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ENGL 3620

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16 April 2020

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

through this great love and passion that the rebellion within the poem is strengthened. This quality, alongside the volta as a call to action, and the strategic opposition between a restrictive form and arguments for freedom within that form, are what make both McKay's and Hayes' sonnets so politically powerful.

The sonnet is traditionally about love and an internal, often romantic situation that the speaker is navigating (Denizé 100). In the case of both Hayes and McKay, the sonnet is about love and is instead, an external situation with oppressive forces. The lack of romance may deviate from the traditional expectation for a sonnet, but neither Hayes or McKay's sonnets are void of intense love or passion. In McKay's poem "America" he starts out by outright proclaiming "although she feeds me bread of bitterness,/ and sinks into my throat her tiger's tooth,/ stealing my breath of life, I will confess/ I love this cultured hell..." McKay uses the word love but goes on to say that he can "see her might and granite wonders there,/ beneath the touch of Time's unerring hand,/ like priceless treasures sinking in the sand" (Levine 938). McKay is making it clear here that the way that America is functioning is not sustainable and that "Time" will inevitably catch up. So while McKay's "love" in the poem in "America" is clearly tinged with bitterness, his love for the oppressed people of America is unwavering. From the care of the observation of sex workers in his poem "The Harlem Dancer" to the pride and power expressed in "If We Must Die" it is clear that McKay's sonnets are an act of love and passion.

Not unlike McKay's poem "America" Terrance Hayes' poem that starts with "I lock you in an American sonnet that is part prison,/ part panic closet..." ends with "It is not enough/ to love you. It is not enough to want you destroyed" (Hayes 11). Hayes writes an entire book of

sonnets “To My Past and Future Assassin” as love poems to a corrupt and broken home that is America. Hayes’ poetry, perhaps more so than McKay’s, is self-aware of the possibility that poetry is futile in the face of oppressive political forces and injustice, but is necessary. In one sonnet, Hayes writes “In a second I’ll tell you how little/ Writing rescues” (Hayes 5) and though he goes on to talk about the many poets who have committed suicide and were gravely unhappy, his conscious choice to break the line where he does, gives us more insight. The line breaks so that the second line starts with “writing rescues” and it is in this way that we understand why there is an entire book of sonnets to follow. The poem also has an example of a love affair gone wrong in which Orpheus “sent his beloved a sketch of an eye with an X struck through it. He meant I am blind without you. She thought he meant I never want to see you again. It is possible he meant that too”(Hayes 5). It is in this way that Hayes acknowledges how much can go wrong in writing but also exemplifies that the first motive was love and a desire to connect, and even if it went terribly wrong, something was discovered in the process. Because just like the love sonnets of the renaissance writing of unrequited love, Hayes and McKay are writing of unrequited love but on a national and societal level rather than a personal one.

One question that naturally comes to mind when considering the sonnet as a poetry form to express resistance is why a poet would choose such a strict form when the theme of the poem is meant to be about liberation, freedom, and rights. The sonnet stands the test of time as an important traditional poetry form that writing a sonnet is akin to a rite of passage as a poet (Denizé 104). This is even more important considering the context in which McKay was writing sonnets. Racism and injustice were rampant and writing sonnets as ingeniously as McKay meant that the literary community would have to take him seriously. McKay was an artist first, with

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 leaves the reader thinking. McKay accomplishes the same effect in “The Harlem Dancer” ending in the lines “but looking at her falsely-smiling face,/ I knew her self was not in that strange place” (Levine 936). This last couplet contemplates objectification and class struggle and humanizes the sex worker mentioned which are both very progressive ideas for the early 1900s.

Hayes also utilizes the volta and snappy couplet to punctuate his arguments within each sonnet, but Hayes differs in that he takes more liberties with the sonnet form. Hayes purposefully diverges from the meter of each line in order to create tension and bring attention to specific line

breaks and moments within the sonnet. The end of almost every sonnet includes one or more extra syllables that place emphasis on the last few words. In his poem that begins with “The song must be cultural, confessional, clear” Hayes ends on “and shed a noise so lovely it is sung at sunset/ weddings, baptisms & beheadings henceforth” (Hayes 46). The extra syllables create a tone-hanging-in-the-air effect on the words “beheadings henceforth” which do not fit within the syllabic rhythm of the sonnet and which also do not fit within the beautiful imagery that precedes them. The form provides a structure for the argument and also provides opportunities to break from that structure to increase tension and emphasis. In one sonnet, Hayes ends on the couplet, “Because he’s someone/ who cannot distinguish meat from malarkey/ anything close to his mouth gets bitten” (Hayes 42). Here he claps the argument shut by presenting Donald Trump as dangerous and thoughtless, not unlike an animal, leaving the reader on the image of unpredictable violence. While the sonnet may be considered a restrictive form, both McKay and Hayes use it to their advantage to create evocative moments of tension and concern in order to expose harsh and important truths.

The traditional sonnet is evolving to the credit of Harlem Renaissance poets such as McKay and is continuing to grow in potential thanks to contemporary poets such as Hayes. The sonnet is “part prison, part panic room” (Hayes 11), and the sonnet is a place to separate the song from the bone. If the sonnet was ever a true love poem, it began with McKay. Poets like McKay and Hayes have transformed the sonnet form to include space for argument, resistance, and unfiltered truths in a symbiotic relationship between the growth and development of both theme and form.

Works Cited

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