

Harlem renaissance essay

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



During the 1920' African American writers began to make significant contributions to American literature, especially during the Harlem Renaissance. I will discuss three poems or short stories from this literary movement.

The Harlem Renaissance is the term given to the blossoming of the creative arts amongst African Americans, centered on Harlem in the 1920s, and embodying the cultural awakening and recognition of African American writing, painting and sculpture, in the same decade that saw jazz and blues reach a wider audience. Terms like the Harlem Renaissance can be useful to signal a historic movement, but the terms can be dangerous if they mask real differences between writers. (baker, 17) The introduction to The Norton Anthology of American Literature makes clear that within the broad group of writers included in the term the Harlem Renaissance there were:

The Harlem Renaissance sparked arguments between those who wanted to claim membership in the culture at large and those who wanted to stake out a separate artistic domain; between those who wanted to celebrate rural African American lifeways and those committed to urban intellectuality; between those who wanted to join the American mainstream and those who, disgusted by American race prejudice, aligned themselves with worldwide revolutionary movements; between those who celebrated a " primitive" African heritage and those who rejected the idea as a degrading stereotype. (Baym, 1075)

In the texts I have chosen to discuss, these two different approaches will be seen in practice. There is also the question of modernism and to what extent

it was embraced by writers of the Harlem Renaissance. By discussing the chosen works, it will be seen that these three authors chose radically different ways to articulate the experience of being African American.

I immediately noticed that ' Yet Do I Marvel' by Countee Cullen is a perfect Shakespearean sonnet and that there are ten syllables in each line. This is a European poetic form that is over four hundred years old. Cullen seems clearly to want to demonstrate his ability to use traditional poetic forms to articulate his experience. But there is more to the poem than that: I had to look up the references to Tantalus and Sisyphus in order to understand them - they are allusions to European myth; you do not have to be a literary critic to notice that Cullen's vocabulary is erudite and complex - " caprice," " inscrutable", and " catechism" - and which might act as barriers to understanding by anyone with a limited vocabulary or without knowledge of European myth. I had to look all these things up which suggests to me that Cullen is writing in an elitist way. Cullen also inverts the normal word order for the sake of the rhyme in line 9 - a practice which now sounds archaic. The poem is a reflection on the ways of God: why God made the mole blind, why God made human beings (" flesh that mirrors him") mortal. The final couplet is the most curious: " Yet I do marvel at this curious thing, / To make a poet black, and bid him sing!" (13 - 14) On one hand, this is significant because it is claiming that Cullen's talent is God-given, which implies that it is a good and enriching thing. However, it seems slightly patronizing to me - why should it be a " curious thing" that a poet might be black? Some might argue that ' curious' is not a bad word, that it merely raises questions - but why should we even question the existence of a black poet? For me it sounds

condescending. Cullen is not frightened of drawing attention to his color; he is clearly proud to be African American, but he seems to feel the need to acknowledge that it is unusual for a poet to be black. According to the book named *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Aesthetic*, Houston Baker (47) writes that “ Cullen was celebrated by black people because he demonstrated authentic, poetical achievement to appreciative whites.” To accuse Cullen of a lack of authenticity is, Baker argues, to miss the point: “ His guiding mode was not the realistic but the romantic, and he believed the poet was in tune with higher spiritual forms than a social tactician.” (53)

“ Ain’t got nobody in this world.

Ain’t got nobody but ma self.

I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’

And put ma troubles on de shelf.” (19 - 22)

Here in contrast to Cullen’s erudite vocabulary and classical allusions, we have phonetic spelling to imitate speech and non-standard forms like “ ain’t” which give the poem authenticity. Here, to use the words of the Norton Anthology of American Literature introduction quoted above, Hughes does not seem to want to “ enter the American mainstream”, but to create a distinctively African American tradition. The subject matter of the poem assists his goal: it is a celebration of the blues; it is a poetic blues poem about a singer singing the blues. In *The Art and Imagination of Langston*

Hughes, Baxter Miller's comment about Hughes whole work applies especially well to this particular poem:

" Any elitist assessment of Langston Hughes must fail. Open to the range of human emotion, they express misanthropy, egoism, or cynicism.

