

The work and life of Lucille Clifton: a biographical approach



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“ You can walk in another’s shoes, the saying goes, but you cannot walk in his skin.” -Tracey Mishkin

Lucille Clifton is an author whose work brings forth attention to “ forms of oppression such as the exploitation of women, people of colour, and other subjugated groups” (Hashim). Clifton utilized her background as an African-American woman in a New York neighborhood and incorporated “ black experience, family life, and the female body” to be “ the main concerns” of her poetry (Hashim). Lucille Clifton was born and raised in Depew, New York. Neither her father nor mother, Samuel and Thelma Sayles, were educated; however, they laid the ground experiences for Clifton’s work (Moody).

Lucille Clifton began writing around age twelve; In an interview with Hilary Holladay, Clifton said that what caused her to begin writing is that inner urge that everyone has to express themselves. Clifton said, “ Cooks do it with food; there are people that do it with hair, clothing, fabric. I loved words, always, the sound of words, the feeling of words in my mouth, and so I did it that way” (Holladay 182). Clifton’s expressions could not have come at a more inspiring time. She began her work during the “ Explosive Black Arts Movement” (Mishkin 305). In this paper, I will connect Clifton’s poetry to her background and this movement in particular. “ oh antic god” is one of Clifton’s later poems. It showcases the love she felt for her mother and the sadness that, even years later, lingers at her loss. The speaker of the poem thinks that God’s action of taking her mother was some ‘ antic,’ a cruel joke of sorts. At any time period, mothers are normally important and influential in their children’s lives. This was especially the case in Clifton’s life, as she drew her early inspirations and skills from her poet mother.

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Assuming that Clifton is the direct speaker, she just wants to remember her mother and everything she contributed to her life because “ though her wild hair scratches my [speaker’s] dreams,” she can barely remember her mother’s characteristics (Clifton 1482). “ the lost baby poem” and “ miss rosie” are similar to Lucille Clifton’s “ oh antic god” in the way that all three are poems of remembrance. “ the lost baby poem” is centered around a longing and regretful mother and her thoughts toward her aborted child. The poem is broken into three sections. The first section speaks of the actual abortion. The second is the mother’s excuses, and the third section is the lessons she learned from the experience. This time period was a particularly difficult time to live in and poverty rates were high, especially for an African-American female. The speaker uses this as a rather logical and good excuse in the lines that say what the child would have been born into, such as no money and cold. The speaker made the choice to abort, a common choice during this time, because she knew she could not provide; however, at the time she now speaks from, she has new children. She makes a promise to herself and her unborn child, a promise that she will do right by her unborn by caring for the baby’s living siblings. There is respect due to the mother for her decision. On the subject of respect is “ miss rosie.” This poem initially has a sympathetic tone that turns to hints of harshness and hatred at the words, “ you wet brown bag of a woman” (Clifton 1479). While there is this tone, it sounds almost as if the speaker contributes some of his or her success to this miss rosie character and is just disappointed in the person miss rosie has become. Miss rosie could be an example of how the world swallows people up and tosses them aside like garbage and old potato peels.

The speaker probably has a fear of becoming like the fallen “ Georgia Rose” (Clifton 1479).

Lucille Clifton’s era was a particularly difficult time for women, especially those of color, and their struggles were probably not understood by many men. For this reason, “ wishes for sons” was probably popular among female communities that understood where the speaker was coming from. One of the most feminine experiences is a menstrual cycle. It’s a time of pain that reoccurs constantly. No man has ever experienced the embarrassment, pain, and worry of a period, and the speaker just wishes that all the males of the world could experience a menstrual cycle so that they would know and understand the constant battle of women in everyday life. Women are constantly fighting a battle that they never win, and unfortunately for women of Lucille Clifton’s time, it was a battle all too well-known. One step forward for them never lasted, as they were knocked back two more. It was like a double whammy for women of color. It has always been a cycle in which results seem lasting and promising but never are, like the way “ the mississippi river empties into the gulf.” There is so much water in the world that you never think of water returning somewhere that is has already been, but it has been a long cycle and some water is bound to go back to the place and way it was. Even if not, old water is still replaced. In the sense of women, old struggles are replaced with new struggles, and many struggles reoccur over time. “ the mississippi river empties into the gulf” may be a short poem, but it speaks volumes nonetheless.

Speaking volumes in few words is something that Lucille Clifton could do with all her works. Her absence of capitalization also aided in this. For some <https://assignbuster.com/the-work-and-life-of-lucille-clifton-a-biographical-approach/>

reason, as a reader, more emotion is felt through the lowercasing of even her titles; however, even as you could feel, sympathize, and understand the content of Clifton's work, you cannot truly know her struggles. It is a new time with new struggles, and you are the outsider. As Jocelyn Moody states about Clifton, "you can walk in another's shoes, the saying goes, but you cannot walk in his skin." We are of privileged times and privileged color.

Works Cited

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