

I Was My Own Route

by Julia de Burgos

Notes, Summary, Questions and Answers

(Exam focused Questions)

Class 12 English

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About the Author

Julia de Burgos (1914 to 1953) was one of Puerto Rico's most influential poets, journalists, and freedom fighters. She was born in Carolina, Puerto Rico, and later lived in New York, where she worked as a journalist and cultural editor for the progressive journal Pueblos Hispanos. She also continued her education at the University of Havana in Cuba before returning to New York.

De Burgos is regarded as a predecessor of contemporary Latina writers because her poetry challenged social injustice long before the Nuyorican literary movement gained recognition. Her works deal with women's liberation, racial equality, identity, and the struggle against patriarchal traditions that limit women's freedom and self expression.

In I Was My Own Route, she presents a bold feminist voice that refuses to let society define a woman's identity. Instead of following the path created by patriarchal traditions, she urges women to create their own paths and discover their true selves through courage, independence, and self realization.

Summary

I Was My Own Route is a powerful feminist poem by Julia de Burgos that challenges the patriarchal traditions that attempt to define women's lives and identities. Drawing from her own experiences as a Puerto Rican writer, journalist, and freedom fighter, Burgos presents the voice of a woman who refuses to remain trapped by the expectations imposed upon her by male dominated society. The poem becomes both a personal journey toward self discovery and a broader call for women's liberation.

The poem consists of six stanzas, each representing a different stage of the speaker's transformation from obedience to independence. At the beginning, the speaker remembers how she once tried to become the woman that men wanted her to be. She attempted to fit into roles created by patriarchal society, but this effort felt like a game of hide and seek with my being, suggesting that she was hiding her true identity behind society's expectations. She realizes that she cannot continue living according to someone else's definition of womanhood because she is made of nows, meaning she belongs to the present rather than the limitations of the past.

As she decides to move forward, the speaker faces strong resistance from the old guard, the symbolic defenders of patriarchal traditions. Every step toward freedom brings pain, criticism, and obstacles, represented by her back being ripped by their desperate flapping wings. However, these attacks fail to stop her determination. Instead, they strengthen her resolve to continue walking on her own chosen path.

The third stanza marks an important turning point. The speaker

experiences a feeling of intimate liberation as her perspective separates from familiar patriarchal horizons. Her face reflects an inner freedom that grows from balancing her own life with the truth of the new path she has chosen. This liberation is not merely physical but emotional, psychological, and spiritual.

In the fourth stanza, the speaker imagines herself as a blossom of all the soils of the earth, symbolizing unlimited freedom. She no longer defines herself by history, boundaries, or the expectations created by men. Instead, she belongs to the entire world, embracing an identity that exists beyond artificial restrictions.

The short fifth stanza expresses complete self realization through the idea that she is all in herself as life is in her. This suggests that she has finally become whole and self sufficient by accepting her own identity.

The final stanza returns to the opening idea but with a significant difference. The speaker no longer wishes to follow men's expectations. When the heralds announce her in the parade of the old guard, her desire to imitate men disappears completely. She has discovered her own route, earned dignity through resistance, and become a symbol of courage for other women seeking liberation.

At its heart, the poem argues that women should not allow patriarchal traditions to determine their identities. Instead, they should confidently create their own paths while living in the present, embracing freedom, equality, and self respect.

Important Themes

Women's Liberation

The poem strongly advocates women's freedom from patriarchal oppression and encourages them to create their own identities.

Self Identity

The speaker discovers that her true identity cannot be shaped by society's expectations but must come from within herself.

Resistance Against Patriarchy

The poem challenges male dominated traditions that limit women's choices and opportunities.

Freedom

The speaker's journey symbolizes emotional, psychological, and social liberation.

Courage

Despite criticism and obstacles, the speaker continues moving forward without surrendering.

Living in the Present

The repeated idea of being made of nows emphasizes that people should not remain trapped by the burdens of the past.

Character Information

Unlike a narrative story, the poem contains symbolic figures that represent larger social ideas.

The Speaker

The speaker is a courageous woman who refuses to accept patriarchal expectations. She transforms from someone trying to satisfy society into someone confidently creating her own path.

The Old Guard

The old guard represents conservative defenders of patriarchal traditions who attempt to stop women's liberation.

The Heralds

The heralds symbolize public recognition and social expectations that once tried to define the speaker's identity.

