

## LIMBO-Edward Kamau Brathwaite

### POEM MATCHES:

Contrast: Two Scavengers in a Truck, Vultures, Nothing's Changed

Past/Present Theme: Nothing's Changed, Island Man, What Were They Like?

### Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Black Male Poet)

1. He is a West Indian poet/writer.
2. One theme he often explores is the theme of COLONISATION.
3. COLONISATION-is when a powerful country invades another country and takes over that country, taking charge of its government, economics etc.
4. The West Indies was colonised by Europeans in the eighteenth century.
5. Sugar was the main product that was exploited. Slaves were brought from Africa to run agriculture in the West Indies.
6. The conditions on the slave ships were dreadful-the slaves were in shackles and the actual ships were dark, cramped and smelly.

### EXPLANATIONS FOR LIMBO:

1. A dance in which the dancer has to pass under a stick by bending over backwards; the stick is gradually lowered. The dance has its origins in the slave ships. The slaves were chained to iron bars-they invented the limbo to keep fit and supple. It is a difficult and painful dance as the dancer bends back but it becomes easier as the dancer moves up again.
2. An intermediate place between two extremes, e.g., if you cannot make a decision between two things, one can say they are in limbo.
3. An imaginary place for lost or unwanted things.
4. In Christianity, the place of rest for infants who die without baptism.

### The Slave's Journey:

1. In the eighteenth century slaves were transported in slave ships from Africa to the West Indies; never would they see their families, friends or native countries again.
2. They were going to be slaves on the sugar plantations.
3. The journey on the slave ships was dreadful.
4. Slaves were packed into the lower deck, shackled by chains to iron bars.
5. They had no idea of what awful conditions and life lay ahead of them.

### STRUCTURE AND CONTENT:

1. **Lines 1-5, 14-15, 18-19, 24-25, 30-31, 39-40: Limbo** is repeated. Rhythm is built up. The repetition of the word 'Limbo' is like the rhythm of the swaying of the boat. It could also be the rhythm of the limbo dance. The beat of a drum. It is used as a refrain/response. It provides shape for the poem.
2. Free verse is used-highly rhythmical to reflect the limbo dance described.
3. Line 7: The **dark silence** is like the journey that lies ahead of them.
4. **Lines 10, 12, 20, 22, 26: Stick** is repeated-the notion/idea of the limbo stick. Slaves approach the ship as they would approach the limbo stick.
5. **Stick** could also be compared to the whip of slavery.

6. **Lines 15-16 Long dark deck** on the ship-the slaves are on their way down below deck just as they would go down below the limbo stick. Repetition of adjectives and feelings of imprisonment.
7. **Dark Deck**-use of alliteration to draw attention to the increasing feeling of foreboding and fear and also to echo the drum beat.
8. Deck of the ship is like their journey to slavery.
9. **Line 26-27:** The dancer goes under the limbo stick. They are surrounded by darkness in the ship just like the dancer is surrounded by the limbo stick. References to heat, dark and water are all related to hell-as if the slave ship is hell.
10. The journey on the slave ship is like the limbo. The slaves approach the ship as the dancer approaches the limbo stick; the slaves go below deck just as the limbo dancer goes below the stick; the slaves rise above deck and reach the new land just as the limbo dancer rises above the stick just as the dance is finishing.
11. Line 28/32-**knees spread wide**-painful movement associated with the dance. Back breaking movement is also associated with the dance and the journey to the West Indies. The position described suggest that the person is vulnerable.
12. Line 29-**and the water is hiding**-slaves are inside the lower deck and are surrounded by water but cannot see it, only when they go above deck for their exercises.
13. Line 33-**dark ground is under me**-the ground is close as the dancer goes down-slaves are close to the land they approach.
14. Lines 34-36-**down, down, down**-reaching the bottom of the dance, reaching the end of their journey. Use of single words lines emphasise movement and rhythm.
15. Line 37-**drummer is calling me**-refers to the beat of the drum in the dance-may refer to the masters on the slave ship calling them above deck.
16. Line 41-**drummers are praising me**-delight as the journey ends.
17. Lines 38-39-this is the last time this phrase is repeated-the dance/journey has ended.
18. Line 40 **sun**-this is like the light after the darkness of the journey on the slave ship. The journey is ending.
19. Line 42 **out of the dark** release from the slave ship-end of the dance.
20. Line 43 **dumb gods are raising me**-reference to the slaves' captors-they are called dumb as they cannot speak the same language as the slaves and so there is no conversation between them.
21. Line 44-46-**up/up/up**-coming back up from the end of the limbo dance. The slaves are coming up from the lower deck. Use of single words lines emphasise movement and rhythm.
22. Line 48-50 **hot/slow/step**-this does suggest pain-but it can be seen as positive-the journey is over-the warmth of the sun is felt.
23. Line 51-**on the burning ground**-(i) positive-heat felt from the ground after the long and difficult journey. (ii) negative-the ground burns-this suggests pain after their long and harrowing journey on the slave ship.
24. Line 51-the pace of the poem has slowed down; there is a suggestion of some sort of salvation.
25. This terrible journey has been saved by transforming it into a limbo dance; this is a cause for celebration; optimistic ending-looks on the bright side.

26. The **FINAL FULL STOP** is the only punctuation used in the poem. No other pauses are found throughout suggesting the pain doesn't end until the journey is over.

#### **SETTING AND CONTEXT:**

1. The poem works in two time periods-the **present** of the dance and the **past** of the slave ships that brought the Africans to the West Indies.
2. A third meaning can be drawn from the actual word **limbo** which is a sort of in between place in Christian beliefs, believed to be the place between heaven and hell.

#### **FORM AND TECHNIQUE:**

1. Free verse is used which is highly rhythmical to reflect the limbo dance described. **Limbo/Limbo like me** is used as a refrain/chorus.
2. Expression in the sentences/how the sentences are made up is very compact; **stick hit sound**.
3. The limbo bar is compared to **the dark deck** of the ship-alliteration is used for impact.
4. Lines with single words are used for impact, e.g., **up...down**
5. The **down** part of the dance represents the descent into the slave ships. The **drumsticks** of the dance become the whips of the slave traders.
6. The **up** part of the dance represents survival. This is aided by the drummers and their music, **and the music is saving me**.
7. The middle passage of the poem is followed by a **hot/slow/step/on the burning ground** this is passing under the limbo bar successfully.

#### **THEME AND INTERPRETATION:**

1. The poem represents the limbo dance as well as the journey for the slaves from Africa to America.
2. The fact that such a terrible events can be saved or transformed by music is positive/optimistic.