



Thematic Trends in Claude McKay's Selected Poems of *the Harlem Era*

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Abstract

Black American Literature is a microcosm of the history of the black people's presence on the American continent as it is known today. The literature of the Black Americans cannot be fully separated from the experience of Slavery and Racism which characterized their lives as a community of people whose social, economic and political privileges are tied up with the evils of race and color. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, most black slaves started developing interest in written literature but before this time, they were more interested in the struggle for survival than to spare the time for literary art. This paper reveals the traumatic experiences of the Blacks in the plantations in the hands of their White masters in America through some of the poems of Claude McKay bringing out some themes in such poems to reveal the traumatized life of the Africans.

Keywords: black, socio-history, poem, literature.

1. Introduction

Of all the Renaissance writers, Claude McKay was one of the first to express the spirit of the New Negro. His first American poems appeared in 1917. Before the decade of the Negro Renaissance, he was already winning recognition as an exciting new voice in Negro literature. McKay, who was of black peasant origin himself, used the English dialect of rural Jamaica to record lyrically the life of his people. In evaluating McKay's Jamaican verse, Jean Wagner as recorded by Wayne Cooper (1964:297) has this to say:

Here, we are far from the dialect of the Dunbar school inherited from the whites, who had forged it in order to perpetuate the stereotype of Negro inferiority, and at best fix them in their role of buffoons charged with diverting the white race.

1.1 *The Harlem Era*

The Harlem era, according to Cary D. Wintz, was primarily a literary movement; whose practical and chronological limits are somewhat difficult to define. During the decade of the 1920's, a flowering of artistic activity centred in the Black community of Harlem. Such creative spirit had earlier antecedents, but did not become a recognized self-conscious movement until this decade. Overtime, certain complex socio-historical events combined to create the conditions for a concentration of artists and writers in one location.

The Harlem era symbolized the fact that Black people in America, freed from the constraints of chattel slavery, were now able to seriously grapple with the question of culture (a way of life) and a collective direction for themselves. Blacks now have the opportunity of attending colleges and universities and for the first time are in the position of creating a substantial intellectual class. Charles S. Johnson (1938) in his extensive study of Black College graduates provides valuable information with respect to the rapid growth of the Black intelligentsia. He notes that from all available records from 1826 to 1936, there were 43,821 Black graduates of colleges and professional schools in America. The increase in the number of Black graduates did not really begin until about 1885 and accelerated considerably after 1920.

It should be noted that James Weldon Johnson affirms that the move to Harlem by Blacks was largely engineered by Philip A. Payten – a Black real estate man who was determined to obtain better housing for Blacks in New York. He

approached landlords and presented them with the proposal to fill their empty houses thus thousands of Blacks crowded in Harlem.

According to Jabulanik Makalani in his article titled “Towards a Sociological Analysis of the Renaissance” published in Black World Journal, development of a Black intelligentsia was a significant requisite to the cultural and artistic flowering which took place in the Harlem. Much of the biographical material on major writers of this period shows that college training was a primary characteristic.

Prominent among the Harlem writers were poets like Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967), Claude McKay (1891 – 1948), Jean Toomer (1891 – 1962) et-cetera. These sets of new black poets recaptured the images of Africa while pre-Renaissance poets felt like forgetting about Africa. The Harlem poets were of two categories: the Spiritualists and the Folkorists. The Folkorists were Langston Hughes, James Weldon and Sterling Brown who believed that folk tradition inspired them more than anything else, while the Spiritualists who were Jean Toomer, Comtee Cullen and Claude McKay affirmed strong loyalty to God. These poets influenced other poets worldwide including the African Negritude poets such as David Diop, Peter Abrahams, and Marcus Garvey, a Jamaican whose dream was that the Blacks be moved back to Africa.

2. The Era of Slavery – A Review

Until the 15th C, Africa, south of the Sahara, had remained unknown to Europe. According to Michael Crowder (1940:48) in *The Story of Nigeria*, in classical times, there are references to voyages beyond Cape Bojador. Herodotus recorded that Phoenicians mariners successfully circumnavigated the return of the continent returning through the pillars of Hercules in 612BC. He also mentioned Carthaginian trade in gold with West Africa.

However, during the period starting about 1600 to the nineteenth century, a great change came in these articles of trade. The trade in human traffic replaced the formally existing trade, which are, for example, the trade in the slave to American colonies, a trade in which all the European nations sought fame, wealth and power. In those days, no nation was left out in this race to hunt human beings as commodities. The British, the French, the Portuguese and the Dutch all came out in full force to compete for the trade while trading stations were established at places such as little Popo, Grand Popo, Whydah, Porto Novo, Bonny et-cetera.

