Modern African American Poets

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From Hughes to Parker

By

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To My Family

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither'd leaves to quicken a new birth!
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an unextinguish'd hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken'd earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

(Shelley, Ode to the West Wind)

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PREFACE

This book introduces African American poetry from totally new perspectives. It consists of eight chapters covering poets from the Harlem Renaissance till our present time. Harlem Renaissance poets, Hughes and Cullen, are introduced from new perspectives, viz., two psychological types: self-acceptance and self-dejection. Their expression of race relations and the way they protest are compared into subsequent chapters. Roscoe C. Jamison represents voices unheard, those poets who were not often read and written about. Ai represents a person of multi-ethnic roots who dissects her society highlighting reasons of violence and sexual hunger. Nikky Finney, a representative of Affrilachian poetry and a political activist, focuses on different social and political issues. The book, then, discusses the application of Dual Inheritance Theory on African American Poetry in two consecutive chapters: one on Yusef Komunyakaa and the other on the influence of Audre Lorde on Afro German poet May Ayim. The book closes with a chapter on Morgan Parker and her ongoing effort exerted on redefining black womanhood.

Chapter I "Race Relations as Expressed through the Ballad, the Sonnet and the Blues" discusses the strain in race relations because of loss of an African-American identity. Chapter II "Poetry of Protest" expresses rebellious feelings against injustice. It traces the concept of the poet-prophet back to Plato and applies it on the two poets. Hughes proves to be the black poet-prophet, since he interacts with the problems of his people and formulates his opinions in his works. On the contrary, Cullen flies away from the social problems of his race because he wants to be a universal poet, not an African-American one.

Roscoe C. Jamison is one of the early modern black poets, who passed away in his early thirties unnoticed and almost unread. He was born in Winchester, Tennessee, and attended Fisk University. Thanks to a sincere friend, William F. Neil, who gathered a few poems and

published them under the title “Negro Soldiers and Other Poems (1918)”, Jamison was introduced to the world. Another friend lamented him by writing an elegy, expressing the importance of his verse which is characterized by cadence and musicality. Though some of his pieces seem imperfect, Jamison’s poetry is better than many known writers.

Ai's dramatic monologues prove that Ai’s poems contain an apocalyptic vision of future repercussions of fracture, violence and sexual hanger. The paper provides a brief account of the dramatic monologue and highlights Ai’s (1947-2010) innovative use of it which questions settled identities and cultural boundaries, involving a wide readership. The poems analyzed reveal the nature of a fractured, violent and sex-hunting society. This study of the selected poems from Cruelty illustrates Ai’s success in exposing such important reasons of American society’s disintegration as fracture, violence and sexual hanger.

Nikky Finney (1957-) has always been involved in the struggle of southern black people interweaving the personal and the public in her depiction of social issues such as family, birth, death, sex, violence and relationships. Her poems cover a wide range of examples: a terrified woman on a roof, Rosa Parks, a Civil Rights symbol, and Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State, to name just a few. The dialogue is basic to this volume where historical allusions to prominent figures touch upon important sociopolitical issues. “Red Velvet” and “Left”, from Head off & Split, crystallize Affrilachians’ /African-Americans’ suffering and struggle against slavery, by capturing events and recalling historical figures from the past. The two poems best illustrate, through a reading put in a wider context of black suffering, Finney’s success in making the beautifully said thing intersect with the difficult-to-say-thing through her sharpened pencil; thus reshaping the present.

Chapter six discusses the role of jazz and blues, as cultural kernels, in Komunyakaa’s Copacetic using dual inheritance theory as a reading mechanism. The chapter divides Copacetic into four groups illustrating different modes of cultural transmission through jazz and

blues. The first group "African American background", (which shows signs of cultural evolution), contextualizes the study of jazz and blues as important expression of African American history and provides a necessary framework for the other three ones. The second one, "Blues as part of poems' titles" illustrates horizontal transmission. The third, "Jazz & Blues figures mentioned in the poems" shows frequency-based bias. The fourth, "Jazz & Blues figures as titles of the poems" underscores the importance of these figures as model-based bias. Put together, the four groups crystallize the important role jazz and blues play as cultural kernels in the transmission of African American culture.

