

Social criticism in london and harlem

Linguistics, English



May 5, I. Social Criticism in “London” and “Harlem” Social criticism unmasks the ills of society. It exposes the corruption and inequalities that people in power impose over the weak. Langston’s “Harlem” and Blake’s “London” criticize their society for promoting social injustice through political and social oppression. These poems reveal the widespread political and social oppression of their times that produce different forms of social injustice. The language of “Harlem” is written after the Civil war and during Jim Crow Laws and it depicts the questions on “dreams deferred” for African Americans (Langston 1). The narrator asks whether a deferred dream becomes a fruit like a “raisin the sun” (Langston 3), a sore that “festers” (Langston 4), “rotten meat” (Langston 6), or a syrup that “crust and sugar over” (Langston 6-7). He also asks whether the dream “sags” (Langston 9) or “explodes” (Langston 11). These are images that describe the frustrations and anxiety of African Americans, who are tired of broken promises for their access to the American Dream. Blake’s “London” is written in 1792 during the intense control of the monarchy over the rising rebellion. Blake criticizes “each charter’d street” (1) that represents the Charters that took away civil freedoms of speech and forming organizations and rallies. Like Langston, Blake sees the effects of political and social oppression through “Marks of weakness, marks of woe” (4). The repetition of “marks” emphasizes the prevalence of social injustice in London. Blake also criticizes the economic system with “How the Chimney-sweeper’s cry” (9). Capitalism exploits children and women alike, through child labor and prostitution that “blights with plagues the Marriage hearse” (16). The “marriage hearse” is an oxymoron, an image for the weaknesses of a masculinized society that

denigrates women and treats them as second-class citizens. These poems assert that their societies have fallen to disgrace, because they promote political and social oppression. They signify the absence of civil rights and freedoms in the authoritarian societies they live in. Langston focuses on the disempowerment of the blacks, while Blake highlights the disempowerment of all those who are treated as second-class citizens.

II. Love in Two Conflicting Images in “ My Mistress’ Eyes” and “ A Summer’s Day”

This paper compares the sonnets, “ My Mistress’ Eyes Are Nothing Like the Sun” (“ My Mistress’ Eyes”) and “ Shall I Compare Thee to A Summer’s Day” (“ A Summer’s Day”). These sonnets both portray the theme of eternal love that lasts and is real enough to be captured in exact terms that people can believe in. The theme of these sonnets is perpetual and real love, although speakers employ different strategies in attesting their love. In “ My Mistress’ Eyes,” the speaker does not begin with the usual emphasis on the woman’s perfect beauty. He starts with a strong negative image: “ My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun” (Shakespeare line 1). While other poets enunciate the goddess beauty of their mistresses by comparing their body parts to corals, snow, roses, and perfumes, the speaker does away with these pretensions and satirizes them. In line 13, the speaker, nevertheless, ensures that he feels the same love as any other man: “ And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare/As any she belied with false compare” (Shakespeare 13-14). The speaker stresses that his love may probably be more lasting than those who describe their mistresses in unreal terms. The irony is that the more he seemingly berates his mistress, the more real his love is. “ A Summer’s Day” depicts a speaker’s intention to use the metaphor for the

summer's day to explain how much he loves her. He believes that "summer" is insufficient, however, because it is too fleeting, "...summer's lease hath all too short a date" (Shakespeare 4), "too hot" (Shakespeare 5), "dimmed" by the clouds (Shakespeare 6), and "declines" in beauty (Shakespeare 7). He stresses how much he loves her by determining that no matter how magnificent a summer is, in reality, it is not enough to capture his intensity of love. An "eternal summer" will be enough as a fitting metaphor, however, because it talks about forever, which is the only way he knows to prove his love for her. In addition, he believes that he can describe his love through the existence of "eternal lines" or through poetry (Shakespeare 12). These lines ensure permanence through oral sharing throughout generations, and this permanence brings reality to his love's undying nature. Both sonnets describe the essence of true love. In "My Mistress' Eyes," the speaker uses a realistic approach and satirizes the idealized female beauty, while "A Summer's Day" believes that love can be proven through the metaphors of endless summer and poetry. They provide conflicting images of love, but they agree that true love is something that lasts and is real, because it can be explained in actual terms. They do not have to use exaggerations to prove that their love exists. Instead, love is true and eternal when it is described from a truthful viewpoint. These speakers want nothing more than to merely use poetry to assert their love, a love that cannot be satirized or undermined, because it lives through breathing, authentic images.

III. Individuality in Housman's "To An Athlete Dying Young" and Langston's "Theme for English B" Some poems assert the existence of the individual despite the power of the majority or society.

Housman's "To an Athlete Dying Young" and Langston's "Theme for English B" explore the individuality that seeks to rise above society's norms and delimitations on individuals. These poems depict strong characters who do not wish to be forgotten in time and aim to assert their distinctiveness as individuals and as part of society. These poems underscore the role of individuality to assert itself against the tides of majority. The speaker in "To an Athlete Dying Young" has an ironic belief, because he sees death as a sureness of life. For him, an early death provides an escape from the inevitability of being forgotten. It says: "[The laurel] withers quicker than the rose" (12). The first image is a laurel that symbolizes victory, but it will soon turn into a rose and die. The speaker stresses that a young life with accomplishments is better than a long life that ends with being forgotten. He says: "And the name died before the man" (20). "Theme for English B" underscores the hardships of being a black individual. The speaker describes that he eats, drinks, and loves like any other white person and yet he will be judged lower because of his race. In the end, he acknowledges his twoness and states that even if the instructor is white, he is "yet a part of me, as I am a part of you" (31). The irony is that the society wants to differentiate blacks from whites and yet they are the same, because they exist as human beings in the same society. These poems argue that individuals should strive to assert their sense of self, no matter how powerful society might undermine them. "To an Athlete Dying Young" cherishes the benefits of dying young and accomplished, while "Theme for English B" celebrates distinct black individuality that cannot be alienated from its whiteness too.

Works Cited Blake, William. "London." Housman, A. E. "To An Athlete Dying

Young.” Hughes, Langston. “ Harlem.” ---. “ Theme for English B.”

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