In the display of the solo self, they reveal a concern for the choral one as well. Here the individual talent speaks within the cultural and racial tradition." (51) Here where Miller speaks of the " choral one", he implies that Hughes is trying to articulate a universal experience of all African Americans. Hughes's own lines in the poem use repetition and a variation in line length which is reminiscent of popular song:

He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.

Sweet Blues!

Coming from a black man's soul.

O Blues! (13 - 16)

Throughout the poem Hughes uses simple words - just as a popular song would - and one can imagine this poem being set to music very easily.

The extract from Cane by Jean Toomer gives us a taste of what the whole work is like. The introduction to the Norton Anthology of American Literature has this to say about modernism:

... a key formal characteristic of the modernist work, whether a painting, a sculpture, or a musical composition, is its construction out of fragments. The

long work is an assemblage of fragments, the short work a carefully realized fragment. Compared with earlier writing, modernist literature is notable for what it omits - the explanations, interpretations, connections, summaries, and distancing that provide continuity, perspective and security in traditional literature. (Baym, 1078)

This description can be applied almost exactly to *Cane* - which is a series of impressionistic fragments, part prose, part poetry; part omniscient narrator, part first person narrative. As a work of literature it deliberately breaks boundaries - it is not a conventional novel, and it is not a collection of short stories. This breaking of boundaries is important because Toomer is reacting to centuries of miscegenation (itself a breaking of boundaries): indeed, Daphne Lamothe (56) calls slavery and the segregated society of the South "an ideology of enforced fragmentation and difference" in "Cane: Jean Toomer's Gothic Black Modernism." Toomer responds to this enforced fragmentation with his own fictive fragmentation in *Cane*: his form is a perfect mirror for the experiences of his characters.

Let me examine one extract in detail to show how radically different Toomer's technique was. On page 54 of *Cane* there is a poem which could stand alone called 'Her Lips Are Copper Wire.' It is not like Cullen's poem - it does not rhyme and has no regular line length; it is not like Hughes's poem - it uses no phonetic spelling or non-standard grammar. Furthermore, in contrast to Hughes's 'The Weary Blues' its meaning is not immediately apparent: there are striking images - 'whisper of yellow globes' - and the poem seems to be addressed to a lover - 'press your lips to mine/till they

are incandescent,' but it is impressionistic and mysterious, matching Toomer's own amazement at the invention of the telephone. It is followed by ' Calling Jesus', a one page fragment which appears unrelated to the poem. ' Calling Jesus' uses an unusual simile from the beginning to describe an unnamed woman's soul: " her soul is like a little thrust-tailed dog that follows her, whimpering." (Toomer, 55) What follows is a descriptive vignette, a snapshot, of this woman's life. The unnamed narrator ends with description on a note of gentle, reassuring compassion: " the little dog is left in the vestibule," but

Someone... eoho Jesus... soft as the bare feet of Christ moving across bales of southern cotton, will steal in and cover it that it need not shiver, and carry it to her where she sleeps: cradled in dream-fluted cane. (55)

The gentleness of this act, re-enforced by the softness and connotations of the words - " soft," " sleeps," " cradled," - present a reassuring image of security. This snapshot is followed on page 56 by ' Box Seat', a surrealistic short story about Dan Moore, who is dating a teacher called Muriel. For me the most striking writing occurs on the first page. Dan is described going up to Muriel's front door and the thought occurs to him that an onlooker might think he is breaking into the house. Toomer then presents Dan's stream of consciousness response to this notion that he might be a burglar:

Dan: Break in. Get an ax and smash in. Smash in their faces. I'll show em. Break into an engine-house, steal a thousand horse-power fire truck. Smash in with the truck. I'll show them. Grab an ax and brain them. Cut them up. (Toomer, 56)

In this fantasy, when the cops come, Dan justifies his actions in this way:

' I'm a poor man out of work. Take your hands off me, you bull-necked bears. Look into my eyes. I am Dan Moore. I was born in a canefield. The hands of Jesus touched me. I am come to a sick world to heal it.' (Toomer, 56)

This fantasy can be seen as a reaction to the white stereotyping of African American criminality, but it also shows the strong feelings of pride that Dan has in his identity, and his suppressed feelings of violence towards the racist society he lives in. His words in the last quotation - ' I am come to a sick world to heal it' - and the mention of the ax earlier reminded me of what I have read of Nat Turner. (Oates, 52 - 70)

However, in *Cane* the paragraph's importance is its unexpectedness and the sudden shift in perspective to give us Dan's thoughts first-hand. I think this examination of three pages from *Cane* has shown that if the key characteristic of a modernist work is " its construction out of fragments" (Baym, 1078), then Toomer is the only one of these three writers who truly embraces modernism.

In conclusion, it can be seen that on the evidence of these texts, Cullen chose to work in traditional European poetic forms; Hughes attempted to create an African American aesthetic which was distinct from the mainstream; and Toomer fully embraced the innovations of modernism. To think of all three as African American writers of the Harlem Renaissance is accurate in a sense, but it is dangerous because it masks the very real differences between the literature that they produced.

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Slaver and the Civil War in Modern American Literature

I have chosen to look at four texts from Volume E of the Norton Critical Anthology of American Literature which all show the enduring legacy of slavery, over a hundred years after the historical event of the Civil War and the historical phenomena of slavery, the reconstruction era and the mass migration of African Americans to the northern cities. Slavery and the Civil War fought to end it, still hold sway over the imaginations of American writers and, although we now have an African American president, some of the fault lines of American society are still based, sadly, on racial difference. It has remained a potent subject for writers from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) also shows, in its psychological portrait of Blanche Du Bois, the long-term effects of the post-bellum period, on an intensely private, but also on a wider social level. Williams's portrayal of Blanche is profound and multi-faceted, but when I read the play I could see that she could clearly be seen as a symbol of the South. She comes from a wealthy family and considers herself grander than she really is; she feels regret about the wealth and gentility she once had, but has now lost; she feels socially superior to Stanley and Mitch; she is very evasive about the past. In the play this comes across as Blanche being evasive about her sexual past - but the evasiveness and the guilt she seems at times to show about the past, might be applied, in a very general way, to the South and its guilt about the slave-owning past and its economic decline in the century that followed the end of the Civil War. Blanche's nostalgia for

Belle Reve (Baym, 1994) is analogous to the South's deluded nostalgia about its past.

Robert Lowell's poem ' For the Union Dead' (1964) is rather different from the other three texts I have chosen. Lowell is from a prominent and famous New England family and his attitude to the Civil War seems unequivocal. The subject matter of the poem is a famous statue commemorating Colonel Robert Gould Shaw who led the first African American regiment in the North against the Confederacy. Lowell sees a serious moral purpose in the sacrifice of these men's lives - " Two months after marching through Boston/half the regiment was dead" (Baym, 2777, lines 25 - 26) - for a cause they believed in. As he writes the poem, the statue is being protected while an underground car park is constructed. For me the poem suggests that American values have changed. Lowell points out that there is no memorial to the Second World War, but an image of Hiroshima is used in an advertisement hoarding: on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph shows Hiroshima boiling over a Mosler safe, the " Rock of Ages" that survived the blast. (Baym, 2777, 55 -58)

The sense of morality that caused the Civil War to end slavery has been replaced by rank commercialism - the bombing of Hiroshima being used to sell things. Lowell notes too that despite the sacrifice of Shaw and his men, segregation still exists in the South and on the television he sees " the drained faces of Negro school-children" (60) in reports about protests in the South about segregated schools. The moral integrity of men like Shaw has been replaced by a culture dependent on the automobile and the poem ends

with the fact that Boston Aquarium has gone (to make way for the underground car park) and everywhere, giant finned cars nose forward like fish; a savage servility slides by on grease. (Baym, 2778, 65 - 68)

The alliteration on ‘ s’ in the last two lines sounds sinister and sums up Lowell’s contempt for modern America.