Important Events

The Speaker Remembers Her Past

She recalls trying to become the woman that men wanted her to be.

She Rejects Walking Backwards

She refuses to continue following patriarchal traditions.

The Old Guard Attacks Her

Conservative forces create obstacles as she pursues freedom.

She Experiences Intimate Liberation

Her inner confidence grows as she follows her own path.

She Becomes a Blossom of All the Earth

The speaker embraces limitless freedom beyond social boundaries.

She Completely Rejects Imitation

Her desire to follow men disappears as she fully accepts her own identity.

Difficult Vocabulary

Promissory: Containing or suggesting a promise.

Whiplash: A painful strike from a whip.

Epochs: Important periods in history.

Regal: Royal or kingly.

Warped: Twisted or changed from its original form.

Homage: Deep respect or honor.

Patriarchy: A social system where men hold greater power.

Liberation: Freedom from oppression.

Emancipation: The act of becoming free from restrictions.

Marginalized: Treated as less important within society.

Key Message and Main Idea

Julia de Burgos teaches that women should reject patriarchal expectations, discover their true identities, and create their own paths through courage, freedom, and self respect. The poem celebrates personal liberation while encouraging equality and dignity for all women.

Literary Devices

Julia de Burgos combines emotional language with powerful symbolism to strengthen the poem's feminist message.

Symbolism

The poem's strongest literary device is symbolism.

New Route: Self chosen identity and independence.

Old Guard: Patriarchal traditions.

Walking Backwards: Returning to oppressive gender roles.

Blossom: Unlimited freedom and self growth.

Hide and Seek: The struggle to find one's true identity.

Repetition

The repeated return to the opening idea emphasizes the speaker's complete transformation.

Metaphor

The speaker compares her life journey to creating a completely new route through unexplored territory.

Imagery

The poem creates vivid images of ripped backs, new paths, blossoms, and distant horizons to make the emotional struggle feel real.

Free Verse

The absence of a fixed rhyme scheme reflects the poem's celebration of freedom and independence.

Textbook Exercise and Answers

Understanding the Text

a. Why did the speaker try to be the way men wanted her to be?

The speaker tried to become the woman that men wanted her to be because she grew up in a patriarchal society where women were expected to obey male expectations and follow traditional gender roles. Society taught her that women should behave according to rules created by men rather than develop their own independent identities.

Although she initially attempted to fit into these expectations, she gradually realized that this meant hiding her true self. Instead of remaining controlled by patriarchal ideology, she decided to challenge those restrictions and create her own path toward freedom and equality. Her decision reflects both personal rebellion and the broader struggle for women's liberation.

b. What do you understand by her feet would not accept walking backwards?

The expression her feet would not accept walking backwards means that the speaker firmly refuses to return to a life controlled by patriarchal traditions. Walking backwards symbolizes obeying outdated social rules that treat women as inferior, while moving forward represents choosing independence and equality.

The speaker's feet become a symbol of determination because they naturally move toward new possibilities instead of returning to oppression. This image also suggests that once she recognizes her true identity, she cannot accept the limitations of her past life again.

c. Who are the old guards? Why did they grow desperate?

The old guards are the conservative defenders of patriarchal traditions

who strongly believe that men should dominate women and preserve old social customs. They represent people who resist change and try to maintain traditional gender roles.

They become desperate because the speaker openly challenges their authority by creating her own path toward freedom. As more women begin questioning patriarchal values, the old guards fear losing their control over society. Their desperate reaction symbolizes the resistance that often appears whenever unjust traditions are challenged.

d. How did the speaker have a feeling of intimate liberation?

The speaker experiences a feeling of intimate liberation after choosing her own path instead of following one created by patriarchal society. As she distances herself from old traditions, she gains inner confidence, emotional freedom, and a stronger sense of self identity.

This liberation is called intimate because it begins within her own heart and mind before becoming visible in her actions. Even though obstacles remain, she feels happier because her life now reflects her own choices rather than society's expectations.

e. Why did the speaker's desire to follow men warp in her?

The speaker's desire to follow men changes because she gradually realizes that patriarchal rules have denied her freedom, identity, and opportunities. What once seemed like normal expectations now appear unfair and restrictive, causing her earlier desire to imitate men to disappear completely.

Instead of seeking approval by following male defined roles, she chooses independence and self respect. This transformation marks the moment when she fully rejects patriarchal ideology and embraces her own identity.

