

"the tennessee hero"
by frances harper
essay sample



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“ The Tennessee Hero” by Frances Harper Essay Sample

“ The Tennessee Hero” by Frances Harper tells of a black slave who chose to be lashed 750 times rather than betray his comrades who were plotting to run away to freedom. What is most striking in Harper’s poem is the irony she presents: the black slave, the one who is commonly treated inhumanely and in highly derogatory ways, is portrayed as the pinnacle of being a true and upright man. Through the suffering he undergoes, his depth of spirit, courage, and loyalty never wavered even under extreme physical suffering. Another thing worth noting in “ Hero” is its powerful use of language. Though simple, they are very vivid in portraying the raw emotions that permeate the text. Finally, the theme of the poem – the evils of slavery – is timeless and is still very much relevant today. Even if people say that slavery has long been abolished, its traces are still very much predominant in society. Racism, unequal opportunities, unjust treatment – these are still very much a part of contemporary life.

The poem is narrated from a third-person point of view. Ostensibly, it seems that it is the author herself who is recounting the scene of the torture and eventual murder of the black slave. According to Sorisio (2000), Harper claims that in “ The Tennessee Hero,” she was actually recounting a true event.

This brutal and heartless event most probably took place in a Southern plantation, a place where slavery and racism was prevalent. The whole poem encompasses the travails of the slave, from pre-torture, to his powerful speech, to his death, and eventually to his flight to God’s eternal embrace.

The " prologue" of the text, which recounts how the slave " had heard his comrades plotting to obtain their liberty, and rather than betray them he received 750 lashes and died," sets the somber but proud mood of poem. In a straightforward manner, it tells the reader what to expect, yet, at the same time, hints that the poem will yield something more.

The importance of setting the prologue in a form different from the rest of the poem is that it acts as an epitaph for the slave. Furthermore, as was stated above it serves to establish the mood of the poem. " The Tennessee Hero," save for the prologue, develops in 11 quatrains. In each quatrain, only the second and fourth lines rhyme. This form is typical of the ballad, which uses " vivid, striking imagery, [and] simplistic language," as well as a certain musical quality in its construction (Hill 1981). This form, Hill (1981) says, is meant to appeal to wide range of audience, to both the blacks and the whites.

Furthermore, the form of the ballad, which is a literary form commonly meant to portray tragedy, heroism, and/or romance, serves to support the theme of the poem. The main idea that was being conveyed in the text is that death, no matter how painful or lowly it may seem, will always be preferable to slavery. This theme is best captured in the slave's monologue, the only time we are able to hear his voice:

" And what! Oh! What is life to me,

Beneath your base control?

Nay! Do your worst – ye have no chains

To bind my free-born soul!"

For the slave, the only way he can be free is if he allowed himself to die.

Aside from the form of the poem, the tone is also an important element that furthers the theme of the poem. Based on the language used in the text's construction, we feel that the narrator is rooting for the slave, and that she approves of his ideal of death rather than slavery. Note the narrator's description of the crowd and the crew who were tasked to punish the slave: "He stood before the savage throng, / The base and coward crew." Indeed, the crowd was composed of brutes who seemed to only be waiting for the bloodshed to happen. On the other hand, the crew was "base and coward," implying that they were only blindly following directions without necessarily understanding what they were doing. By contrasting this with the author's depiction of the slave, we are able to establish to whom her sentiments lie: "He was the hero of his band, / The noblest of them all."

The development of the theme calls for the use of several different symbols. One of these is the fetters that tied down the man. These were not only the physical chains that held him bound to the stand but they were also symbolic of how, while still alive, slavery has chained his whole body. And since these fetters were physical materials, it follows then that it was only his physical being that was bound. His spirit, however, remained free: "...Ye have no chains / To bind my free-born soul."

The gaping wounds of the slave mimicked the wounds of Christ. Through the symbol of the wounds, Harper was alluding to the fact that the sacrifice of the slave for his comrades were tantamount to the sufferings Christ himself

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underwent for humanity. These gaping wounds he showed " before the unslumbering eye," a symbol for God, the omniscient one.

Being written in the form of a ballad, " Hero" employs a lot of striking imagery that conveys the message and the theme of the poem more clearly without being too pushy. For example, the use of the line " tameless light flashed from his eyes" conveys the sense of lucidity, strength, and courage. If Harper had only used the line, " and his eyes were bright," the same sentiment denoted by tameless light would not be brought to fore. Another good use of imagery in the poem is in the fourth stanza, where the slave is pictured as towering " in its manly might, / above the murderous crew." It evoked the sense of consummate manliness, as he rose to great heights over the crowd. Through this picture, he became a singular figure above all the faceless people who formed the crowd. Finally, when Harper paints the punishers as bringing forth the "...hateful lash and scourge / With murder in each eye," she gives her commentary on who the punishers really were. They were, in fact, only concerned with murder and not with bringing forth justice, as they purport themselves to be.

In the poem, Harper has kept the use of figurative language to a minimum. The only place where this occurs is in the 11th stanza. A simile was used to emphasize the severity of the lashes the slave received, as it was depicted " like storms of wrath, of hate and pain / The blows rained thick and fast." This simile implies two things: the shape of heavily-falling rain, which was similar to the elongated shape of the lash, and the drenching power of a storm fully

encompass one's body, which suggested the numerous lashes the slave received.

Powerful, poignant, and moving, "The Tennessee Hero" is a clear and strong voice from the other side. Too long the slaves were marginalized, stripped of their humanity by a brutal system. I realize that this is what makes literature a very potent device: it has the power to elevate and give them the place of honor. From being relegated to obscurity, they are now the center, the ones being listened to. The movement of literature towards writers who come from the margins of society – the women writers, writers of color, writers of ethnic backgrounds – should be embraced, for it is through listening to their voices that understanding and acceptance can occur. By giving them a place in literature, we are affirming their worth and contribution to society, a society that becomes richer through the infusions of their fresh traditions and outlook.

Works Cited

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