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Dark Phrases of Womanhood: Madness and Imprisonment in Ntozake

Shange's For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow

is Enuf

The first reading of Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" was in 1955. It incited a

national controversy regarding the antiestablishment movement and

counter-culture. Its run-on sentence is equal parts avant-garde and angry,

striking out at the post-World War II American vision, a vision Ginsberg

seems to view as oppressive and stifling. The work begins with a statement

on the potential of the generation: I saw the best minds of my generation

destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves

through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, angelheaded

hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in

the machinery of night...(1-3) Ginsburg's opening passage thus speaks of the

alienation associated with post-war American culture and its subsequent

intellectual conformity (Galens 17). The tempo of the poem seems to further

contextually emphasize the longing for escape from the status quo, even if

the speed of society relegates the group to the fringes of the cultural

mainstream. Much like Ginsberg's "Howl", Ntozake Shange's For Colored

Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf challenges

society's perception of black women in the urban prisons of the 1960s

through the use of unconventional language coupled with a non-traditional

delivery method. Shange's combination of dancing, acting, and regional

lexica set over the spoken word creates a more visceral experience for the

audience than can be achieved solely through an intimate reading. Much like

"Howl", Shange's inclusion of alternate aesthetics allows for an enhanced

sense of empathy for the women and the alienation associated with being

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both female and black. Furthermore, this choreopoem exposes the jagged ends of madness endured by these women, infused into them by their environment. Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* is a sophisticated rendering of the conflict between sanity and madness, subjugation and survival, imprisonment and empowerment, a conflict that stems from a history of oppression and awaits a cultural revolution. The women in Shange's choreopoem alternate between states of self-induced anxiety and despair and levels of madness granted by social constructions. For example, on graduation night, Ulinda is described as crazy because she starts attacking one of the boys at the party. Since the reasons circumscribing the altercation are not divulged, the blanket term "crazy" is applied to her behavior. The lady in blue is encouraged to leave her friend alone and go with Bobby, whom she "gives it up to in a Buick" (Shange 10). The separation of the lady in blue from her friend is, as Andrea Rushing notes, symbolic of the socio-cultural disconnect between black women and the community at large (Rushing 145). She adds that this separation has a "devastating psychic effect" on black women, causing them to lose esteem and self-worth (144). This separation is exemplified by the lady in yellow when she says, "I've lost it...bein alive & bein a woman & bein colored is a metaphysical dilemma...my spirit is too ancient to understand the separation of soul & gender..." (Shange 45). Shange seems to acknowledge the many levels of isolation the black woman faces: isolation within society, within the community, and within the fractured sense of self. Conversely, after the lady in orange ends her discourse on dancing, the others chime in saying "we gotta dance to keep from cryin/ we gotta dance

to keep from dyin” (Shange 15). This form of mental despair is far more intrinsic: it has been generated internally and adapted into the battered senses of self within each of the women. This passage also hints at the beginning of a new community among black women in reaction to the individual isolation each of them endures. Carol Christ likens this solidarity among the women to a “ search for the meaning of the nothingness experienced and a quest for new being” (Christ 98). Through the madness and despair, the women are coming together in an effort to be reborn. The transcendence from madness to sanity is similar to the journey from subjugation to survival. Whether these women survive through dance, music, or, as the lady in yellow states, “ on intimacy & tomorrow”, each of them has something to focus on to keep them alive. Carol Christ offers that there is even acknowledgment that these women know they may have to become as violent as their surroundings if they are to survive (Christ 110). However, it is the moments of solidarity among the women that again culminate in both pride and hope for survival. The lady in orange offers a decree to all and says, “ hold yr head up like it was a ruby sapphire/ I’m a poet/ who writes in English/ come to share the worlds withcu” (Shange 16). Similarly, Shange closes one of her poems detailing male/female relationships with a moment of unity: she held her head on her lapthe lap of her sisters soakin up tearseach understandin how much love stood between themhow much love between themlove between themlove like sisters (42)This passage illustrates the transformation of the fractured woman into the collective, communal woman that cannot be destroyed by men. As Carolyn Mitchell adds, this unified woman, empowered by sisterly love and touch, “ cannot be divided

by competition” of women against women for the affections of men (243). Finally, Shange reconciles the madness, subjugation, and feelings of utter isolation with passages of empowerment and hope for the coming days. The women’s discourse on the various forms of apologies uttered by males renews their confidence, ultimately leading to the lady in blue’s assertion: “one thing i dont need/ is any more apologies...beatin my heart to death/ talkin bout you sorry” (Shange 52-3). Furthermore, the “layin on of hands” exchange between the women represents the actualization of the fractured self and the knowledge that there is power in unity. It is this communication that Carolyn Mitchell says is crucial to the rebirths of these women. They have been “cleansed and bound together by these unique experiences”, and no longer question whether they are animals, ghouls, or crazy people (246). They have realized that there are voices to their words and that they no longer need anyone else to sing their songs (246). The rebirth experienced through the collective sharing of experiences culminates with the lady in red: it waz too much i fell into a numbness til the only tree i cd see took me up in her branches held me in the breeze made me dawn dew that chill at daybreak the sun wrapped me up swingin rose light everywhere the sky laid over me like a million men i waz cold/ I waz burnin up/ a child & endlessly weavin garments for the moon wit my tears i found god in myself & loved her/ i loved her fiercely (Shange 63) In this passage, Shange alludes to a sense of balance between the feminine trees and the masculine sky, each existing simultaneously in harmony. Mitchell states that the culmination of these earthly images symbolizes healing and rebirth and perfectly fits into the lady in brown’s final dedication to the world (247). & this is for colored

girls who have considered suicide/ but are moving to the ends of their own rainbows (Shange 64) The climactic dialogue examines the choice the collective woman has in life—to give up or to accept, reinvent, and unify. Christ succinctly states that the passage offers the affirmation that a woman “ does not have to imitate whiteness or depend on men for her power of being” (117). Consequently, there is much to look forward to. Allen Ginsberg and the antiestablishment Beat movement manipulated language to forge out a new intellectual identity in American society. Beat writers abandoned traditional narrative structure and replaced their words with jazz, marijuana, and life at full speed. Shange, too, chose to disregard the mechanics of grammar and classical narrative; however, rather than recreate language, she imitated the dialect of women in the throes of turmoil. As opposed to Ginsberg, Shange’s imitation of life was the music of anguish, not jazz; not marijuana, but rebirth. Works Cited Christ, Carol P. “ I Found God in Myself...& I Loved Her Fiercely: Ntozake Shange.” *Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, New York: Beacon, 1980. 134-38 Galens, David. “ Howl, Allen Ginsberg: Introduction.” *Poetry Criticism*. 47, 1 (2003): 15-22. eNotes. com. 2 Nov 2007. Ginsburg, Allen. *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights, 1956 Mitchell, Carolyn. “ A Laying on of Hands’: Transcending the City in Ntozake’s Shange’s *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf*,” *Women Writers and the City: Essays in Feminist Literary Criticism*, Boston: University of Tennessee Press, 1984. 230-48 Rushing, Andrea. “ For Colored Girls, Suicide or Struggle.” *The Massachusetts Review*, 22, 3 (1981): 539-50. Literary Resource Center. UMUC’s Information and Library Services. 1 Nov 2007. Shange, Ntozake. *For*

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