Reference to the Context

a. What does the speaker mean when she says I was my own route?

The line I was my own route is the central idea of the poem. It means that the speaker chooses to create her own path in life instead of following one designed by patriarchal society. Earlier, she tried to become the woman that men expected her to be, but she eventually realized that doing so forced her to hide her true identity. By declaring that she became her own route, she celebrates her independence, self respect, and freedom to make her own decisions.

The route symbolizes life's journey, while becoming her own route means refusing to let others control that journey. The speaker no longer accepts traditions that treat women as inferior or dependent. Instead, she embraces the courage to shape her future according to her own values and dreams.

This statement also carries a broader feminist message. Burgos encourages women to stop walking on paths created by unequal social systems and instead create new possibilities for themselves. The line therefore represents self discovery, confidence, and liberation from patriarchal control.

b. Do you think the speaker is talking to someone? If so, to whom?

Yes, the speaker appears to be addressing more than one audience throughout the poem. On one level, she speaks directly to the patriarchal society that tried to define her identity and limit her freedom. Her words challenge the traditions and expectations imposed upon women by male dominated social systems.

She also speaks to men who expected women to remain obedient and dependent. By rejecting their expectations, she makes it clear that women deserve equal dignity and independence rather than control or domination.

At the same time, the speaker speaks to women everywhere. Her personal journey becomes a source of encouragement for other women who struggle with similar restrictions. She invites them to recognize their own worth, question unfair traditions, and create their own paths toward freedom.

Finally, the poem also speaks to readers in general. It encourages everyone to reflect on equality, identity, and the importance of allowing people to live according to their true selves instead of society's unfair expectations.

c. How does the speaker distinguish between myself and those who are not me?

The speaker creates a clear distinction between myself and those who are not me by separating her true identity from the expectations imposed by patriarchal society. Myself represents her authentic personality, independent thinking, freedom, and self respect. It reflects the woman she truly is when she follows her own route instead of

pretending to satisfy others.

In contrast, those who are not me refers to the people and social forces that attempt to shape her identity according to traditional gender roles. These include the old guard, conservative customs, and patriarchal beliefs that expect women to remain silent, obedient, and dependent.

The speaker explains that she once played a game of hide and seek with my being, meaning that she temporarily hid her real identity in order to fit society's expectations. However, after gaining intimate liberation, she separates herself from these outside influences and becomes whole again.

This distinction shows that genuine freedom begins when people stop allowing others to define who they are and instead accept their own identity with confidence.

d. In the poem, Julia de Burgos uses natural elements as symbols. How does this strengthen the poem's meaning?

Julia de Burgos uses natural elements as powerful symbols that make her message of freedom and self discovery more vivid and universal. Instead of explaining feminist ideas only through direct statements, she allows nature to reflect the speaker's emotional and spiritual transformation.

One important symbol is the route, which represents the journey of life and the freedom to choose one's own direction. The blossom symbolizes growth, beauty, and unlimited possibilities because it belongs to all the soils of the earth rather than being confined to one place. The horizons

represent new opportunities that become visible once the speaker leaves patriarchal restrictions behind.

The image of wings also becomes meaningful. The desperate flapping wings of the old guard symbolize the resistance of conservative forces trying to stop social change, while the speaker's movement forward suggests courage and perseverance.

These natural symbols strengthen the poem because they transform personal experiences into universal ideas. Readers from different cultures can easily understand the emotional meaning behind flowers, roads, horizons, and wings, making the poem's message about freedom even more powerful.

e. What does the poem suggest about women's liberation?

The poem suggests that women's liberation begins with self realization. Before society can change, women must first recognize that their identities should not be controlled by patriarchal traditions. The speaker's transformation demonstrates that true freedom comes from refusing to accept unfair expectations and confidently choosing one's own path.

The poem also presents liberation as a continuous struggle rather than an easy victory. The speaker faces criticism, resistance, and emotional pain from the old guard, but she refuses to return to her former life. Her determination shows that freedom requires courage and persistence.

Importantly, the poem does not argue that women should reject all relationships with men. Instead, it rejects systems of domination that

deny women equality and independence. Burgos calls for a society where women enjoy the same dignity, opportunities, and respect as everyone else.

Ultimately, the poem portrays liberation as emotional, intellectual, social, and spiritual freedom. It encourages women to discover their own voices, trust their abilities, and live according to their authentic identities rather than limiting social expectations.

