

# The black modern



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Poets of the Harlem Renaissance faced a challenge above and beyond that of their modern contemporaries. The two groups were unified in their struggle to make sense of a chaotic reality. But Black poets writing in Harlem confronted a compounded predicament because their race further isolated them from a society that all Moderns struggled to relate to. In the context of a society that was confusing at best, poets endeavored to synthesize what they saw as a fragmented culture. Black soldiers returning from World War I had trouble re-adjusting to segregated life, as they had grown accustomed to more equal treatment abroad. Concurrent with divisions of race was a transformation of the poetic movement. It experienced a revolution of form, content, and function, as poets reacted to a turbulent culture. In addition, poets struggled to adapt to a new readership and its new expectations. Though all Modernist poets faced this struggle, black poets faced it from the edge of society. They were marginalized not just for their blackness, but also for the way they chose to react to the Modern dilemma. Blacks and whites alike criticized Langston Hughes for his informal style. Members of his own community disparaged him for not writing at the white level. Even black poets like Countee Cullen who employed traditional poetic form were viewed as distinctive from other contemporary poets. Hughes' synthesis of his struggle imitated the form of jazz music, blending the black experience with the Modern dilemma. The traditional form of Cullen's work also explores the black-Modern dilemma by contrasting with its content. Despite their divergent forms, Hughes' "The Weary Blues," and Countee Cullen's "Yet Do I Marvel" both serve as examples of black poets with the same purpose: a reconciliation of blackness with the struggles of a Modern world. Though Cullen models "Yet Do I Marvel" after the well-established Shakespearean

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sonnet, its themes are progressive. He infuses the traditional form with modern substance. The poem is written in the rhythmic iambic pentameter and employs highly sophisticated language. Its ABAB rhyme scheme emphasizes a contrast in form and content by linking the last word of every other line in rhyming pairs. The relationships of these pairs reveal Cullen's conflict. The clash of a "kind" God and "blind" humanity, underscored by its rhyme, illustrates Cullen's conception of what it means to live in a modern society. For him, modernity is a collision of new and old, sure and uncertain. He clings to a poetic form that is familiar and well established to tackle contemporary issues. Cullen's faith in God is sure, but he questions His ways. Why most man "someday die" (4) and what compels "His awful hand?" (12). These questions emerge from Cullen's reaction to a modern society that questions and often rejects established tradition. Through a superimposition of traditional style and contemporary content, he illustrates the first of his modern dilemmas. Hughes explores similar modern themes through an imitation of a jazz song. His poem "The Weary Blues" struggles to engage the immediate moment and context, using the form of a jazz song. In its opening lines, the poem both describes a scene, with the narrator listening to a jazz singer's moan, and uses language to imitate the sound of the singer's tune: Droning a drowsy syncopated tune, Rocking back and forth to a bellow croon...He made that poor piano moan with melody. (1-2, 10) These rhetorical literary devices blend the boundaries between poetry and jazz. Using language that reflects his content, Hughes makes his poetry sound like music. In describing a jazz song, he uses language that is melodic. Words like "droning" and "drowsy" hang on the readers tongue in fashion reminiscent of what the words actually mean. The placement of the word "

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syncopated” actually syncopates the rhythm of its line. This influence of the jazz movement on Hughes reflects his peculiar dilemma, and explains much of the criticism of his poetry. He is caught between his identity as a poet and that of a black artist. Whereas Cullen clings to a traditional form, Hughes uses jazz as an attempt to synthesize himself within a larger movement. Cullen is harder to admonish because, at least, he engages in modern themes while preserving traditional form. Conversely, Hughes identifies with singers, not just poets, and also confronts modern issues. While Cullen expresses feelings of distance from a troubled modern society, Hughes’ feelings of distance come from his conflicting persona. He identifies with the entire Harlem Renaissance, and utilizes a contemporary form to unite them all under their common struggle. Cullen perceives the modern world as full of obstacles. As a black poet, he was confined to Harlem, and lived in a segregated and unequal society. In his poem, “ Yet Do I Marvel,” Cullen illustrates this inequality by invoking Greek mythological figures. He wonders why God would “ tortur[e] Tantalus,” who was forced to stand in neck-high water he could not drink, and “ doo[m] Sisyphus,” who He sentenced to roll a bolder up a hill, only to see it fall just before reaching the top, for the rest of eternity. We understand these two mythological figures as suffering their punishments because an omnipotent God deemed them deserving of such fates. Cullen’s question in the last two lines of the poem allow us to understand this mythological reference as an illustration of how he sees himself in a modern context. He wonders why such a great, “ good” God would make “ a poet black” (14). Ostensibly, Cullen does not view black poets as being in a favorable position, and he is not alone – marginalized sentiment is also present in Hughes’ work. This view colors Cullen’s

