

Discuss mckays poem america essay sample

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In the 1920's many African Americans compromised themselves by conforming to the ideals of many white Americans. Segregation in schools, buses and neighborhoods were all common place, many African Americans accepted these terms for the sole purpose of living their lives as happily as they can within the confines of society. There were a number of people who challenged these beliefs and ideals; some were forceful in their ways and others who were more discreet with their form of protest and opinion. Claude McKay challenges the ideals in his poem "America" by writing in the traditional form, not separating himself from what is considered the mainstream.

McKay's poem "America" is written in the traditional format. If McKay was to write his poem in the non-traditional sense, he would be immediately separating himself from other authors with his unorthodox style. Before the poem is examined the reader will make a judgment based on the style of the poem, overshadowing the meaning the author intended. The poem "America" follows a straightforward ABAB CDCD EFEF GG format. He is writing to a universal audience, one that is not bound by various stigmas of society.

Rather than use form to get his message across, McKay uses more discreet measures to get his point across. Through the use of imagery McKay is able to provide the reader with a mental image to better describe his message. McKay begins his poem with a bleak description of America, "Although she feeds me bread of bitterness,/ And sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,/ Stealing my breath of life, I will confess". (Line 1-3) The opening two lines of the poem create a less than desirable depiction, one that challenges the usual characterization of made America.

The poem begins with the word although. Although is used in this case to make the reader aware that they will be reading about a not so pleasant situation, but stay tuned because there is some good to come out of it.

McKay's choice of words sets up line four, somewhat changing the direction of the poem, " I love this cultured hell that tests my youth."(line 4) The poem takes a dramatic turn with this line; it is a contradiction of words that do not make sense. Hell is usually associated with evil, a place that no one wishes to be, but the speaker in this poem enjoys the situation he finds himself in. It challenges the reader to make some sense of it meaning. How is it possible that this person enjoys being in a place that offers him such a horrible life? McKay in this passage is deconstructing the traditional vision of America being a cultural melting pot and is an example of how McKay discussed his position as a black American living in the 1920's.

Another important aspect to examine in this poem is who the speaker is and more importantly how the subject is portrayed in the poem. In this poem America is portrayed as a mother figure. The opening line of the poem explains how " she feeds me" (line 1) suggesting a motherly figure. The mother of a child, for the most part, does not feed her child " bread of bitterness" (line 1). This portion suggests that the motherly figure only gives the child what it needs to survive; representing black Americans inequality. The country keeps them alive, but it only provides them with what the others do not want, " the bitter bread."

The speaker in the poem America is another tool McKay uses to his advantage. Portions of the poem are more personal than others, while other

portions seem to be a public voice. The position of the speaker in any poem is one of importance, but what makes America stand out is the fact that the author makes no mention of his background throughout the entire poem. Given the fact that McKay is a black author during the 1920's and the subject matter is one that is still prevalent today, and one that in many cases is exclusive to various classes of society. However McKay was making a statement by not making that distinction. The point being made is that the problem of racism affects everyone, regardless of who you are. Various lines from the poem demonstrate how diverse the descriptions are and require the reader to dissect the poem. For example in lines five to seven, " Her vigor flows like tides into my blood,/ Giving me strength erect against her hate,/ Her bigness sweeps my being like a flood." (Line 5-7) These lines could pertain to anyone; it is a universal description of what America, according to the author, stands for.

In line 9 of the poem, the change of attitude begins, " I stand within her walls with not a shred/ Of terror, malice, not a word of jeer". (Line 9-10) The speaker informs the reader in these of his current position. He is surrounded by walls; he is trapped a comparison of black Americans in the 20's. They are trapped within the boundaries of what American society dictates. However he goes on to point out that, although he is trapped, fear has not taken over him.

In the final two line of the poem McKay discusses what he believes the future holds. He view is an positive one, " Beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,/ Like priceless treasures sinking in the sand." (Line 13-14) McKay

capitalized the word time; the emphasizing this particular word gives it an added meaning. McKay is ensuring that the reader is aware of the meaning of the word. To often time is forgotten or goes unnoticed, but time is truly in charge of everyone. The use of time in this poem is to make the reader aware that with time everything will heal, those who are powerful will fall, like the Greek and Roman Empires. In line 14, McKay reminds the reader that time will also change what people feel, something they may have found important in the past will change in the future. The comparison he gives is one of a treasure that is lost in the sand; although it is precious time has slowly taken it away.

McKay was able to demonstrate his point very well, and without the use of the obvious tool of changing his format. He explored various other aspects in order to get his message across to his reader.