Reference Beyond the Text

a. Women's Freedom in Modern Society

Women's freedom is one of the most important issues in today's world because equal opportunities allow society to develop more fairly and successfully. Compared to the past, women now have greater access to education, employment, leadership, and public life. However, complete equality has not yet been achieved, and many women continue facing discrimination, violence, unequal treatment, and social pressure.

Education has played a major role in improving women's freedom. Girls now have more opportunities to attend schools, colleges, and universities, allowing them to build careers and become financially independent. Education also increases confidence and helps women understand their rights and responsibilities.

Economic independence has become another important step toward freedom. Women today work as doctors, teachers, engineers, scientists, pilots, entrepreneurs, politicians, and leaders in many different fields. Their achievements demonstrate that ability should not be limited by

gender.

Despite this progress, challenges still remain. Gender discrimination, unequal pay, domestic violence, workplace harassment, forced marriage, and harmful stereotypes continue affecting many women around the world. In some societies, traditional beliefs still restrict women's choices regarding education, careers, and personal decisions.

The poem *I Was My Own Route* beautifully reflects this struggle by showing a woman who refuses to let society determine her identity. Like Julia de Burgos's speaker, modern women continue creating their own paths through courage and determination.

True freedom does not mean rejecting others. It means having equal rights, equal opportunities, and equal respect regardless of gender. Governments, families, schools, and communities all share responsibility for creating an environment where women can live safely and confidently.

In conclusion, women's freedom strengthens not only individual lives but also society as a whole. When women are free to develop their talents and make their own choices, everyone benefits from greater equality, creativity, and progress.

b. Compare Julia de Burgos's View of Women with John Donne's View in *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning*

Julia de Burgos and John Donne both write about women, but they present very different perspectives because they belong to different literary traditions and historical periods.

In *I Was My Own Route*, Julia de Burgos presents a woman who actively challenges patriarchal traditions. Her speaker refuses to let society define her identity and insists on creating her own path through courage, independence, and self respect. The poem emphasizes women's freedom, equality, and self realization.

In contrast, John Donne's *A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning* focuses primarily on spiritual love between two devoted partners. The woman in Donne's poem is portrayed as a faithful companion whose relationship with the speaker is based on trust, emotional connection, and enduring love rather than social rebellion. His famous compass metaphor presents husband and wife as equal parts of one spiritual relationship, even when physically separated.

The biggest difference lies in their purpose. Burgos directly criticizes patriarchal systems that limit women's freedom, while Donne celebrates the strength of sincere love between partners. Burgos's speaker fights for independence and personal identity, whereas Donne's speaker emphasizes emotional unity and spiritual commitment.

However, both poets value inner qualities more than outward appearances. Burgos values self respect and authentic identity, while Donne values spiritual love above physical presence. Together, the two poems show different ways literature explores human relationships, identity, and emotional truth.

Simple Question Explanations

Why does the speaker say I was my own route?

The speaker says I was my own route because she decides to create her own path instead of living according to patriarchal expectations. Earlier, she tried to become the woman that society wanted her to be, but she realized that doing so meant hiding her true identity. By choosing her own route, she gains confidence, independence, and self respect.

This statement also becomes a symbol of women's liberation because it encourages women to make their own decisions rather than blindly following traditions that limit their freedom.

What does walking backwards mean?

Walking backwards symbolizes returning to outdated patriarchal traditions that deny women equality and independence. The speaker refuses to move backward because she has already discovered her true identity and no longer wishes to live according to unfair social expectations.

Who are the old guard?

The old guard represents conservative people and social traditions that resist change. They symbolize patriarchal systems that try to keep women obedient, silent, and dependent. Their desperate attempts to stop the speaker show how strongly oppressive systems resist social progress.

What is intimate liberation?

Intimate liberation refers to the speaker's inner freedom. It begins inside her heart and mind before becoming visible in her actions. She

experiences emotional confidence, psychological independence, and spiritual strength after choosing her own path.

Why does the speaker compare herself to a blossom?

The speaker compares herself to a blossom of all the soils of the earth to show that her identity cannot be limited by borders, traditions, or patriarchal restrictions. Like a flower that can bloom freely, she embraces unlimited growth and freedom.

Important Lines and Passages

I was my own route.

This is the poem's most important line because it symbolizes self identity, independence, and the courage to reject patriarchal expectations.

I wanted to be as men wanted me to be.