Chapter seven further explains Dual Inheritance Theory (DIT) and asserts that both genetic and environmental factors have a formative impact on the physical as well as psychological upbringing of people. Audre Lorde, a famous Afro-American poet and a model (according to DIT) has influenced Afro-German women writers. For the forging of a collective Black German consciousness of identity, Audre Lorde's connections with Black Germans were pivotal and marked the beginning of a cross-cultural movement that was seminal for the building of various organizations like the Initiative of Black Germans (ISD), ADEFRA (Afro-German Women) and Home story Deutschland. Afro-Germans, and Afro-Americans, who share much in common, are part and parcel of the environment they have been raised in; therefore, according to genetic-cultural coevolution, subsequent generations are fully developed Homo sapiens whose biological and cultural genes are every inch (Afro-)Germans (and (Afro-)Americans). Moreover, a model, Audre Lorde in this case, who shares genetic roots with others, such as May Opitz, alias May Ayim—a palindrome that underscores her fascination of word play—and who lives somewhere else can transfer some of his/her environmental practices such as protest against racism and give voice to the marginalized. Analysis and comparison of some poems by Lorde and Ayim will prove the DIT model's influence on others.

The last chapter investigates the role Morgan Parker's Beyoncé plays in reformulating the longstanding image of black woman rooted in Africa. Such an image has been developed by writers of Harlem Renaissance (Hughes) as well as those of the Diaspora (Senghor). The

Beyoncé poems criticize the contemporary society of black women, explore the deep reaches of their souls, spotlight stereotypical images of black womanhood and build up a wished-for image of black womanhood. Beyoncé's symbolic and metaphorical representation has had a formative impact on the reformulation of the image of black women. In order to prove Beyoncé's impact, some poems are analyzed such as: "Please Wait (Or, There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyoncé)", "Beyoncé on the Line for Gaga", "White Beyoncé", and "Beyoncé is Sorry for What She Won't Feel".

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CHAPTER ONE

RACE RELATIONS AS EXPRESSED THROUGH THE BALLAD, THE SONNET AND THE BLUES

Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen show fundamental differences in expressing race relations: Cullen used the sonnet and Hughes the blues. Both, however, wrote ballads with different purposes. For Hughes, it represented African-Americans. For Cullen the ballad, as well as the sonnet, may have functioned as a mask under which he hid his blackness. Therefore, it can justifiably be claimed that Cullen wanted to join the pantheon of English ballad writers like Coleridge, Keats, Swinburne, and Housman, Auden, and the American poet, Henry Wordsworth, Longfellow, and many others. Cullen fundamentally differs from Hughes on the subject of lynching. The Scottsboro case is a good example. One of his most outstanding contributions to American literature is his ability to reproduce everyday stories, and especially African-American language. Hughes finds the blues an effective tool through which his race can penetrate the veil and breach the gap. His ballads are stronger than Cullen's because they spring directly from black folk tradition and are overwhelmed by the black spirit.

Much of Hughes's poetry has the unmistakable flavour of the blues, music which is characterized both by "angst", (sadness), and ironic humour. None of this is unintentional. These sad songs reflect the state of the Negro. In addition to the blues, Hughes uses a jazz structure as another scaffolding to his poetry. It is a rhythm that is a combination of structure and non-structure. Actually, a jazz "leitmotif" dominates his verse just as much as, if not more than blues themes.

Unlike classic blues, the jazz poem has no fixed form: it is a species of free verse which attempts to approximate some of the qualities of jazz. The dynamic energy of jazz is contrasted with the relatively low-keyed and generally elegiac tone of the blues. Blues is for the most part vocal and mellow, jazz for the most part instrumental and aggressive. The jazz poem attempts to capture that instrumental vigor (Onwuchekwa 57); it can easily be perceived that Dunbar, Sandburg and Lindsay had a strong impact on Hughes's jazz poems. Dunbar's "A Negro Love Song" can be traced in Hughes's "Song for a Banjo Dance". The latter's "Harlem Nightclub" and "Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret" are reminiscent of Sandburg's "Jazz Fantasia." The form and manner of Lindsay's "The Congo" are reflected in "Ask Your Mama".

