



## **The Theme of Beauty in Leopold Sedar Senghor's Poetry**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In his long and immensely successful career,<sup>1</sup> Leopold Sedar Senghor celebrates the beauty of three major places or landmarks, namely, the African geographical landscape; the spirit and essence of womanhood, especially black womanhood; and the ethos of the dead ancestors. This essay is organized into three structural divisions each of which highlights how Senghor's verse is enhanced by the peculiar theme of beauty which defines it. Thus part one focuses on the beauty of the African topological landscape; part two addresses the beauty of womanhood; while part three celebrates the respective ways in which the dead ancestors promote and protect the interests and the welfare of the living.

### **I**

#### **Senghor's Lyricism**

Leopold Sedar Senghor very much likes and cherishes his indigenous African background. Africa's tropical settings, the beauty and structural configurations of its land and people greatly fascinated his mental and physical well-being and soul. S. Okechukwu Mezu writes:

Sedar had a happy childhood, swimming with the other children, riding on hocreback among the coconut plantations, and running around the sandy beaches not far away. When he was not learning about village lore, about medicinal plants and herbs, about birds and animals, about stars and constellations from his maternal uncle Toke 'Waly, he used to go to the sandy island of Fadiouth near his native village Joal...Leopold Senghor remembers details of this early childhood with great fondness and striking clarity<sup>2</sup>.

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Among Senghor's lyrics which celebrate the beauty of the African flora and fauna and its topographical settings are: "What Dark Tempestuous Night," "You Held the Black Face," and "New York." The coordinates of the various beauties produced by these lyrics endow Senghor's work with authenticity that is unsurpassed in African poetics.

In "What Dark Tempestuous Night," Senghor compares and contrasts the alluring physical presence of Africa with the sharp contours of the frosty and austere reaches of European winter: the one is happy and momentous, the other is eerie and dreary. In thinking of Europe, he writes somberly: "I slip into the mudhole of fear and my fear is suffocated in a watery rattle." In thinking about his African background connections, he writes with nostalgia and exultation: "But when shall I hear your voice again, happy luminous morn?/When shall I recognize myself again in the happy mirror of eyes, that are large like windows?"<sup>3</sup>

A similar note of contrast is developed in "You Held the Black Face," where Senghor recalls with vivid memory his personal grief which "seizes you," where there is "No smile of a child," and "no book where wisdom may be read," in contrast to his idyllic African background of "the most ancient times" which "seemed with fateful twilight luminous." Senghor refers here to the fact that some day, he will re-unite with his kith and kin in order to "drink from the sources of other lips."

The title of the poem has a connective and illuminating touch. The image, "the black face," is revealing: the "black face" is unique and distinct, a phenomenon which cannot be substituted or mistaken for another, hence it is one of immortal wonderment. Senghor's metaphor, "black," may also be alluding to the Western European view of the African continent which, for decades, was regarded Africa as the "dark continent." Whether "dark" or "black," the image which both words conjure in the mind of the sophisticated audience is one of celestial grace and beauty. In this poem, Senghor is re-creating history: he sees beauty in what traditionally has been viewed as ugly or deeply ominous of evil.

At the end of the poem, Senghor pays glowing tributes to his ancestral homeland. He writes: "I shall mourn anew my home, and the rain of your eyes over the thirsty Savannah." The word, "morn" is employed paradoxically, in the sense that Senghor really intends his reader to understand the word to mean "celebrate." The force and intensity of this paradoxical employment of language is, without doubt, one of the principal elements of Senghor's lyricism.

Senghor also explores here, for poetic purposes, the Wordsworthian principle of simplicity of language and subject matter, whereby "incidents and situations from common life" are examined or highlighted, whereby "the peasant is more poetical than the aristocrat/...because he sees in him a sort of emanation from the landscape."<sup>4</sup> In this poem the beauty or charm or mystique of the African continent is brought vividly before our eyes.

