

Messages of strength and pride in three poems

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Poems from the Harlem Renaissance provide vibrance and energy for the reader as they enliven a culture and tradition never before seen in the United States. The poems “Chicago,” by Carl Sandburg, “The Harlem Dancer,” by Claude McKay, and “Mother to Son,” by Langston Hughes, all embody this strong culture through vivid images and lingering metaphors. While they show the pride and substance of their subjects, the poems also hint at a bit of vulnerability as well. Therefore, these three poems metaphorically illicit outward shows of strength and pride which hide pain, toil and even resentment underneath.

Strength is an attribute of a person who has toiled and prevailed despite the overwhelming odds against him. In the first half of the poem, “Chicago,” the first person speaker is addressing the city through a series of metaphors. First, he addresses it as a series of occupations which all require great physical strength but which do not have an association with upper class wealth or power:

HOG Butcher for the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and the Nation's Freight Handler (Sandburg, lines. 1-3). These images create a masculine, hulking mood for the reader. It is evident that life in this city requires brawn and even a cunning mind. The speaker notes the physical attributes of the city, which can be compared to a man: Stormy, husky, brawling, City of the Big Shoulders” (Sandburg, lines. 4-5).

The city is personified as a hard-working and proud blue collar worker who may have to resort to underhanded dealings in order to survive.

However, as the poem progresses, the metaphors change. The speaker begins with a parallel series of descriptions - "wicked," "crooked," and "brutal," to characterize the city along with a justification for each. He notes the city is "sneering" but with lifted head singing so proud to be alive and coarse and strong and cunning" (Sandburg, lines. 18-19).

The suggestion is that the city demands more than hard work; it sometimes takes pain and trickery from its inhabitants. However, the messages notes that sometimes this behavior is necessary for survival, and that the city has no moral problem with crime, corruption and manipulation.

Finally, the poem shifts to the metaphor not of a man at all, but a beast. This creature is Fierce as a dog with tongue lapping for action, cunning as a savage pitted against the wilderness" (Sandburg lines. 23-24).

Now the city is not human, but savage and untamed, reflecting the problems it presents for the survival of its dwellers. They must endure, the smoke, the dust, the teeth and the burden of the city and somehow manage to laugh, even as an ignorant fighter laughs who has never lost a battle" (Sandburg, lns. 34-35).

The bottom line for this poem is pride. Sometimes the people had to be dishonest and brutal, but they have an immense pride in getting to where they are. The personified images of the city portray all of these emotions for the reader.

"The Harlem Dancer," by Claude McKay, focuses on the single image and experience of a boy watching a girl dance. While the image is softer, it can correlate with the message from "Chicago." Of course, the undertone is

that these dancing girls are prostitutes, tempting the boys to wrongdoing, but that is part of the magic of the experience for these Harlem youth. Despite her degrading occupation, the dancer of note is elevated to idealistic proportions in the eyes of the speaker.

First, she is half-clothed, and swaying, which reminds the young man, oddly, of a palm tree. He notes, To me she seemed a proudly-swaying palm Grown lovelier for passing through a storm (McKay, lines. 7-8).

With this description, the reader understands that even the boy recognizes that this girl does not belong in Harlem. After all, no palm trees grow anywhere near Harlem; they are products of more tropical, exotic climates, as is the dancer. He also insinuates that she has endured hardships herself, the storm he notes, and finds her more attractive for having survived those hardships.

Next, the speaker notes the melodic, otherworldly quality of her voice. He says, Her voice was like the sound of blended flutes Blown by black players upon a picnic day (McKay, lines, 3-4). The airiness of her voice and their comparison to prayers places the girl in an almost angelic realm, oddly juxtaposed to her actual position as a prostitute. This angelic nature is further emphasized by her "gauzy" dress, her graceful body, and her "shiny curls." To the speaker, she is perfection, something he has never before experienced.

However, underneath the beautiful figure of the dancing girl is something else, something that the boy eventually notices. She is not the strong and serene figure he initially perceives. She is, in his words, not there. He notes

But, looking at her falsely-smiling face

I knew her self was not in that strange place (McKay, lines 13-14).

The speaker comes to realize that she is not truly the confident and strong person that he initially perceived her to be. In order to get through her day, she has to somehow transport herself elsewhere, and he has bought into it for a while. She is not ideal or perfect but has had her own shares of struggles and deceptions.

The poem "Mother to Son," by Langston Hughes, also illuminates the theme that life is a struggle, but one that should make a person proud. The speaker is an African-American mother who is attempting to relate a life lesson to her son. She uses a metaphor of a crystal staircase to try to emphasize the hardships she has endured in getting to the place she is now. The clever analogy notes that a crystal staircase would be smooth and easy to climb, unlike the experience the mother relays:

Well, son, I'll tell you: Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had tacks in it, And splinters, And boards torn up, And places with no carpet on the floor -- Bare. (Hughes, lines 1-7)

Her life journey was painful and filled with obstacles, and she wants her son to realize this so that he will be ready for his own obstacles and hardships in life. She does not want him to grow up expecting to have things handed to him, but to expect to have to work hard for the things he wants.

Another message that she wants to convey to her son is that he should never give up despite these hardships. She wants to encourage him:

So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard (Hughes, lines 14-16).

In addition to warning him about the condition of the stairs and the difficulty of traversing them, the mother is also warning her son of the dangers. She notes that sometimes the stairs are dark, and she warns him against falling. Of course, the grand metaphor for life is apparent. Life is sometimes dark, full of pitfalls, and daunting, but she has continued the journey and is endeavoring to make her son do the same.

She is not making the journey sound easy; clearly, they were not the privileged individuals, but she is attempting to instill endurance through her message. After all, she is still climbing the stairs, and if she can do it, so can he.

All three of these poems address issues of life and perseverance. None of the lives described seem easy. Life in "Chicago" is compared ultimately to a beast that laughs and sneers. Life as "The Harlem Dancer" is empty for her, as she continually desires to be somewhere else. Life on the broken staircase is uncertain and treacherous. However, all three scenarios represent the continual toil of life, and the pride that these individuals have. They may not have riches, easy jobs, or crystals stairs, but they have their work ethic and their sense of self-worth, and that is all that matters.

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