramatic intensity through statement-like lines.

Language is more than just a tool to communicate. It connects people with something greater than themselves. A common language breaks barriers between people and allows people that share a language to identify with each other although they are different. Each good poem comes with a "new language" which makes you notice that you have always missed. It leads to an appreciation of things that you never existed. And, in doing so, a new person is formed; the old is not gone but is somehow different.

-

What makes this poem, a poem

Here are some thoughts and questions about good poems:

- There's a deep meaning to a poem that really stays in your head and keeps you thinking, some quality to it that keeps you wanting to return to read it over and over again, like hearing your favorite song. Every time you read it, the words are somehow still new and somehow still able to call up that deep feeling. (Emily Dickinson)

Question :

Does the poem "The Lost Word" suggest to you that there's some deep meaning to it? How do you think it does this?

.....

A powerful poem challenges you to dig into it. It might be abstract, experimental, symbolic-- like a puzzle waiting to be solved. (e.e. cummings) (See his poem: <http://www.geocities.com/soho/8454/268.htm>)

Question :

Is this an abstract poem, "a puzzle waiting to be solved"?

.....

A powerful poem can make you feel something, imagine something, without resorting to "artsy" language. The language is simple and natural and doesn't make you fight through it to get at the real point. (Langston Hughes)

Question :

Does this poem have "artsy" language? Do you have to struggle to understand the language, its vocabulary?

.....

· Poems have to make me imagine something really vividly, really paint a picture in my mind's eye and let me "be there." A powerful poem uses language full of sensory images. This way the poem leaves a lasting impression.

Question :

Does this poem make you imagine some scene realistically, as though you were participating in it? If so, how?

.....

· A really powerful poem is universal and timeless-it can be written in any age by any person from any culture and be understood by us today because it's about some kind of human truth.

Question :

Do you feel that this poem is powerful and timeless? Describe how?

.....

· A powerful poem makes me think and feel at the same time. But my thinking isn't always on a rational, logical level. It might be more intuitive.

Question :

What does this poem make one think about?

.....

· A really good poem has to have words that flow smoothly. It might tell a story, but it may not sound like prose.

Question :

Does this poem tell a story? And how does it not sound like one?

.....

Concluding Comment

A close examination of the language of this poem, a deep reading of it, uncovers a richness beneath the surface simplicity. And that's part of the pleasure too...Discovering that depth. Complexity wrapped in brevity is usually artful.

The Legend of the Lost Word

Please Note : The poet does not profess to make any connection between her poem "The Lost Word" and the legends of the Lost Word given below. These narratives are given just as interesting bits of information regarding the notion of the "lost word".

.....

Another Version

The Lost Word is believed to be a WORD that was uttered or intoned at the moment that all creation commenced; by The Architect of the Universe or GOD. This intonation escapes us and we can only speculate what this word or group of words might be. We will never actually find the exact word until we become Avatars, and even then we are not sure if the exact Word will be revealed. For those not sure of what an Avatar is, I might add that it is when we reach full Mastership here on earth and are about to be absorbed permanently into the Cosmic at transition. In the meantime we can try to contemplate and meditate on this word and come up with a Word that will be as close as possible for our present Spiritual development. This word can be important to us. It can become a creative word that can be used in our lives. As we study Mysticism, comparative religion, etc; we should take note of any word that has an emotional response to us; but do not pick any word in this manner, wait for the word to come to us during meditation periods.

In conclusion, I hope I have motivated you to try to ascertain your "Lost Word" that can be used when you create something new in your life. Accept the word into your reality, then the word will make it possible to finalize your creations and send them into the Cosmic.