reference to Sisyphus and Tantalus; as people fated with inescapable obstacles, they reflect troubles faced by black Americans in the early twentieth century. Like Tantalus, blacks were tantalized by the booming society around them, and unable to reap its rewards. And just as Sisyphus was doomed to confront an insurmountable task, blacks were held to unfair standards. As poets, they were asked by some, like W. E. B. DuBois, to uplift their race from the top, and were admonished when it seemed they were not fulfilling their duties. Whites did not see black poetry as equal to mainstream Moderns'. Through an invocation of Greek mythology, we appreciate Cullen's perception that black Americans faced struggles in every facet of life, and, like Sisyphus, saw no potential remedy. Through the lyrics of a jazz singer, Hughes conveys his conception of modern society as solitary and oppressive. The first of the singer's verses illustrates this sense of loneliness: "Ain't got nobody in all this world, / ...nobody but myself." (19-20). Even within the vast modern world – "all this world" – the singer feels alone and isolated. His repetition of the word "I" throughout the verses also emphasizes this isolation. He feels no connection to the modern world. The next verse communicates his dissatisfaction and helplessness: "I got the Weary Blues / And I can't be satisfied / ...I ain't happy no mo'" (25-26, 28). The singer cannot be satisfied; there is nothing he, himself, can do to secure his own happiness. It is his isolation from modern society that produces this dissatisfaction. And though these sentiments seem to be those of a jazz singer, Hughes' emphasis on repetition transforms them into the poet's own. The boundaries between the singer's verse and poet's words are blended as we listen to the fatigued and disengaged moan of the singer. His identification with all Harlem Renaissance artists, regardless of their

discipline, is evident as he adopts the words of the singer through repetition, and takes on their common struggle. He is compelled identify this way because of his seclusion from mainstream society. He says, “ I wish that I had died,” (28) suggesting that modern society’s loneliness compels him to desire death. Though dramatic, these sentiments are perfectly understandable in consideration of the context in which Hughes writes. As a black poet, he is marginalized for his race among both his poetic peers and society at large. Furthermore, Hughes’ style distinguished him from poets like Cullen who, at least, conformed to traditional form. But both wrote of this same marginalization, notwithstanding their divergent styles. The paradox of a modern black poet is a matter that both Hughes and Cullen address. Blacks were blatantly and obviously marginalized from 1920’s society, and certainly not equal citizens. But in addition, they were marginalized from their own genre of poetry. This marginalization stands in stark contrast with the special attention that the modernist movement enjoyed on the whole. Poetic talent was given great attention and widely received. This created a paradoxical identity for poets like Hughes and Cullen – the “ black” part of them admonished and the “ exalted.” Cullen’s expresses this paradox explicitly in the last lines of his poem, as he wonders “ What awful brain compels [God’s] awful hand... / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!” (13, 15). Again questioning God’s motives for making society so troubling, Cullen perceives this dual identity as part of his modern dilemma. Hughes does not address the paradox explicitly, but it can be used to explain the source of the troubles expressed in his poem. His inability to relate to society at large was due to the duality of being a second-class citizen and part of a group of admired artists. The words of the jazz singer’s song, which can be

interpreted as the poet's own, express fatigue. He says, " I got the Weary Blues / and I can't be satisfied." (25-26). There is no satisfaction in the life of a black poet. Hughes is held to both a white and black standard, criticized by his black audience for his use of colloquial language, and from his white audience for attempting to assimilate into the modernist movement. He says, " I ain't happy no mo' / And I wish that I had died." (29-30). His frustration leads him to question whether his paradoxical identity is worth the trouble it causes him. The focus on Harlem Renaissance poetry's divergence from other modern poetry conceals a discussion of the poetry itself. Reducing Cullen's and Hughes' significance to their innovative forms precludes a discussion of their more thematic contributions concerning the nature and challenges of a dual identity. This very struggle of self-determination informed the poets' experimentation with form, and reflected their unequal standing as black artists in a fragmented Modern world.