

Poems from *Olive Senior's Gardening in the Tropics*, [www.dloc.com/olivesenior](http://www.dloc.com/olivesenior)

"Bamboo: (In Five Variations)": <http://www.dloc.com/l/AA00061856/>



"Bamboo (In Five Variations)", text of the poem, annotations, and commentary are on (or to be added) the following pages and online: <http://www.dloc.com/AA00061856>

Audio: *forthcoming*

**BAMBOO**  
***(In Five Variations)***

1

1. "Bamboo love" burns
2. bright and hot
3. and comes (and goes)
4. in flashes

5. leaving behind
6. as residue
7. fugitive
8. bamboo ashes.

2

9. Bamboo prides itself on knowing
10. the art of living long:

11. before wind, rain, axe and forager
12. humbly bending

13. while secretly sending deep into
14. cliff or mire

15. roots that are grasping and strong,
16. to spread. Not always

17. as quickly as that dread enemy
18. of conceit: fire.

3

19. If Stone had been a better debater,
20. Man (like Stone) would be living
21. forever. But long ago when such
22. matters were settled, Stone lost
23. the argument for eternity to Bamboo.
24. The clincher came with Bamboo saying:
25. it's true, this way Man will die,
26. like me. But look along this endless
27. river-bank, what do you see? So Man
28. could be. With careful tending,

29. despite my periodic ending, from
30. my roots young shoots spring, routinely.

4

31. Cows grazing on fresh bamboo shoot
32. gaze at eleven-year-old me lying at
33. bamboo root, in my sanctuary: dried bamboo
34. leaves my bed, my head buried in a book.

35. "The Little Prodigy," my Great-Aunt
36. Emily (sarcastically) calls me when
37. I refuse to help her dust or cook,
38. polish silver or learn to use a hook

39. to fish up thread or wool in her tortures
40. called crochet and knitting. To keep her
41. from having further fit in my idle
42. presence, at my earliest convenience

43. I take off over the picket fence, across
44. the pasture to lie in that dense bamboo
45. thicket. All who pass by call out to
46. remind me that Duppies inhabit bamboo root

47. and if I don't take care those spirits
48. will cause my head to twist around, my
49. tongue to tie, my eyes to shoot up
50. straight out of my head as bamboos do

51. from the ground. Still, as often as
52. possible I perversely choose to lie and
53. court fright on dry leaves that rustle,
54. under bamboo joints that creak, troubled

55. only by the thought that Great-Aunt Emily
56. would experience such delight if a Duppy
57. (or the cat) actually got my tongue.
58. "A nice kind of heathen we're raising"

59. she says talking over my head to some
60. invisible presence Up There (for such
61. weighty matters to me cannot be

62. directly communicated). And only because

63. I said Church Makes Me Sneeze (which is  
64. true). In view of her great age and to  
65. avoid further outrage I bite my tongue  
66. and wisely don't say that if she would only

67. leave me alone, one day in bamboo cathedral  
68. I might encounter even the Holy Spirit,  
69. for there I can breathe in (without  
70. sneezing) a naturally fresh and liberating air.

5

71. You say you've been to my house  
72. in the hills and never heard  
73. from my high window

74. something like a dry rustle  
75. from the river-bank, a long blue  
76. sighing? Yes, maybe (as you say)

77. it wasn't the wind dying  
78. in bamboo leaves and yes maybe  
79. that isn't the sound of wild

80. bamboo flutes scaling up and down  
81. mountain passes which I keep  
82. hearing from this high window

83. near St. Clair Avenue Toronto  
84. Canada which is not where  
85. river-bank or hill is.

## Annotations to the Poem

(prepared by Olive Senior)

**1-2]** Bamboo (*bambusa spp.*) is a fast-growing giant grass that has both ornamental and practical uses. Bamboo love is as described—burning quickly and hot.

**8]** "Bamboo ashes" refers to what is left after bamboo is burnt and symbolizes something that is light and easily blown away—something negligible. Bamboo is easily burnt but will regenerate quickly from the roots.

**19-30]** The third stanza refers to a legendary debate between Stone and Bamboo during which both decided that death, rather than immortality, would be the fate of mankind.

