

Comparison of i have a rendezvous with life and the ballad of the brown girl



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Countee Cullen is one of the most famous African-American poets who has won more literary prizes and recognitions than any black American has ever won before. He came into prominence quite early in his life. Becoming quite famous already in the high school he has been recognized as an outstanding poet before he was 25 when he published such poems as " I Have a Rendezvous with Life" and " The Ballad of the Brown Girl" (Johnson). So, " The Medea" and " The Lost Zoo" which I am going to compare and criticize in this paper are during his late period (in the age of 37 and 31 respectively).

I am going to argue that both poems are still valuable today because of their didactic nature. By writing them Cullen attempted to express and somehow summarize his ideas of that what is good and what is bad, as well as about morals and proper behavior. They are all written for children, even if those children believe themselves to be adults. Since 1934 Cullen taught English and French at the Frederick Douglas Junior High School. He has been offered a position of a lecturer at the Fisk University in Nashville which he declined. Thus he has chosen a career of a teacher, not a lecturer and scientist.

His interest to work with children and writing for children later clearly revealed when he wrote " The Lost Zoo", yet it can be traced already in the " Medea and other poems". Why among numerous Greek tragedies has Cullen chosen to translate exactly " The Medea", and why has the translation been accompanied by a set of Cullen's own verses? The answers can be found after reading this poetry collection and comparing its themes and motifs to the ones of Euripides. The original myth of Medea, as it has been told by Euripides, is a story of an aggrieved woman who has been driven to a disastrous path by her passion and despair.

Cullen provided a modern translation of Euripides story (Corti 202) and the other poems included to the collection can be viewed as Cullen's commentary to the problem. Medea's fate is reflected in "The Magnets" in which Cullen writes of "The straight, the swift, the debonair" who "are targets on the thoroughfare". This passage can be viewed as a personal reflection, yet in the light of "Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song", another Cullen's poem, it can be interpreted in a broader social context, as a vision of an entire nation driven to the wrong pass.

Cullen begins the poem by imagining poets who will sing and their cries "Their cries go thundering Like blood and tears". The period when Cullen wrote this poem was marked by a deep spiritual crisis following the Great Depression, so Cullen observes that in the world "Is all disgrace And epic wrong" and wonders why the poets have not eventually risen their voices against this wrong. This poem is to put a rhetoric question but not to give an answer. Cullen attempts to make his readers themselves concerned with the moral descent, to awaken their own minds and conscience.

Otherwise they are likely to repeat Medea's mistake. This was Cullen's teaching method: he has not expressly developed own philosophy and preferred to teach through parallels and comparison (Nelson 91). It can be observed that Cullen's teaching and moralization is not only for children, but for adults as well, perhaps more for adults than children. His "The Lost Zoo" published in 1940 is for the "young but not too young". Although this writing may seem childish, in it Cullen once again (after "Black Christ") rises to the Biblical heights in his poetry (Nelson 90).

In "The Lost Zoo" Cullen tells tales of animals that for some reasons could not get onto Noah's Arc thusly teaching his readers certain life lessons (Silvey 3). Squilililigee's story is a warning both against teasing and against excessive susceptibility, while the story of a Snake-That-Walked-Upon-His-Tale is a warning against arrogance and false vanity (See: Cullen, Pinknee 1991). In fact, neither of the lost animals was fated and each of them could be saved in case they themselves behaved in a proper way. The conduct of the lost animals ruins them because they attempt to be that what they are not. This is a typical mistake of all times.

Cullen is a man of his time, yet his verses are of universal everlasting value. They are topical in our days same as in the days of Cullen. When Cullen wrote both "Medea" and "The Lost Zoo" he played a role of a teacher rather than a poet and he was able to teach not only children but adults as well. Human passions never change, and so Cullen's poems will never lose their importance, just like "Medea" by Euripide and the Biblical story of an Arc have not lost theirs. Each generation understands and interprets them in their own manner just as Cullen interpreted the Bible and Medea. Works Cited: 1. Cullen Countee. *The Medea and Some Poems*.

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