The beauty which Senghor discusses in the poem, "New York," can be viewed from diverse perspectives. Interestingly, the poem begins with a note

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of exultant jubilation: "New York! At first I was confused by your beauty, by those great/golden long-legged girls."

Upon reading the poem further, the reader is led to see the "mask," the veil of hypocrisy which surrounds the city, a place where "No smile of a child blooms," a city where crash materialism has not only distorted the truth but destroyed the fabrics of social life. Senghor elaborates: "No tender word for there are no lips, only artificial hearts paid for in hard cash." The remaining sections of the poem is a litany of the corruption and other social evils inherent in the city.

The ugliness which Senghor sees in New York city is possible or perceivable against a backdrop of the beauty and glory of the African background which he knows and where he was raised as a child. Senghor's mind is radiating back and forth, between the beautiful African homeland, and the New York city where now he is an exile. The New York-Africa nexus is important in understanding and appreciating the full range of Senghor's poetic art.

To the sophisticated reader, it is not difficult to distinguish the superiority and beauty of the African geographical contours over the one which he notices in New York city where he is now an unhappy exile. This scenario recalls "the complementary nature of African and European civilization" which Gerald Moore discusses in his essay, "The Politics of Negritude."<sup>5</sup> Although Senghor is an exile physically in New York city, psychologically however, the paternal bond between him and his idyllic African birthplace is profound and inseparable.

## II

Senghor's celebration of the beauty of womanhood -- indeed of all womanhood -- may be said to have originated from the strong bond which existed between him and his mother. S. Okechukwu Mezu describes it as follows:

...as is common in the serere matriarchal system, he was greatly attached to his mother, and was known (and to quite a few people is still known) as Sedar Nyilane, the latter being the name of his mother.

Sedar Nyilane was profoundly influenced by this matriarchal system. The mother belonged to the Fulani ethnic group, and most of Senghor's knowledge of local customs and beliefs was imbibed during his frequent visits to his uncle Toko 'Waly, the eldest in the maternal line!<sup>6</sup>

Another factor which may have contributed to Senghor's celebration of womanhood was the need to define, defend, and promote the concept of womanhood in the comity of nations. Thus much as Negritude was a fight that the black elites engaged in in order to enhance the black man's ethos in

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the eyes of the "luckier race,"<sup>7</sup> so also may it be said that the celebration of womanhood derives from the need to accord women their rightful place in society<sup>8</sup>.

Senghor's poems which celebrate the beauty and grace of womanhood include: "Night of Sine," "I Will Pronounce Your Name," "Be Not Amazed," and "Black Woman." Collectively, they define the beauty, the grace and the goodness which Senghor finds in the world of womanhood. And he communicates this experience with lyrical intensity and clarity.

In "Night of Sine," a poem which describes, with luminous details, Senghor's vegetational background -- symbolized by "the palm trees swinging in the nightwind," "the dark pulse of Africa," "the bards themselves/Dandle their heads like children on the backs of their mothers" -- the poet highlights the comfort and care which motherhood provides, especially during precarious and uncertain times.

The image of the "mother's breast glowing, like a kuskus ball smoking out of the fire" further strengthens the beauty of motherhood. The image, "dark blood," is effectively employed, as it highlights the unique and distinctive nature of Senghor's matriarchal cultural origins. The exhortation towards the end of the poem, "Woman, light the lamp of clear oil, and let the children in bed talk about their ancestors, like their parents," suggests the love and warmth of womanhood in the African socio-cultural context.

It is instructive that the lamp, which the poet urges the woman to light, is to be lighted with "clear oil." This suggests the unmistakable, unambiguous role of womanhood. In the indigenous African society, the female species is enjoined to cultivate virtuous attributes which would be imitated by all in order to promote cultural values. This is the beauty of womanhood as exemplified in "Night of Sine."

The didacticism of the poem is profound and interesting. Even though it is night-time at Sine, the beauty of womanhood -- symbol of night -- is illuminating: the "children," the "ancestors," and the "parents" all have joy and their spirits uplifted.