The blues and spirituals reflect a detailed anatomy of black America, both collectively as well as individually. The whole body of folktales and spirituals arose from the experiences which slaves had on their plantations, mingled with the memories and customs that they brought with them from Africa. They acted, gestured and sang, thus elevating storytelling to an art. Slaves were forced not to speak their own native African language, but English instead. They were kept illiterate. Slave spirituals were the only available means of communicating feelings of discontent and exile. African slaves used their stories and spirituals to compete with their owners. This clever tactic involved the passing of vital information concerning meeting places, plans or dangers through hymns and stories. They were able to accomplish this through the use of hidden meaning in their words, and the ultimate result was that they outwitted their masters and proved that they were not, after all, an inferior race.

The significance of African-American culture is a vital component in the full political emancipation of African-American people, both individually and collectively. Signification implies cultural survival, affirmation and a condition of liberation which is an essential step in decolonizing the African-American mind. Within African-American culture lay the alternate images, self-definitions, and strategies necessary for the resistance to Anglo-American cultural domination, and for reclaiming black life. Central to the struggle was

the vitality of folklore, which can be seen in signifying, storytelling, indirect discourse and humour.

The fact that Hughes is experimental and radical, while Cullen is a classicist, leads the latter to refuse to write in dialect. He also criticized Hughes for this and for introducing folk themes in his introduction to *Caroling Dusk*, an anthology of poems by black poets. Henceforth, Cullen wanted his poetry to deal with traditional and universal poetic themes. However, he was not recognized as a universal poet since he could not escape the color prejudice. Such a desire for universal recognition away from the inescapable color brand, is the chief source of tension found in his poetry. Thus, he was urged to use originally non-black forms, like the sonnet.

In his famous essay "The Black Artist and the Racial Mountain", Hughes indirectly criticized Cullen's aversion to black themes:

> Certainly, there is, for the American Negro artist a great field of unused material ready for art. Without going outside his race, and even among the better classes with their "white" culture and conscious American manners, but still Negro enough to be different, there is sufficient matter to furnish a black artist with a lifetime of creative work. And when he chooses to touch on the relations between Negroes and whites…there is an exhaustible supply of themes at hand. To these the Negro Artist can give his racial individuality, his heritage of rhythm and warmth, and his incongruous humour that so often, as in the Blues, becomes ironic laughter mixed with tear. (Gibson 226-7)

Although the sonnet is a rigid form, it reflects a dichotomy in Cullen's soul when talking about racial problems. Although he chose such a form as a means of separating him from his black roots, the subject-matter often failed him, since it was, whether consciously or unconsciously colored by race.

As we would expect from a lyric poet, Countee Cullen takes as his province the larger category of religion, love, and death. Many of Cullen's poems, however, and here is added a new dimension of subject matter, are solely concerned with what he would call "color" or "race" and what we would call the black experience (Gibson 227).

Cullen divided his sonnets according to the Petrarchan model, while at the same time, the rhyme-scheme follows that of the Shakespearean sonnet, sometimes with a slight difference. This asserts his desire for distinction, even in a white circle. His racially motivated sonnets fall into two sections: Some express regression from an unjust world, while others deal with niggardly attempts at transgression. Despite his indefatigable efforts to embrace classicism, his use of the sonnet shows innovative signs. Cullen uses the traditional octave: The first quatrain presents a theme, while the second develops it. However, his use of the sestet is untraditional. While the first three lines of the sestet often traditionally exemplify or reflect the subject, the last three bring the whole poem to a unified whole. Cullen innovatively uses the first four lines to give examples of the subject and the last two as a final couplet which bring about an effective, unifying climax. The language in Cullen's sonnets reflects a strong disapproval of African-American folklore. For him, the black idiom is not fit for writing poetry. Therefore, he draws heavily on other sources like Greek mythology. Besides standard English and references to Greek mythology, Cullen uses religious imagery to underline a complete indifference to and separation from his blackness. However, his use of Christian imagery is contradictory. He cannot reconcile pagan inclinations of the African jungle, which he expresses in “Heritage”, and religious teachings of the new community, which function as a newly presumed identity.