The first European country to export slaves from Africa was Portugal in 1441, when Prince Henry’s seamen reached the West African coast looking for the sea-route to India; they captured twelve men, women, children and brought them back to Portugal as slaves. Within seven years, nearly a thousand slaves had been taken away and sold at the Lisbon slaves market. Christopher Columbus’ discovery of the West Indies and America made trading in slavery the most profitable venture. According to Afolabi R.O. in his book titled *A Textbook History of West Africa* (1971:67), the discovery of America therefore was responsible for the greatest increase in slave trade that the world had known. Thus in the 17th C and 18th C, the west coast of Africa became a centre of European enterprise and rivalry with the slaves as the price. There was only one means by which the Europeans could ensure steady supply of slaves, and that was to obtain the cooperation of the local population. In certain instances, it was easy to make raids on sea and riverside villages, but the small numbers of slaves captured by these methods never justified the huge expedition in fitting up a ship to go to the west coast.

According to the experience of one of those that worked with slave masters during 18th Century as reported in Afolabi’s book titled *A Textbook History of West Africa* (1971:67), He posited that the space between decks in slave ships was a bare five feet with rows on ledges on which the chained slaves were tied:

in two rows above the other, on each of the ship, close to each other, like books upon a shelf. I have known them so close that the shelf would not easily contain one more – And every morning perhaps more instances than one are found of the living and dead, like the captives of Mezentius, fastened together. (Hatch, 1971:79).

Also, an American slave trader of the 19th Century added:

I took my round of the half-deck, holding a camphor bag in my teeth, for the stench was hideous. The sick and the dying were chained to corpses, which our drunken overseers had not removed. The blacks were literally jammed between desks as if in a coffin; and a coffin that dreadful hold became to nearly one half of our cargo before we reached Bahia. (Hatch, 1971:79).

This shows the inhuman and barbaric conditions the Africans were subjected to on their way to America. Most of them that revolted were either killed or thrown overboard alive. Slaver captains did not always have it their own way. They often out numbered Europeans ten to one. On the Bonny River, a group of slaves just carried on board an English ship took advantage of the bargaining between the captains and the local chiefs for further supplies of slaves, seized the ships arms and overpowered the crew. This is one reason for the barbarity of the instruments of torture or discipline kept on the ship.

Ralph A. Austen (2004) in his article titled “The Jewish Holocaust as a Model for African – American Slave Trade Discourse: History, Politics and Money”, insisted that:

The Atlantic slave trade had precedents in Africa but makes the very birth of African-American communities. In New World it was not succeeded by liberations, but rather by centuries of slavery almost sixty years of it after the importation of slaves into the United States, by nearly a century of harsh discrimination, often enforced by violence (Falaiye 2003:182).

3. Thematic Exposition of McKay's Selected Poems

According to Lloyd W. Brown in his article "The African Heritage and the Harlem Renaissance" critics in the past have dismissed some African themes in earlier African – American Literature as mere sentimental primitivism, with Harlem renaissance bearing the main brunt of this criticism. Stephen H. Bronz, for example, dismisses what he calls the "artificial tradition" of Africanist themes in Harlem Renaissance writing. According to Wayne Cooper as cited by Brown (1978:1), "black writers of the twenties merely perpetuated plantation images of the happy primitive Negro" while Sterling Brown alleges that their idealization of Africa "was more poetic dreaming than understating".

The Black-American literature possesses a community of themes and subject matters that best express the social, economic and political situations of the Blacks in America. These themes are interwoven with various images of black's communal lives. It is worthy of note, that the protest literature, which invariably takes the form of racial themes, focusing on racial oppression, deprivation of an individual, family or a community of their rightful liberty, forms the main bulk of African – American writing from the plantation era to date. This often leads to a re-evaluation of their cultural heritage which often involves a nostalgic allusion to Africa as the imaginary lost fatherland and reveal a people who are, as a race, coming to terms with their own history in an alien land.

3.1 Claude McKay's Selected Poems

A. 'If We Must Die'

The poem is a militant poem in which the persona calls blackmen in America to arm against racial oppression and lynching. He urges black men to defy all sinister forces and meet violence with violence in ascertaining their ethical dignity in their struggle for social, economic and political emancipation regardless of all odds.

