

# Identity and Violence in “Pomegranate Means Grenade” by Jamaal May

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Jamaal May is an American author and poet born in Detroit in the 1990s. In his book *Hum*, published in 2013, May explores themes of technology, machines, obsolescence, and community. The allegorical poem “Pomegranate Means Grenade,” published in *Hum*, specifically covers themes of masculinity, violence, and the power of self-expression in the face of oppression. In “Pomegranate Means Grenade,” May responds to Jontae, a young student, who wrote a line May includes as an epigraph: “*The heart trembles like a herd of horses.*” The poem is written contemplatively, and, at times, May seems to talk directly to Jontae. May writes about the creativity in the young student and his fears about what Jontae’s life will be like, based on May’s experiences as a Black man in America. May touches on the challenges Black men and boys face in expressing their emotions in a world that sees violence as a defining trait of masculinity. May evokes pathos using colorful imagery, symbolism, and allusion to the Tiananmen Square student revolt and activist Huang Xiang to paint a picture to Jontae that although life will be difficult, he will never be alone and that staying in touch with his creativity will be a powerful tool against oppression.

At the beginning of his poem “Pomegranate Means Grenade,” Jamaal May juxtaposes the symbolism of a pomegranate fruit and a grenade. Figuratively, pomegranates can symbolize lushness, abundance, immortality, and death. May repetitively connects the pomegranate with a grenade, writing, “Remember granada / means pomegranate and granada / means grenade because grenade / takes its name from the fruit” (May, lines 3-8). May implores the reader to “think of the breaking / skin as shrapnel” (lines 2-3), comparing the widespread impact of a grenade to the inevitable messiness and drip of opening and harvesting pomegranate seeds. By comparing a pomegranate and a grenade, May can juxtapose the abundant life in ripe fruit with the death and destruction of war. May writes: “identify war by what it takes away / from fecund orchards” (lines 7-8), tying the devastation of war to the ruin of a lush and productive orchard (perhaps a pomegranate orchard). The word “fecund” can synonymously refer to productivity and creativity. One could interpret this destruction of a “fecund orchard” as a death of imagination and expression. May alludes to the epigraph and succinctly ties the grenade simile to his anxiety about witnessing military recruitment in a high school: “You are writing a stampede / into my chest, the same anxiety that shudders / me when I push past marines in high school / hallways” (lines 18-21). Juxtaposing the grenade and pomegranate and including the presence of military recruiters in high schools can be identified as an application of pathos, as references to war imagery evoke specific complicated emotions in audiences.

In addition to the symbolism of the pomegranate, May also uses color symbolism; utilizing pathos again. Color symbolism requires attaching emotion to a specific color, and in the case of “Pomegranate Means Grenade,” the colors mentioned are black and red. May writes:

there will always be one like you: / a child who gets the picked over box / with mostly black crayons. One who wonders / what beautiful has to do with beauty, as he darkens / a sun in the corner of every page, / constructs a house from ashen lines, / sketches stick figures lying face down – / I know how often red is the only color / left to reach for. (May, lines 9-17)

The color black can represent death, darkness, and grief or reference skin color within the poem's context. Red evokes powerful human emotions and often denotes blood, war, anger, passion, and violence. In the context of this poem, red can be tied to the saturated red-brown of the pomegranate and the insinuations of death and violence. May's writing depicts Jontae as a child who initially finds beauty in the color black but who will eventually reach for red. This behavior change could indicate the eventuality of violence in Jontae's life. The line, "sketches stick figures lying face down" (May, line 15), implies May's belief that Jontae already has experience with death or loss. Additionally, May could be addressing the unfortunate reality that our society fails to provide enough positive outlets for individuals, especially men, to express and manage their emotions healthily. This lack of options may eventually result in the suppression of creativity, leading young men to resort to expressing their feelings through anger or violence. In this way, color symbolism reinforces May's mentions of conflict, violence, and the simile of the pomegranate-grenade.

In addition to pathos in the form of evocative symbolism, May utilizes allusions to Huang Xiang's work as a poet and activist and the Tiananmen Square student protests of the 1980s. Huang Xiang is a revolutionary poet and calligrapher who opposed the Chinese Communist Party's takeover of the country. Huang advocated for a movement of democracy through his poetry and prose. "From 1959 to 1997, Huang was incarcerated six times and spent a total of twelve years in jail" (Li). In 1978, Huang Xiang and a few of his comrades posted his poetry on Beijing's Democracy Wall, and his "daring act of publicizing poems in big character posters and public recitals, which brought the long-suppressed underground literature to the surface for the first time, swept Beijing like a storm" (Li). May writes of Huang's acts of resistance:

and remember the cranes buried inside the poems / painted on banners that hung in  
Tiananmen Square - / remember because Huang Xiang was exiled / for these / Remember  
because the poet Huang Xiang / was exiled for this: the calligraphy of revolt. (May, lines 26-30)

Huang Xiang's defiance of censorship is a powerful example of the importance of self-expression, even in the face of persecution. By referencing Huang, May suggests that Jontae's artistic expression is a powerful tool for resisting the oppressive forces he may encounter. May additionally references the 1989 Tiananmen Square student protests, which resulted in "hundreds if not thousands of unarmed peaceful pro-democracy protestors" (Amnesty International UK). Furthermore, May refers to a man who stood in front of a line of tanks the day after the massacre occurred. Jeff Widener, who photographed the iconic 'Tank Man' photo,

watched as the man confronted the lead tank, standing directly in front of it. The tank stopped and tried to go around the man. The man moved with the tank, blocking its path once again. At

one point during the standoff, the man climbed aboard the lead tank and appeared to speak to whoever was inside... The man was eventually pulled away by onlookers. (Almond)

May writes: "Always know that you will stand nameless / in front a tank, always know you will not stand / alone" (May, lines 31-33). May communicates through these lines that he knows Jontae will face challenging circumstances but will always be in solidarity with those who came before him and those who share his beliefs. May is aware that if Jontae decides to follow his creative pursuits and learn to express himself healthily, he will simultaneously benefit from the enlightenment of education and bear the social responsibility of pursuing equitable change. May cites Tiananmen Square and Huang Xiang as examples of how individuals can bring about powerful social change.

Jamaal May's "Pomegranate Means Grenade" is a provocative and poignant poem exploring masculinity, violence, and the power of self-expression. Using pathos in the form of evocative symbolism and allusions to Huang Xiang's advocacy work and the Tiananmen Square student revolt, May effectively conveys his message to Jontae and the reader. May's thought-provoking work also offers hope and encouragement, emphasizing the importance of the creativity of activists and the power of self-expression in the face of oppression. "Pomegranate Means Grenade" is a moving call to action for all of us to strive for a more just and equitable society.

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