It is remarkable that the colorful pictures of womanhood presented in the first few lines of the poem -- symbolized by "your balsam hands, your hands gentler than fur" -- are echoed in the last and concluding lines of the poem -- suggested by "let me live before I sink, deeper than the diver, into the lofty depth of sleep." The morale of the poem, then, is that womanhood is the beginning and the end of all good and beautiful things.

In "I Will Pronounce Your Name," Senghor discusses womanhood from several interesting perspectives: from the power-love-wisdom syndrome; from the physical attractiveness of womanhood; and from the point of view of womanhood as a natural phenomenon which affects our human sensibilities.

The power-love-wisdom symbolism of the poem's narrative can be viewed as follows: First, Naet's beauty is so compelling that the poet must celebrate her (it "blossoms forth under the masculine ardour of the midday sun"). Secondly, Naet's love is so overpowering that the poet must submit to

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it (“I am your hero, and now I have become your sorcerer in order to pronounce your name”). Finally, the reversal of roles here suggests the appropriateness in loving Naet since she seems to possess both primordial love and beauty.

The physical attractiveness embodied in Naet, and by implication, all womanhood, is suggested by the powerful and colorful images which the poet employs to address her. They include: “my night, my sun,” “coin of gold, shining coal.” That Naet possesses celestial beauty is therefore not in doubt.

The name, Naet, is mentioned half a dozen times in the poem: this suggests not only the poet’s familiarity with the name of his beloved, but also the degree and extent to which he cherishes or values that name. Moreover, that she appeals to all of our five senses suggests the fact that her virtuous attributes are complete and impeccable.

For example: the expression, “the sugared clarity of blooming coffee trees,” appeals both to our sense of taste as well as of sight. The image, “the masculine ardour of the midday sun,” appeals to our sense of smell. And the image, “the dry tornado, the hard clasp of lightning,” appeals to our sense of hearing and that of touch.

The woman Naet has several names: for instance, apart from being everything to the poet (my night, my sun”), she is also the Princess of Elissa, banished from Futa on the fateful day.” All of the above epithets and qualifiers certainly add grace and glamour to her beauty.

The title of the lyric, “Be Not Amazed,” and the qualifying epithet “if,” which is repeated within the first two lines of the poem, hints at the level of the profusion of praise which Senghor intends to pour on the beauty of his beloved. Accordingly, the poet warns at the outset of the poem that nobody should be amazed if the unexpected should happen.

Neither the beloved, nor the general audience, should be amazed, he warns, if the poet himself should pass away. The occasion of his passing, he adds, will inevitably provide the beloved the opportunity to weep for him, that is, the bard, who had hitherto proclaimed the beauty of black womanhood. The images, “the purple voice of your bard,” “the glorious voice that sang,” effectively underscore the degree to which blackness -- as a concept -- seems to have been elevated to its crowning glory.

Then, in a series of swiftly moving lines, Senghor goes on to proclaim the lady’s blackness, “the glowing voice that sang your black beauty,” which, in the African cultural context, is never so openly expressed. That Senghor should break this code of cultural norm for the sake of love, testifies to the enormous and compelling beauty of womanhood.

Of Senghor’s poetry which celebrates the beauty of black womanhood, no poem, in mood, tone and dramatic intensity so effectively does it better than “Black Woman.”

*Naked woman, black woman  
Clothed with your colour which is life,  
With your form which is beauty!*

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*In your shadow I have grown up;  
the gentleness of your hands  
was laid over my eyes.  
And now, high up on the sun-baked pass,  
at the end of summer, at the heart of noon,  
I come upon you, my Promised Land,  
And your beauty strikes me  
to the heart like the flash of an eagle<sup>9</sup>*

### III

In order to fully appreciate the reason why Senghor sees so much beauty in the dead ancestors -- and consequently celebrates them -- it is appropriate to understand the relationship between the living and the dead in the African cultural matrix. Ulli Beier explains:

The ancestors are the guardians of morality among the living community; they are guides and protectors. Through priests and masqueraders a constant communication is maintained with the dead.<sup>10</sup>

On the difference between the way the Europeans view the dead in contrast to the Africans, he elaborates:

The European has almost lost his belief in survival after death altogether, but even where it still exists, the separation between the living and the dead is final ... In African, on the other hand, the idea of death is not associated with horror. The living and the dead are in continuous contact and a large part of the religious life of the African is devoted to establishing a harmonious contact with the dead<sup>11</sup>.