**46]** "Duppies": ghosts or spirits of the dead.

## Commentary

Written by H.M. Simpson (with assistance from the following ENG620 students: Melissa Coutts, Elyse Mayo, and Keisha Wright).

"Bamboo (*In Five Variations*)" is one of several poems in *Nature Studies*, the second movement in *Gardening in the Tropics*. In *Nature Studies*, each poem is named for a specific plant associated with the Caribbean/New World landscape and uses the plant for which it is named as a point of entry into discussing larger themes or issues associated with the peoples and cultures of that space. In an interview with Hyacinth Simpson, Senior comments on one of the main literary devices she employs in the *Nature Studies* poems:

In the section *Nature Studies*, I had a lot of fun with these plants. In my poetry I do a lot of what is called [personification](#) where I treat an inanimate object as if it were human. I not only talk to these plants but they talk back to us. Also [...] in writing these poems about plants I'm using a lot of the mythology and folklore of the Caribbean. There's a lot more than simply descriptions of the plants; it's going inside the plants to reveal more than just what we associate with them, that is, as plants that produce fruit, or trees, or whatever... these plants are very much an integral part of who we are as a people. They are part of our stories and mythologies. (*On Gardens and Gardening*)

Not surprisingly, then, as one reads through the five parts—or variations—of the poem it becomes clear that the natural properties of the bamboo plant—its resilience, its ability to adapt to almost any condition, and its tendency to regenerate quickly and last for a long time—become the means by which the poem/t addresses the absence or presence of similar traits in Caribbean/New World peoples. [Read More...](#)

In keeping with Senior's comment above that she mines culturally specific folklore and mythologies for information that links specific human traits with particular plants (see, for example, the poem "Starapple" where the plant is likened to someone who is "mean" or close-fisted), the poem begins with a Jamaican folk saying. Bamboo love, as the saying goes, is the kind of relationship that is very intense ("burns/ bright and hot," line 2) but does not last long. The prevailing sense here is of impermanence, fragility, and vulnerability—maybe even untrustworthiness and betrayal. But on closer look, that impression is mediated by the fact that after the bamboo is consumed, it leaves "behind/ as residue/ fugitive/ bamboo ashes" (lines 5-8). Although elusive and fleeting like a "fugitive," the ashes, which are light and easily blown away, contain a trace of the plant consumed by fire so it has not fully disappeared. In fact, when one remembers that bamboo ashes are often used as fertilizer it is possible to argue that in the remnants of the bamboo's destruction itself lies the possibility of its rebirth.

This idea of rebirth—and thus of resilience—is picked up and expanded on in the second variation. A fast-growing giant grass, the bamboo is known to send its roots “deep into/ cliff and mire” (line 14) so that the plant can withstand a variety of harsh conditions: “wind, rain, axe and forager” (line 11). The bamboo, it seems, is difficult to destroy, even in the wake of “that dread enemy/ of conceit: fire” (lines 7-18). Its growth may be slowed, but it knows “the art of living long” (line 10). One of its defining features, then, is its ability to rebound after disaster or setbacks, and to survive. This is a feature that Senior claims throughout *Gardening in the Tropics* for Caribbean/New World peoples and cultures. Like folklore, mythology is referenced because of the parallels it draws between the plant and the human worlds. The third variation recounts an indigenous aetiological tale in which humankind’s mortality is explained as the consequence of Bamboo winning a debate with Stone. But while Bamboo cannot claim to be as indestructible as Stone, it has the advantage of being able to regenerate. It affirms that, with “careful tending” (line 28), new shoots will continually spring from old roots.

