

## **"Oranges" by Gary Soto**

**paper by....**

### **Paraphrase of the poem**

The speaker describes the "first time I walked / With a girl", when he was twelve years old. He walked to her house to fetch her and from there they walked together to the shops. They went into a drugstore and he asked her what she wanted, and she chose a chocolate. He didn't have enough money to pay for it, but did not tell her this. He went to the saleslady and offered her the small amount of money which he did have, plus a fresh orange which he had been carrying in his pocket. The saleslady accepted this without saying anything. The speaker had been carrying two oranges, and when he and his girlfriend left the shop, he ate his orange and she ate the chocolate. He held her hand for a while. The color of the orange seemed so bright and fiery to him.

### **Discussion of the theme**

The theme is growing up and maturing into adolescence, and how one feels all sorts of attractions, vulnerabilities and responsibilities for the first time. It is also about acceptance (will his girlfriend accept his invitation to choose a candy? Will the saleslady accept the orange as a payment?). He is learning to express himself through asking the girl if she would like something, and he accepts the sense of responsibility that goes with that. He also feels responsible for her while walking her to the shops and then back home. There is also a theme of energy and brightness, like the girl's face "bright with rouge" and the orange "that was so bright" it looked like "a fire in my hands". Finally there is a theme of breathing and impermanence, as he walks to her house with his breath

“before me, then gone”. When they arrive at the drugstore they are “breathing”, which shows a sense of life and vitality, although the breath is impermanent.

### **Analysis of the speaker**

The speaker is a young boy, maybe in his early teens, who still has the innocence of a child but is starting to think like an adult and see the world through a man’s eyes. He is a responsible boy, and is excited to find that his attempts to impress a young girl pay off and she accepts him. He seems a bit shy, but we can see him gaining in confidence during their little trip to the drugstore and back. He is learning to express both his affection and his sense of responsibility.

### **Description of the form**

The poem is written in free verse, which means that the words do not rhyme or have any noticeable beat to them. The lines are short, which makes the pace of the action seem quite easy and relaxed, and they run on into each other because some sentences end in the middle of a line of the poem. The descriptions of who did what and what happened next lead the reader along in the action, forming images based on descriptions rather than philosophy or abstract ideas. The style of writing is crisp and vivid to the senses. The first stanza of the verse is long, which builds up a bit of tension. The second stanza is short and to the point, and resolves the tension by showing a successful outcome.

### **Discussion of the emotional qualities**

The emotional quality of this poem is innocence plus sensuality. Sensual descriptions in the first stanza include “cold”, “weighted down”, “frost cracking”, “light burned yellow”, “dog barked”, and “touched her shoulder”. Later, the focus is on the girl: “Light in her eyes, a smile / Starting at the corner of her mouth”. In the second stanza the sensual descriptions continue, for example with “cars hissing past” and “fog hanging”. This kind of sensory description gives the poem a feeling of immediacy, as if we are experiencing the scene ourselves. There is also a feeling of some awe at the brightness and warmth of what the speaker is feeling. We can see this from the way he puts his own feelings onto the orange in his hands and feels that someone would think he is lighting a fire. This shows that he feels that people can see his passion for the girl, maybe feeling a bit transparent or vulnerable about this, but maybe also quite proud of the brightness.

### **Brief biography of the poet**

Gary Soto grew up in Fresno, California, in a Mexican-American (Hispanic) family. He did not do well at school.<sup>1</sup> He always liked to read and later started writing poetry, short stories and so on. He then obtained a university degree in English and he is now a very widely published author and poet.<sup>2</sup> He also does a little community work.

### **Any relevant external events**

The theme of financial hardship appears in the poem Oranges, when the boy does not have enough money to pay for the chocolate and trades with an orange instead. When Soto grew up, he probably did go through some experiences just like in the poem.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://garysoto.com/faq.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/soto.htm>

### **Response to the poem**

I found this poem moving and heart-warming. At first I thought it was a little childish, but on a second reading I realized that the poet is using simple descriptions to say something deeper. His descriptions made me feel that I could relate to what was taking place, and I could easily imagine being there and feeling what the boy felt. The way he understates his feelings allowed me to bring my own feelings into the poem as well. I thought this was a very good poem about “coming of age”.