Senghor celebrates the beauty of the dead ancestors because of their protective powers; because of their ability to ward off ominous evils and other dangerous phenomena; and because they are the source of all prosperity and other worldly beneficence. Furthermore, the dead ancestors maintain a living presence in the midst of the living.

In the poem, "In Memoriam," for example, while Senghor is in far away Paris, he invokes the spirit of the dead ancestors for protection ("Protect my dreams as you have made your sons, wanderers on delicate feet/oh Dead protect the roof of Paris in the Sunday fog").

The image, "wanderers on delicate feet," alludes to the fact that Senghor himself and some other elements of the Diaspora are exiles in Paris, threading on precarious circumstances, including the inclement weather, the scourge of racism, loneliness and isolation, and nostalgia. Through his

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identification with the spirit of the dead ancestors, Senghor and his compatriots can hope for protection or salvation.

In the above poem, as in many of his lyrics that celebrate the essence and beauty of the dead ancestors -- including "Night of Sine," "Visit," and "Prayer to Masks" -- Senghor illuminates his work with grace, authenticity, realism, and a sense of reverence not easily found in African literature.

In this poem Senghor also praises the gallantry and heroism of the dead ancestors, whose blood flows freely on a restless earth. The dead ancestors participated in wars and, apparently, their pain and suffering hit Senghor in passing. The dead ancestors are compared to saints and holiness, not only through the employment of the image "Sunday," but also through the reference to "All Saints."

The beauty which Senghor celebrates in "Visit" centers on the ancestors' magnanimity, not only because they bring "the souvenirs of the decade" but because they commune with the living through their "hidden presences."

Under normal circumstances, in African culture, the dead ancestors are expected to make their visit during the middle of the night. However, the fact that their visit takes place during the late-afternoon ("I dream in the intimate darkness of an afternoon/am visited by the fatigues of the day") is an indication of the necessity and the urgency of their desire to commune with the living.

It is also important to understand the fact that, in the African culture, the affection which a parent extends to the child is often mutual and complementary. Thus the reciprocity between the dead ancestors and Senghor is suggested by Senghor's celebratory and extempore declaration: "suddenly my dead draw near to me."

In terms of style, there is the effective employment of repetition, both for rhetorical effect as well as the need to hasten the pace of the desired action or response:

It is the same sun....  
The same sky unnerved....  
The same sky feared....  
(*The Penguin Book*, p. 177)

Of Senghor's poetry the verse that best illustrates the omnipresence of the dead ancestors in human affairs is "Prayer to Masks." It is the one poem that addresses all of the dead ancestors on a universal scale: "Black mask," "red mask," "white masks," and "Rectangular masks." And the reason for which they possess beauty that deserves universal praise is two-fold: "You guard this place, that is closed to any feminine laughter, to any mortal smile/You purify the air of eternity."

The word, "masks," operates at several levels of meaning. For example, on the one hand it connotes the different ancestors from all nationalities: black, white, red, rectangular, etc. For Senghor, all the dead ancestors from

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all nations are wearing masks, as their different skin colors symbolize nothing but a façade. He also realizes another reality, that is, the different ancestors of the world provide support and comfort to the living: "You guard this place." Herein lies the beauty of this poem.

On another level, the employment of the word "mask" is designed to suggest the fact that humans of all stripes and colors -- as suggested by their skins -- are the same: For example, when we die and we are "liquefied and we mix with the elements," we are permanently reduced into skulls and bones. Consequently, death, as the universal leveler, reduces our respective skin colors into oneness. Herein lies the moral didacticism of the poem.