Some of Hughes's ballads show the attempts of African-Americans concerning desegregation and withstanding racial prejudice. Others debunk white ideology and display racists as either walling themselves off or doing great harm to African-Americans. Hughes' ballads can be categorized under three major headings: Political, religious and social, all of which deal with race relations. The association between race and servitude is a constant theme in Afro-American literature. The economic exploitation and social discrimination which define persons of African descent as a social category gives many of its members an avid sense of race consciousness as a consequence of mutual humiliation (Chapman 37). Of the ballads which show political thought are "October 16: The Raid" and "The Ballad of Sam Solomon." Hughes's "October 16: The Raid" balances lynching committed against African-Americans with

heroic deeds. It is a narrative ballad, since Hughes focuses on John Brown's struggle for freedom:

John Brown
Who took his gun,
Took twenty-one companions
White and black,
Went to shoot your way to freedom
Where two rivers meet
And the hills of the
North
And the hills of the
South
Look slow at one another–
And died
For your sake.
(Rampersad 141)

The scene underlines the details of the struggle. Simple as it is, the ballad illustrates two contrasting parties: "White and black", "two rivers" and "the hills of the/North/ And the hills of the/ South." The ballad recalls the sacrifice of John Brown, mainly as a means of encouraging young African-American intellectuals to take action. It also celebrates the great efforts which have been exerted by African-American leaders and which resulted in the Niagara Movement, which was:

> was primarily political in its objectives. The organization deliberately tried to resurrect the spirit of the angry abolitionists immediately preceding the Civil War. The meeting places of their three conventions were chosen for their symbolic value. Niagara Falls was the terminal on the underground railway, the point at which runaways had reached freedom. Harpers Ferry had been the site of John Brown's violent assault on slavery, and Oberlin, Ohio, had been well known as a center of abolitionist activity. (Coombs 66)

Then the scene changes, with John Brown contemporary African-Americans harvesting the fruits of their ancestors' labour.

Now that you are
Many years free,
And the echo of the Civil War

Has passed away,
And Brown himself

Has long been tried at law,
Hanged by the neck,
And buried in the ground—
…

Perhaps
You will recall
John Brown.

(Rampersad 141-142)

Though this scene does not concentrate on a detailed description of the Brown story, it functions as a morale-booster, since Hughes's aim is to entice his people to fight Jim Crowism [Jim Crow was so named after black minstrel shows]. The image of a lynched Brown is a symbol of the African-American sacrifice for freedom. Furthermore, this image haunts John Brown's offspring and asks for non-racial relations rather than the wreaking of vengeance on white racists. At a deeper level, this ballad and others like it, provide African-Americans with the rich heritage that is necessary for weaving their way among the white throng. Therefore, the poem ends with the possibility of gaining access to this heritage in moments of distress as well as relief.

"The Ballad of Sam Solomon" introduces African-American political awareness and its claim to political rights. The poem denounces intimidation and physical violence done by whites. On the other hand, it asserts African-American manhood. The content of the poem is expressed through a dialogue which shows defiant reciprocity on the part of Sam Solomon. However, the two absent forces, the Ku Klux Klan and the African-American masses, are what the poem focuses on. Both Sam and the white crackers are but representatives.

In the poem the impersonal representation of the African-American case helps delineate Sam's character as an African-American. Thus, Sam addresses white crackers in the following manner: “You may call out the Klan/But you must've forgot/That a

Negro is a MAN (Rampersad 295). The "Klan" and the "Negro" create a balance of political power which controls the whole poem. The rhyming words "Klan" and "man" result in irony. The Klan supporters are characterized by an antagonistic dehumanizing nature. On the other hand, the African-American is manly enough to face the facts.

