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Love and the Resistance: Claude McKay, Terrance Hayes, and the Sonnet Form

The sonnet is a widely known poetic form, even those that do not study literature or poetry are at least vaguely familiar with the sonnet. While it was popularized by Shakespeare and is most often associated with the English Renaissance, the modern sonnet has served the surprising purpose as a tool and artistic expression of resistance. Proclamations of strength and resilience in the face of oppression, calls to action to resist oppressive forces, and scathing criticisms of a broken system are just a few examples of the ways in which writers crafted sonnets during and after the Harlem Renaissance. This is especially true as “...black American poets since the Civil War have used the form for their own ends...Some have used it to write themselves into an exclusionary canon and gain credibility with a white audience; others subvert it as a means of delivering radical content, as Claude McKay did with his incendiary ‘If We Must Die’”(Stoner).

Claude McKay is among the Harlem Renaissance poets that used the sonnet to make such statements, and while his writing career may have been brief, his sonnets have made ripples that continue even now. Just as Faulkner said, “happen” is not once, but like ripples after the pebble sinks. A contemporary poet who has made not only ripples but waves is Terrance Hayes, who utilizes the sonnet much like McKay. While these poets express resistance through their sonnets, they also express the great love and passion that is traditionally associated with the form, and it is

politics and injustice entering his art after his horrendous experiences with American racism (Helbling 51). Taking a form that is traditionally written with specific themes in mind and subverting those expectations creates an immediate and all-encompassing tension that works especially well for the specific themes such as racism, and injustice, that McKay is exploring through his sonnets. While he was surprised at the impact of the poem “If We Must Die” after it was published (Helbling 52) and may not have considered it, the form is also symbolically significant because while resistance is promoted and while McKay encourages fighting back, the determination and gusto written powerfully in metered lines exemplifies that there is strength in a controlled effort.

The sonnet form functions similarly in Hayes’ work, in which he has an entire book of sonnets each titled the same thing “American Sonnet for my Past and Future Assassin” as a way to connect the pieces in an organized and controlled manner. After all, writing to an assassin requires attention to detail and control, there is much at stake. For Hayes, the sonnet form is “part prison, part panic closet, a little room in a house set aflame” (Hayes 11). In some of his sonnets, Hayes expresses that the sonnet is meant to contain the ideas that the speaker is analyzing and tearing apart. Hayes writes “I lock you in a form that is part music box, part meat grinder to separate the song of the bird from the bone” (Hayes 11). If the song is the art and the performance, the meat and bone are the physical, tangible, reality that exists despite what it produces. Here, Hayes is making it clear that the sonnet isn’t just a setting for song but also a setting for cutting deep to “the bone” and truly getting at the core of such issues as racism, police brutality, the school to prison pipeline, toxic cultural practices, hypocrisy, and injustice.

Of course, the sonnet offers more than just control in rhythm and meter. The Shakespearean sonnet contains “the octave (the first eight lines) [which] usually presents a problem or question, and the sestet (final six lines) answers it with... a comment on the situation...in between octave and sestet there is often a shift, a changing of gear, called the volta” (Denizé 100). The sonnet form provides this built-in cognitive roadmapping that aligns perfectly with the sonnet as an argument or a call to action. In McKay’s poem “The Lynching” the volta is the shift from the haunting and gruesome description of a man’s dead body to the way that the white people behaved upon seeing that dead body. The last couplet, which “sums up the poet’s conclusion” (Denizé 100) reads “and little lads, lynchers that were to be,/ danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee”(Levine937). With these lines, McKay wraps up the poem by exposing the sickening behavior of white women and young boys.

What is especially interesting in this poem is that the victim of the lynching is a man and the perpetrators of violence (even indirectly) are women and children, which is yet another level to which McKay subverts expectations to create tension and make his statement. The form of the sonnet allows it to be both love poem and argument, with a couplet at the end that claps shut and

Works Cited

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