The above analyses tie into Senghor's universal theme of togetherness, brotherhood, reconciliation and the unity of all mankind, in spite of the racism, wars, rancor, "machines and cannons" that have tried to tear all of our humanity apart. Senghor believes in the innate goodness of the dead ancestors. He also believes that all peoples are "connected through the navel." Further, we have the same "reckoning with death."

### **CONCLUSION**

It is safe to conclude that Senghor finds beauty mostly in three distinct places: in the African physical landscape, in womanhood, and in the spirit and essence of the dead ancestors. From the African topographical settings, Senghor celebrates both the animate and inanimate objects, including the "home," the "thirsty savannah," and the ethos of "dark" and "black." From Senghor's poetry we understand the fact that the beauty of womanhood is not only situated in her physical attractiveness, but it accommodates other virtuous attributes like loyalty, faithfulness, obedience to marital and cultural codes, responsibility to family, especially the husband and the children. Womanhood confers privileges as well as demands responsibilities.

The beauty which Senghor finds in the ancestral dead arises from their spiritual support of the living to their ability to ward off ominous evils. Furthermore, the dead ancestors are the agents of wellness as well as of economic progress and prosperity. That Senghor is able to identify beauty from three distinct areas -- as illustrated above -- attests to his enormous imaginative vision and his fecund lyrical virtuosity.



NOTES

1. As D.I. Nwoga describes him, "He is the foremost thinker and writer on African Culture and the greatest African advocate of Negritude". See *West African Verse: An Anthology*, chosen and annotated by Donatus Ibe Nwoga (London: Longman Group Ltd, 1976), p. 223.
2. S. Okechukwu Mezu, *The Poetry of L.S. Senghor* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 1-2.
3. Leopold Sedar Senghor, "What Dark Tempestuous Night," in *The Penguin Book of Modern African Poetry* eds. Gerald Moore and Ulli Beier (London: Penguin Group, 1998), p. 317. Most of the quotations from Senghor's poetry will come from this edition.
4. See William Wordsworth, "The Observations Prefixed to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads," in *The Great Critics: An Anthology of Literary Criticism*, compiled and edited by James Harry Smith and Edd Winfield Parks, Third Edition, revised and enlarged (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1951), p. 497. Wordsworth owes his indebtedness to the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau.
5. See Gerald Moore, "The Politics of Negritude," in *Protest and Conflict in African Literature*, edited by Cosmos Pieters and Donald Munro (London and Ibadan: Heinemann, 1978), p. 36.
6. S. Okechukwu Mezu, *The Poetry of L.S. Senghor*, p. 1.
7. Cyprian Ekwensi explains the reason why it was necessary for the black man to assert his individuality: "it was necessary for the black man to reassure himself of his pride in being black because the blackness had become a shameful thing, an undignified state. There was in fact a 'fight for blackness' and with it a paradoxical yearning to become white." See Oladele Taiwo, "The Philosophy of Negritude," in *An Introduction to West African Literature* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd., 1967), p. 49. For more information on the philosophy of Negritude, see Isaac I. Elimimian, *Theme and Style in African Poetry*, Chapter 2, Three Negritude Poets: Leopold Sedar Senghor, David Diop, and Birago Diop (New York: Edwin Mellon Press, 1991), pp. 23-51.
8. As D.I. Nwoga, *West African Verse*, p. 222, explains, "In Africa, woman occupies the first place ... Because she does not leave the family and is the giver of life, woman has been made the source of the life-force and guardian of the house, that is to say, the depository of the clan's past and the guarantor of its future."

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9. Leopold Sedar Senghor, "Black Woman," *West African Verse*, p. 96.
10. Ulli Beier, *Introduction to African Literature*, New Edition (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1982), p. 105.
11. Ulli Beier, *Introduction to African Literature*, p. 105.

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