The poem reveals the new status of the African-American who wants to manage his own affairs. It is for political equality which he primarily aspires:

> A few years ago,
> Negroes never voted but
> Sam said, it's time to go
> To the polls election day
> And make your choice known
> Cause the vote is not restricted
> To white folks alone.
> (Rampersad 295)

The African-American political claim underlines a fundamental difference in the role forced upon them in the past. The past reference in "a few years ago" reveals a history of slavery and oppression where African-Americans were considered no more than "objects", the existence of which is important insofar as they serve the white man. 'It's time to go' indicates the new African-American who is well aware of everything and is always on the alert, ready to take due action. The rhyming words 'ago' and 'go' enhance the comparison since they refer to the past and the present respectively. Then comes the most decisive step 'to make your choice known', which accredits the African-American political presence. It is these people's newly-founded choice which draws the comparison to its fullest. The whole poem prepares us for the confrontation of an imposed aloneness which makes voting an exclusively white privilege.

"Ballad of the Two Thieves" and "Ballad of Mary's Son" discuss the African-American's fluctuation between abjuration and belief in the influence of religion on the elimination of racial discrimination. In "Ballad of the Two Thieves" the crucifixion is valued by the two thieves who were hanged on both sides of Christ. They were

Twŏ mém/bĕrs óf/ ă lów/ly mób/
Whŏ stóle/ tŏ gét/ thĕir bréad/
Wĕre tíed/ ŭpón/ ă Cróss/ thăt dáy/
Tŏ táste/ ŏf déath/ ínstéad||.

(Rampersad 439)

The ballad retells the long-standing story of a poverty-stricken people, of "a lowly mob" which suggests African-Americans. The irony of the situation lies in the fact that Christ who is love and peace incarnated, is crucified along with two supposed thieves. However, the irony gets sharp since Christ has sacrificed Himself for the sake of mankind, while those two thieves had been sentenced to death only for their hapless attempt at surviving. The rhyming words "bread" and "instead" reinforce the contrast since they steal to survive, however they were condemned to death. This is assured by the pattern of stressed syllables. The first and third lines, which may serve as a premise, are iambic tetrameters. The sharp result of this hapless attempt is highlighted in the second and fourth lines scanned on iambic trimeter.

This contrast results in two different opinions on the concept of belief. The first thief shows disbelief:

One thief looked at Christ and said,
If you're so great
As your followers swear—
Save yourself! Save me!

And save my brother thief there—
If you're as great
As your followers swear!
(Rampersad 439)

The first thief's disbelief is illustrated through his suspicion of the power of the Saviour. The repetition of ‘If you're so great’ and ‘As your followers swear!’ underlines a moment of despair when the thief, under the yoke of racial injustice, adamantly repudiates such a fact as redemption. Such repudiation is crystallized in the ironic effect produced by the word "save". The thief is in doubt concerning atonement. On the other hand, the second thief represents a strong belief in Christianity. His reaction reveals the power of religion with

which the African-American can face racism. Therefore, the believer cried "Lord, remember me!" (Rampersad 440). The poem proceeds with this sense of contrast. Christ utters His redemptive philosophy which evokes abjuration on the one side and belief on the other:

> For the sins of man I suffer.
> For the sins of man I die—
> My body and my blood
> Are the answers to your cry.
> (Rampersad 440)

The ambiguous meaning which the word "sins" bears, sharpens ironic effects, since it refers to "man" in general. Thus, it includes the white man, the traditional sinner in the story of racism. However, the case is altered since the sacrifice is made particular to that believer.

The concluding stanza of the poem represents the poetic justice the poet aspires for:

> In the garden one betrayed me,
> And Peter denied me thrice
> But you who cry, Remember me!
> Go with me to Paradise.
> (Rampersad 440)

The comparison held by the figure of Christ reveals the dark despair of achieving equality in this life. On the other hand, the thief who represents the African-American, will be done justice to in the afterlife. African-Americans have to identify themselves with Christ. They have to believe in eternal justice in order to be able to endure the hardships of this life.

"Ballad of Mary's Son" shows the African-American's wish to identify himself with Christ. The implication is that Christ is made a symbol of the cherished hope of equality, peace and love. Redemptive philosophy asserts the African-American's conviction of religious power which can effect change. The opening stanza illustrates an African-American traditional identification with Jewish suffering:

> It was in the Spring.
> The Passover had come.
> There was fasting in the streets and joy.