It is Bamboo’s ability to produce new shoots from old roots—i.e. choose change over the kind of stasis that can result in atrophy—that provides an interpretive framework for the brief narrative presented in the fourth variation. In this part of the poem, a precocious eleven-year-old girl seeks solitude and sanctuary in a dense thicket of old bamboo roots and fresh bamboo shoots away from her Great-Aunt Emily whose claustrophobic and restrictive dictates regarding proper female behaviour the girl defies at every opportunity. Instead of spending her time dusting, cooking, polishing silver, or knitting, the girl prefers to read books that allow her to give flight to her imagination and envision other realities than the one she is being forced to live. Undeterred by old wives tales that would have her fear the malevolent spirits that supposedly inhabit the roots of the bamboo plant, the girl escapes to her bamboo hideaway every chance she gets, daring to believe that there—rather than in the Church at the centre of Great-Aunt Emily’s life—she will find that which truly sustains and affirm her spirit/self. While the [tone](#) in the fourth variation is playful (the little girl’s feistiness and her conflict with her guardian are humorously depicted), its critique of the role religion and the Church as a Western institution have played in socializing Caribbean females into Eurocentric, class-based gender identities that can severely undermine their sense of themselves as culturally autonomous and valid beings runs deep. Senior has addressed this issue in other poems (such as “Colonial Girls’ School” in her collection *Talking of Trees*) as well as in her prose fiction (including the short stories “Bright Thursdays” and “Do Angels Wear Brassieres?” from *Summer Lightning and Other Stories*). Significantly, then, it is the Indigenous New World myth which presents Bamboo as the prototype for humankind’s ability to renew itself in positive ways through natural cycles of death and regeneration rather than the Christian conception of death as the consequence of Original Sin that the poem offers as a more liberating way of knowing and being for the little girl, and future generations of Caribbean women. But, as Bamboo warns in the third variation, the cycles of death and regeneration—of young shoots springing up from old roots—will continue routinely and unabated only if those roots are carefully tended. This suggests that Caribbean/New World peoples have to do the cultural and psychic work necessary to release themselves from the centuries of self-abnegation represented in Great-Aunt Emily’s clinging to beliefs and practices used to invalidate her and her culture so that they too, like the little girl, “can breathe in (without/ sneezing) a naturally fresh and liberating air” (lines 69-70).

In the fifth variation, the poem addresses another issue that, as evident in several other poems in *Gardening in the Tropics*, has greatly impacted the lives of Caribbean/New World peoples: migration. The persona in this section of the poem (ostensibly an adult) has moved from a Caribbean location to “Saint Clair Avenue Toronto/ Canada” (lines 83-84). Here, the poetic persona bears witness to her own experience of migration and diaspora in that she speaks directly in her own voice to an implied listener about her physical and emotional response to

resettlement. At first it might appear that the persona is hearing things—that her perception of her new environment cannot be trusted. Although she now lives in a place where there is no “river-bank” or “hill” (line 85), she insists that she hears “something like a dry rustle/from the river-bank” (lines 74-75) and the “sound of wild/bamboo flutes scaling up and down/ mountain passes” (lines 79-81). Her auditor appears to be puzzled that she is hearing similar sounds of nature—from the “high window” in her former “house/in the hills” (lines 71-73) presumably somewhere in a mountainous region of the Caribbean like the Cockpit Mountains of Senior’s birthplace, and from the “high window” looking out from an apartment in an high rise building in Toronto—in two very dissimilar landscapes. But rather than functioning as an indicator of the persona’s mental or physical disorientation/dislocation in her new environment; or, as Jenny Burman argues, as evidence that the poem is “antidiasporic” and “does not locate a thriving Jamaica in Toronto” (Burman 68), the persona’s mishearing suggests exactly the opposite. Like the bamboo whose rustling leaves and flute notes she keeps hearing, the persona is able to spread her roots so that she simultaneously (and comfortably) belongs to two worlds. Again, the reader is invited to call upon what she learned about the natural properties of bamboo in the earlier variations and apply them to a reading of the brief narrative that unfolds in this final variation. It is no coincidence that this persona, like the little girl, seems to have an affinity with the bamboo plant as it becomes, like various features of the natural world in Senior’s creative garden space, a potent symbol of a culture’s ability to heal and sustain itself.

## Work Cited

Burman, Jenny. “Remittances; or Diasporic Economies of Yearning.” *Small Axe* 12 (2002): 49-71. Print.

*On Gardens and Gardening*. Prod. Hyacinth M. Simpson. Perf. Olive Senior. Toronto: Ryerson University, 2007. DVD.