This line reveals the speaker's painful past, showing how society expected women to shape their lives according to male approval rather than their own desires.

My feet would not accept walking backwards.

This powerful image represents determination. The speaker refuses to return to a life controlled by outdated traditions once she has discovered freedom.

A game of hide and seek with my being.

This metaphor beautifully expresses how the speaker once hid her true identity while trying to satisfy society's expectations.

A blossom of all the soils of the earth.

This line symbolizes universal freedom, suggesting that the speaker belongs to the entire world instead of remaining trapped by artificial boundaries.

Exam Focused Questions

1. How does Julia de Burgos present feminism in I Was My Own Route?

Julia de Burgos presents feminism by giving the speaker a strong, independent voice that rejects patriarchal control. Instead of accepting traditional gender roles, the speaker creates her own identity, challenges social restrictions, and encourages women to pursue equality, dignity, and self respect.

2. Explain the significance of the title I Was My Own Route.

The title symbolizes the speaker's decision to create her own path instead of following one designed by patriarchal society. It represents independence, courage, self discovery, and women's right to determine their own futures.

3. What role does the old guard play in the poem?

The old guard represents conservative defenders of patriarchal traditions. Their resistance symbolizes the obstacles women face whenever they challenge unequal social systems and demand greater freedom.

4. How does the poem portray self identity?

The poem portrays self identity as something that must be discovered from within rather than imposed by society. The speaker becomes truly free only after rejecting expectations that forced her to hide her authentic self.

5. How does the poem use symbolism to strengthen its message?

The poem uses symbols such as the route, walking backwards, blossoms, horizons, wings, and hide and seek to transform personal experiences into universal ideas about freedom, equality, and self realization.

6. What does the poem suggest about social change?

The poem suggests that meaningful social change begins when individuals challenge unfair traditions with courage. Although resistance from conservative forces may be painful, personal liberation can inspire wider change for others.

7. Compare the speaker's past and present identity.

In the past, the speaker tried to satisfy society's expectations by hiding her true identity. In the present, she confidently embraces her independence, rejects patriarchal control, and becomes a symbol of women's empowerment.

Commonly Confusing Points

Does the poem reject men completely?

No. The poem rejects patriarchal domination, not the existence of men. It criticizes unequal social systems that deny women freedom rather than arguing against coexistence between men and women.

What does made of nows mean?

It means the speaker belongs to the present rather than remaining trapped by the burdens of the past or outdated traditions.

Is the route a real road?

No. The route is a symbolic path representing the speaker's personal journey toward independence and self identity.

Why does the speaker's back get ripped by wings?

The ripped back symbolizes the emotional pain and criticism she faces while challenging patriarchal traditions. The desperate wings belong symbolically to the old guard resisting change.

What does the blossom symbolize?

The blossom represents unlimited freedom, personal growth, and an identity that cannot be confined by social restrictions.

Why does the poem use free verse?

The absence of a fixed rhyme scheme reflects the poem's celebration of freedom because its structure itself refuses unnecessary restrictions.

Quick Revision

Poet

Julia de Burgos

Genre

Feminist free verse poem.

Beginning

The speaker remembers trying to become the woman that men wanted her to be.

Development

She rejects patriarchal expectations and begins creating her own path.

Turning Point

The old guard resists her journey, but she experiences intimate liberation instead of surrendering.

Ending

She completely accepts her own identity and refuses to imitate

patriarchal expectations.

Major Themes

Women's liberation, self identity, freedom, resistance, equality, courage, and self respect.

Important Symbols

Route: Self chosen path.

Walking Backwards: Returning to oppressive traditions.

Old Guard: Patriarchal society.

Blossom: Unlimited freedom.

Hide and Seek: Hidden identity.

Literary Devices

Symbolism, metaphor, imagery, repetition, free verse, and a powerful feminist voice.

Key Lesson

The poem teaches that true freedom begins when people reject unfair social expectations, discover their authentic identities, and courageously create their own paths.

One Minute Revision

I Was My Own Route is a feminist poem by Julia de Burgos that celebrates women's liberation and self identity. The speaker remembers trying to satisfy patriarchal expectations before realizing that doing so forced her to hide her true self. She refuses to walk backwards into old traditions, faces resistance from the old guard, experiences intimate liberation, and finally embraces herself as a blossom of all the soils of the earth. The poem ultimately encourages women to reject oppression, choose their own paths, and live with dignity, confidence, and freedom.

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