

Bird from bone: an
analysis of terrance
hayes' american
sonnet



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American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin by Terrance Hayes

suggests that the experience of black Americans is a constant self-love and self-destruction, a separation of “ the song of the bird from the bone.”

Through the expert use of speaker/auditor relationship, metaphor, and structure the poem paints a picture of the complicated and often contradictory relationships that black American’s are caught up in with themselves and with the culture they live in.

The title of the poem, American Sonnet for My Past and Future Assassin immediately sets up a reader expectation that this poem’s speaker and auditor will be at odds. The reader naturally assumes that the “ My” in the title must reference the speaker while the “ Past and Future Assassin” is another entity entirely, presumably one who wants to hurt the speaker. This expectation is at once confused in the opening line, “ I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,/ part panic closet” (Hayes line1-2). Suddenly, the one doing the harming is the speaker, while the auditor is the one being harmed. This forces the reader to reconsider the dynamic at play in the speaker/auditor relationship. The speaker is clearly addressing a black American, as evidenced by the metaphors and allusions present later in the poem like “ song of the bird” (Hays 4) and “ I make you both gym & crow here” (Hayes 7) This begs the question, then, of who the speaker is. The poet Hayes is himself a black American. However, it could be that the speaker is not Hayes, but America or the American sonnet itself, i. e. the thing that is trapping the auditor. However, this wouldn’t explain the contradictory speaker/auditor relationship present in the title, wherein the speaker is the one having harm enacted upon them. It seems likely, then, that Hayes is

both speaker and auditor and that each role represents some part of himself, some attitude that he holds.

To be both the one harmed and the one harming is self-contradictory.

However, this contradiction serves the message of the poem by showing the conflicting feelings Hayes holds about his status as a black American. This should not be taken to mean that his situation is self-imposed. Quite the contrary, Hayes' situation arises from being forced to be a part of this American sonnet and his struggle of trying break free of its influence while also remaining bound to it on some fundamental level. The form of the American sonnet represents structure and tradition. There are certain rules to sonnets, frameworks by which they operate. An American sonnet, then, would exemplify American structure, tradition, and ideals. And what is more traditional in America than the systematic oppression of black people? While Hayes, as the writer of the poem, is entirely aware of the structure and the rules of sonnets and operates within this structure, he also dares to push at the boundaries of what constitutes a sonnet, thereby refusing to adhere totally to the values traditional structure implies. Though his sonnet consists of fourteen lines of iambic pentameter, it lacks a rhyme scheme. Towards the end, it rejects iambic pentameter as well, stripping itself almost entirely of its status sonnet and making it, at the last minute, more akin to free verse poetry. This is not accidental.

Hayes' poem is, quite literally, struggling against itself. The free verse is attempting to break away from the sonnet, the sonnet attempting to reign itself in. It is not coincidental that this happens at the end of the poem where it reads, " It is not enough to love you. It is not enough to want you
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destroyed” (Hayes 14). It is as if the poem is arguing with itself, both in words and in structure, about what it wants. This is simply another metaphor for Hayes’ internal struggle. The poem is rife with metaphors that further illustrate the self-contradiction that Hayes deals with as a black American. The first, and most obvious, among these is the line, “ I lock you in a form that is part music box, part meat/ grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone.” (Hayes 3-4) The mention of birdsong (which is also referenced later in the poem) seems to be a nod to the famous poem Caged Bird, written by black poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou. In Angelou’s poem the bird, which is a metaphor for black Americans, sits in a cage and “ sings for freedom” (line 22). This cage is not dissimilar to Hayes’ American sonnet and his mention of birdsong is a clear reference to Angelou and her bird’s song of freedom. Through the metaphors of the music box and the birdsong, Hayes also seems to be referencing the desire for freedom and the long history of black Americans pushing back against what binds them, while also elevating black culture to a celebrated status by referencing Angelou’s iconic work and by identifying with her as a black poet with a shared language, culture, and history. This is one aspect of the metaphor; the other aspect is the “ meat/ grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone” (Hayes 3-4). The words “ bone” and “ meat grinder” evoke a more visceral tone, a tone that juxtaposes the hopeful message of freedom. Bone, again, references the idea of structure. The meatgrinder attempts to pull apart the bird (which represents the black American) because of the inconsistencies it holds through its bone (the structure and adherence to American ideals) and its song (the desire for freedom from such structures.)

The meat grinder could also simply represent a destruction of self, identity,
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and culture. If the bird is a celebration of black culture and identity then the meat grinder is the desire to kill that connection, a kind of self-hatred—or internalized racism—that is ingrained within black Americans via the structures of American society.

Hayes further expounds upon this idea of separating American cultural ideals and black cultural ideals from one another in the line, “ I make you both gym and crow here” (Hayes 7) The use of the words “ gym” and “ crow” together is an obvious reference to Jim Crow, a reference that could be alluding to either the laws or the racist caricature. Hayes then elaborates, “ As the crow/ you undergo a beautiful catharsis trapped one night/ in the shadows of the gym. As the gym, the feel of crow-/ shit dropping to your floors is not unlike the stars/ falling from the pep rally posters on your walls” (7-11) Again, Hayes uses the bird imagery to refer to the desire for freedom or the heart of black American culture. The “ gym” is yet another box which holds the bird in. While “ catharsis” (or release) may sound hopeful, even positive, the reader soon finds that it is no divine experience. Instead, the bird is simply shitting on the gym floor. This could mean one of two things. Either the bird shit signifies the defiance and rebellion that black Americans engage in through their culture (the bird is taking a shit on the gym, thus defiling it) or it represents the gym’s attitude toward the bird. The gym holds such an apathy toward black American struggle that it doesn’t pay it any special attention to it. Instead, it is a normal fixture of the gym, “ not unlike the stars/ falling from the pep rally posters” (Hayes 10-11) This self-contradictory relationship is summarized when Hayes writes, “ I make you a box of darkness with a bird in its heart” (12) Though it is the bird trapped inside the

gym struggling to escape and though it is the gym trapping and stifling the bird, they are really one and the same, a single entity locked in an unending struggle with itself.

Through an expert use of speaker/ auditor relationship, structure, and metaphor Hayes paints a vivid picture of the convoluted, difficult, and often contradictory relationships that black Americans have with themselves in the context of American culture. He ends the poem by saying, “ It is not enough to love you. It is not enough to want you destroyed” (Hayes 14). Thus, Hayes summarizes in two the sentences the message of the entire poem. For the bird, for the American sonnet, and for Hayes himself, existence is self-love and self-destruction. It is separating the song of the bird from bone.

Works Cited

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