But an awful thing
Happened in the Spring—
Men who knew not what they did
Killed Mary's Boy.
(Rampersad 462)

The stanza evokes two opposing images, one of joy and the other of violence. The 'Passover', a Jewish spring festival commemorating the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, is a historical allusion to the African-American wish to overcome their predicament. Amidst this joyful image appears a bloody one. The killing of 'Mary's Boy' asserts an utter absence of secular justice. The African-American identifies himself with the figure of Christ. This unpardonable murder recalls the killing of Jewish first-borns. Egyptian oppressors symbolize the white racist who wants to obliterate the black race.

Christ's suffering and sacrifice has become an indication of both a strong Christian belief and a humanitarian philosophy. For the African-American, the crucifixion functions as an allegorical reference to lynching by whites. Moreover, the oppressed retreats from the inter-racial struggle and seeks a holy identity:

He was Mary's Son,
And the Son of God was He—
Sent to bring the whole world joy.
There were some who could not hear,
And some were filled with fear—
So they built a Cross
For Mary's Boy.
(Rampersad 462)

Holy Parenthood refers to an image of two separate groups: The African-Americans who belong to Christ and the white people who do them great harm. The image proceeds with the former as peacemakers who are horrified by the sight of the crucifixion. The latter who are deaf to Christian teachings, obliterate peace and love when Christ is crucified.

Resorting to faith as represented in Christ's crucifixion and sacrifice involved both a scathing criticism of the secular world and an excuse for any possible reaction by African-Americans. Therefore,

the concluding lines of the poem underline the psychological power African-Americans derive from Christ's crucifixion:

> His body and His blood divine!
> He died on the Cross
> That my soul shouldn't be lost.
> His body and His blood
> Redeem mine.
> (Rampersad 463)

The lines portray a perfect image of the incarnation. Crucifixion leads to the saving of the poet's soul, since he is part and parcel of Christ. The hanged body and the flowing blood function as spiritual food and drink to believers; hence the poet is divinely redeemed. Besides dealing with political and religious themes, Hughes's ballad tackles social issues, especially those of white exploitation and lynching. The very title of “Ballad of the Black Sheep”, (Rampersad 569), is symbolic. It refers to the African-American's ostracism and social injustice. The protagonist repeats a long-standing story of African-Americans and their white brothers. The tension is built up through a comparison between the down-trodden and their oppressors.

Cullen's "The Ballad of the Brown Girl", and "Threnody of a Brown Girl" trace different kinds of racial discrimination and injustice through individual experience. "The Ballad of the Brown Girl" is a retold story of exploitation, greed and injustice on the part of white people. This ballad is divided into four- line stanzas rhyming abcb. It is a detailed, fully-plotted narrative which has a dramatic structure focusing mainly on the climactic scene where the brown girl kills her white rival.

The opening lines highlight the convention that each ballad is subject to continual change, since it is transmitted orally:

> Oh, this is the tale the grandmas tell
> In the land where the grass is blue,
> And some there are who say 'tis false,
> And some that hold it true. (Early 307)

Line division reflects a dichotomy of opinion concerning the tale: Some are for it, others are not.

The intricacy of the tale emanates from a duplicity of the situation: Lord Thomas has two lovers, the Brown Girl and Fair London. Each, has two sketches, one by Thomas and the other by his mother. White exploitation has two forms: Thomas and the Brown Girl's relationship and that between the mother and son.

There is racial discrimination in the sketch Lord Thomas draws of both fair London and the Brown Girl. The scansion lays a further stress on the two contradictory portraits. Lord Thomas told his mother that he had two lovers:

> Ănd óne/˜'s Fáir/ Lŏndón/, lily maid, /
> Ănd príde/ ŏf áll/ thĕ sóuth. /
> Shĕ ís /fŭll shý/ ănd swéet/ ăs stíll/
> Dĕlíght/ whĕn nóth/ĭng stírs;/
> Mў sóul/ căn thríve/ ŏn lóve/ ŏf hér,/
> Ănd áll/ mў héart/ ĭs hérs./ (Early 307)