James Baldwin’s ‘ Going to Meet the Man’ is a shocking and powerful story set in the heat of the civil rights movement of the 60s. It was published in 1965 and follows the thoughts of a white policeman who is having difficulty getting to sleep: he seems very worried about a demonstration at a court the next day. As he drifts towards sleep he remembers a childhood experience when his parents took him to the public lynching of an African American – a lynching and burning which was attended by a huge crowd of white people with refreshments and who, in the policeman’s memory, watch with relish as the African American is slowly burned to death and tortured with knives. His alleged crime would seem to have been rape of a white woman since a key part of the proceedings is the severing of the man’s penis, before he is literally ripped to pieces by the crowd, eager to get back to the refreshments they have brought. What is so horrifying is the brutality of this scene and the sadistic pleasure that the main character remembers seeing in his mother’s face as the man is tortured and suffers barbaric injuries.

He watched his mother’s face. Her eyes were very bright, her mouth was open; she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her, and more strange. He began to feel a joy he had never felt before. He watched the hanging, gleaming body, the most beautiful and terrible object he had ever seen till then. (Baym, 2201)

Such lynchings were commonplace in the South in the first half of the twentieth century, and it has been estimated that on average there was one a week somewhere in the southern states between 1900 and 1939. (Carroll & Noble, 219) The main character's memories of the lynching merge in his mind with a beating he has given an African American civil rights protestor in the cells: Jesse comes across as a sadistic racist whose views and actions are repugnant and shocking. The subject matter of the story, however, is how this middle-aged white man is reacting to the changed situation in the 1960s where the Civil Rights movement has made such lynchings no longer possible. Baldwin shows the policeman as being filled with racial hate in a bizarre way and in a way that demonizes black sexuality: his memory of the lynching he observed as a child gives him an erection and he makes love to his wife at the end of the story.

Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use' refers to the failure of reconstruction in the South, but also refers to another historical event in American history - the Civil Rights movement. The story is narrated by Mama who certainly does not refer explicitly to those historical events, but as an intelligent reader I can see that they are the foundation of the story. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s empowered blacks, especially urban blacks. Dee, Mama's older daughter, is presented as typical of this new empowered black middle class. Dee has tried to get more in touch with her African heritage to the extent of changing her name and having as her partner an African American who has converted to Islam - which was quite a trend at the time amongst some African Americans. However, in the story Dee/Wangero has lost contact with her roots in the rural south, the lived experience of poor blacks scrabbling to

make a living in the century following the Civil War. Because the story is narrated by Mama we are encouraged to see Dee/Wangero's attitudes as pretentious and superficial: the argument at the end of the story over the quilts exemplifies how far Dee is ostracized from her own family. She wants the quilts to hang on the wall, to be denotative items designed to show the authenticity of her poor rural past. On this issue Mama refuses to let her have the quilts and I understood the significance of the story's title. Mama wants to keep the quilts for her younger, less gifted, less attractive daughter, Maggie, because, as she says, "Maggie knows how to quilt." (Baym, 2474) In other words, Maggie is in touch with her real roots in the post-war poverty of the south, while Dee/Wangero is more interested in the seemingly exotic rediscovery of an African heritage which is centuries away, ignoring her own mother and her sister. Maggie will put the quilts to everyday use; Dee will treat them as art. At the very end of the story Dee/Wangero says to her mother, "You just don't understand... your heritage," (Baym, 2475) but this is clearly ironic: Dee is the one who will not face up to the reality of the past of slavery and the continuing struggles of African Americans in poor rural Southern communities.

In these four texts the lingering effects of the Civil war and the legacy of slavery can be seen. Blanche Du Bois cannot face up to the failures of the past and her loss of honor and status; Lowell contrasts the idealism of the Union soldiers with the crass commercial modernity of Boston in the early 1960s, while showing awareness of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement. Baldwin presents the sadistic thoughts of an engrained racist and Walker

shows differences between African American experiences and attitudes to the past.

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