Themes:

Heroic Death: The persona reveals the dignity of black Americans that even if they will die as a result of the suffering and oppression they are undergoing, they should not die like 'hogs' rather should die "a nobly death".

If we must die let it not be like hogs.

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot (lines 1 – 2).

Pride of Africanness: The persona vividly shows the Africanness in him, propagating the beauty of blackness loud and clear in the presence of the whites who see themselves as super human beings.

While round us bark the mad hungry dogs

making their mock at our accursed lot

If we must die, o let us nobly die

So that our precious blood may not be sheet.

(Lines 3 – 6).

Defiance: This theme is evident in the last two lines of the poem, showing how defiant the persona is like 'Abiku' in one of Wole Soyinka's poems who is defiant by coming and going severally.

Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack

Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back! (13 – 14).

B. "Outcast"

The persona laments his plights in an alien land and talks about his root, Africa, a land that breeds peace, love and tranquility. He talks about losing contact with his culture only to embrace alien gods. He regrets ever being given birth to in a foreign land.

Themes:

Alienation: The theme of alienation is evident in the poem whereby the persona is taken away from his natural roots in Africa to a foreign land. He shows lamentation in his utterance about his root; Africa and the fact that he may never see again in life:

For the dim regions whence my fathers came

My spirit, bonded by the body, longs

Words felt, but never heard, my lips would frame

My souls would sing forgotten jungle songs (Lines 1 -4).

Also, the persona is forced to enhance alien gods and culture:

And I may never hope for full release

While to its alien gods I bend my knee (lines 7 -8).

Religion: The persona having been taken away from the shores of Africa is made to embrace alien gods in a foreign land.

While to its alien gods I bend my knee (line 8).

Lamentation: The theme of lamentation radiates over the poem. The persona laments his history seeing himself in bondage from which he may never be free.

Something in me is lost, forever lost,
Some vital thing has gone out of my heart (lines 9 – 10).

C. “Lynching”

The poem reveals the gory sight of the way the Blacks are lynched without being questioned. The Blacks mean nothing to them and they look on them with disdain as if they are not the creation of God. The Whites take joy at the lynching of the Blacks while the young lads (whites) learn more about the act of lynching.

Themes:

Death: The theme of death revolves round the poem when the persona talks about the spirit of the lynched Blacks ascending into heaven in smoke. “His spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven” will have final rest in the bosom of the Lord having suffered greatly on earth in the hands of his fellow white men.

Pain and Sorrow: There is pain and sorrow in the mind of the deceased’s father who painfully witnesses the lynching of his son and could not complain because he too is in bondage and could not question the authority or action of the white masters.

His father, by the crudest way of pain
Had bidden him to his bosom once again (lines 2 – 3).

Betrayal: The theme is evident in the poem and betrayal is as ancient as creation. In the poem, the persona reveals how the white guarding the Blacks in the plantation which he symbolizes with “a bright and solitary star” gives up the Blacks to be lynched with no visible crime committed:

All night a bright and solitary star
Perchance the one that ever guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to fate’s wild whim (lines 5 – 7).

The white Americans during the era of slavery until the late sixties did whatever they liked with the Blacks without any authority questioning their gruesome actions. They saw the Blacks as sub-human. This is quite evident in the biographical work of Richard Wright titled The Black Boy (1980), Tony Morrison’s The Bluest Eyes (1994) and Tony Wilson’s drama piece titled Fences (1985), where all the major characters are blacks and were treated inhumanly by their white masters. Until now, there are still relics of Whites’ hatred towards the Blacks in America.

Horror: The persona brings to the readers’ minds the pitiful and horrible scene of lynching of the Blacks with their bodies dangling on the swinging chair being described as the instrument of torture and death:

Hung pitifully o’er the swinging chair
Day dawned and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun (lines 8 – 10).

The Blacks are hung over the death chamber unquestioned, unchallenged while they carry out their dastardly acts with ignominy.

4. Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is observed that nearly all the literary works of African-Americans reveal the plights of the Blacks in America. William Maxwell affirms that Claude McKay’s poetry is “defined, and defied the boundaries of the Harlem Renaissance”. He describes McKay further as “a peripatetic poet, social radical and self-conscious modernist”. Also, Mary Helen Washington affirms that McKay is “a largely important figure in the development of Caribbean and African-American poetry, and bringing his poems together in one place does an invaluable service to readers of all backgrounds”. McKay’s early and later life evinces a sensitive identification with his people. He is proud of his race and is hurt by the wrongs they suffer.

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