Fair London is gracefully represented. She is a "lily maid", "shy" and "sweet". Lord Thomas' loving description of Fair London enhances an implicit feeling of repulsion against the Brown Girl. While Fair London is his soul mate, the Brown Girl experiences a love of an unrequited nature. The representation of the Brown Girl shows the greed of Lord Thomas and his mother. When the latter asks her son about the Brown Girl, he says:

> "Shĕ ís/ thĕ dárk/ Brŏwn Gírl/ whŏ knóws/
> Nŏ móre-/dĕfín/ĭng náme,/
> Ănd bítter/ tŏngués/ hăve wórn/ thĕir típs/
> ĭn snéer/ĭng át/ hĕr sháme./ (Early 308)

Lord Thomas' description portrays a dehumanizing image of a girl stained by her color. At the background of this image the white complexion of Fair London stresses the contrast of color. Thus, the white girl's grandeur is the brown girl's debasement.

However, for Lord Thomas, the girl's shameful color can easily be overlooked, so long as there is redeeming wealth. Therefore, he alerts his mother: "But there are lands to go with her, /And gold and silver stores" (Early 308). The exploitative nature of both the mother and the son shows itself in the latter's focus on the Brown Girl's riches. This reflects Lord Thomas's duplicity. He talks passionately about

Fair London, whereas his relationship with the Brown Girl originates from materialistic drives.

Like her son, the mother's character also shows some kind of duplicity, but one deeper and more bitter than that of her son's. Her seemingly maternal care is originally meant to satisfy her unquenchable desire for gold and money. She expresses an exploitative philosophy and promotes the principle of carpe diem:

> "Oh, love is good," the lady quoth,
> "When berries ripe and sweet,
> From every bush and weighted vine
> Are crying, 'Take and eat.' "
>
> "But what is best when winter comes
> Is gold and silver bright;
> Go bring me home the nut-brown maid
> And leave the lily-white." (Early 308)

The mother's materialistic philosophy is expressed in her idea of love. For her, love is meant to satisfy an uncontrolled gluttony. The natural portrait drawn by the mother ironically reflects a spiritual waste land, since these natural elements represent a utilitarian-founded world in the form of synecdoche. Love is good so long as it is useful. For her, the brightness of "silver" and "gold" shines on dark winter days. This image supports the philosophy of the mother, since she sees money as the only resort in days of distress. Therefore, the Brown Girl overshadows her white counterpart. Again, the mother helps creates a false sketch of the Brown Girl. She is desired for her riches, while in fact, she is despised for her color. This duplicity sharpens the exploitation exercised by the mother and the son.

At the wedding, the Brown Girl reflects a beauty emanating from her primitive origins rather than her wealth[1]:

> Her hair was black as sin is black
> And ringed about with fire;
> Her eyes were black as night is black
> When moon and stars conspire;
> Her mouth was one red cherry clipt
> In twain, her voice was a lyre. (Early 309)

The simile of black hair suggests both a lustful appearance and an inferior identity. The black girl has always been regarded as a subject of white man's lust, and it is her color which has consigned her to debasement. Sin has always been associated with fire, since it recalls an image of a ritualistic tribal society where early people used to gather around a fire. Together, fire and a lustful, black-haired girl, portray an image of primitive beauty. Her beauty is also derived from nature, since her eyes are as black as night. This simile is made clear when put in antithesis with another of the disappearing moon and stars whose color suggests white people. The visual image of the girl's mouth as a 'clipt' cherry, supports the above-mentioned image of physical beauty. Her spiritual beauty comes through an aural image which compares her voice with a lyre.

At the wedding, the white girl's description stands in sharp contrast with the brown's. The former is pale, sad and weak as a withered leaf. However, her apparent suffering does not prevent her from insulting the Brown Girl:

> "But, Thomas, Lord, is this your bride?
> I think she is mighty brown;
> Why didn't you marry a fair, bright girl
> As ever the sun shone on?
> For only the rose and rose should mate,
> Oh, never the hare and the hound,"
> And the wine he poured for her crimson mouth
> She poured upon the ground. (Early 310)

The color motif hovers over the whole ballad, since the first fault Fair London finds with the Brown Girl is that she is not so fair as befits the position of wife to Lord Thomas. Fair London's scathing tirade against this inharmonious marriage communicates itself through two opposing images. For her harmony occurs when 'rose and rose should mate'. Meanwhile, the Brown Girl and Lord Thomas's incompatible relationship is seen in the image of a hound–and-hare chase. The supposedly brokenhearted girl spills the wine.

The ballad reaches its climax when the Brown Girl asks her husband to avenge her. To add insult to injury, Lord Thomas does nothing. Therefore,

> The Brown Girl's hair has kissed her waist,
> Her hand has closed on steel;
> Fair London's blood has joined the wine
> She sullied with her heel. (Early 311)

The primitive atmosphere accompanies a spirit of revenge. The girl's disheveled hair which suggests primitiveness, magic and a wind of change, stands for utter anger. To appease it, the Brown Girl murders her rival. The image of a confluence underlines severe brutality.

The bloody massacre forces Lord Thomas to divulge his true intentions. Though he married the Brown Girl, he is deeply in love with Fair London. At her death, he expresses his racist passions through two antithetical images: The Brown Girl is the overwhelming dark night, and Fair London the vanishing golden sun. (Early 311)

Time and again, the idea of duplicity which is characteristic of this ballad, appears in the idea of revenge. Lord Thomas wreaked vengeance on the Brown Girl. He made a noose of the girl's hair and stifled her[2]:

> He pulled it till she swooned for pain,
> And spat a crimson lake;
> He pulled it till a something snapped
> That was not made to break. (Early 312)

The aural image in ‘spat’ and ‘snap’ suggests the savage nature of the white man. The way Lord Thomas avenges himself refers to a long-standing history of suppression where African-American dreams and wishes have been nipped in the bud.

The conclusion stresses the fact that racial discrimination shows itself even in death. Lord Thomas, who is about to kill himself, addresses his greedy mother:

> Go dig one grave to hold us all
> And make it deep and wide;
> And lay the Brown Girl at my feet,
> Fair London by my side."(Early 313)

The image of the eternal triangle reveals the position of African-American people. Lord Thomas and his mistress lie buried beside

each other, while the Brown Girl rests at their feet. The tincture of racism of the ballad is overwhelming. To this effect Shucard says:

> It is indisputably racial… Of special interest here is that while the sacrifice of love for economics is important to the ballad, the racial dimension is measurable also: Love for the lord, is white, as he is; riches are personified in black, as are also forces of passion and vitality (that is, Fair London is poor and insipid by comparison with the Brown Girl). At the end of the poem " The Brown Girl sleeps at her true lord's feet, /Fair London by his side"—a noteworthy positioning of the two women in relation to the lord. (22-3)

Besides the ballad, Hughes used the blues and Cullen the sonnet. Cullen's sense of inferiority justifiably accounts for his conservative nature and, ipso facto, for his use of traditional forms. The fact that Cullen draws heavily from the romantic poets, especially Keats, is unconsciously meant to create a counterbalance with a white-dominated racial world where, as Cullen feels it, any non-white is surely branded inferior. Cullen's "For a Lady I Know" reflects the strong influence this complex mixture holds on Cullen:

> SHE even thinks that up in heaven
> Her class lies late and snores,
> While poor black cherubs rise at seven
> To do celestial chores. (Early 111)

Therefore, Cullen’s constant tension unconsciously forces him to identify himself with traditional forms, especially the ballad and the sonnet, primarily to escape an unfavorable classification under a social stratum to which he is bound by color.

The fact that the following sonnets express racial themes asserts a conflict in Cullen's ideology. He uses the sonnet form mainly to distinguish himself as a universal poet, not as one concerned with racial problems. The conflicting ideology is intertwined with the fierce struggle of a tormented psyche which is torn between two opposing concepts of regression and transgression. To the former belong “To France", "To One Not There" and two others entitled "Sonnet". The above-mentioned sonnets of regression are mostly characterized by religious and water images which express the faltering attitude of a hesitant spirit. In "To France" and "To One Not