



### **The Negritude Continuum**

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#### **Abstract**

This chapter discusses the various literary themes and images in Senghor's poetic art that recur again and again that would make the Negritude movement a viable area of study for a very long time. It considers the themes of love,

#### **I**

If Negritude is about race and color, it stands to reason to think that the principles on which its foundation is erected will stand the test of time. It also highlights the fact that, as a poetic and ideological concept, the literary discourse on Negritude will not diminish nor disappear in the foreseeable future. On the contrary the literary debate about Negritude will not only resonate but will continue to reverberate across space and time.

In his poetics, Senghor explores the theme of continuity in several aspects of human life: love, death and immortality, beauty, etc. These are issues that will not go away so soon in our life. In all of these themes, Senghor employs vivid images and metaphors to articulate his aesthetic convictions.

The theme of love and its enduring possibilities are discussed in such lyrics like "Be Not Amazed" "I Came With You", and "Long, Long Have You Held". In these poems, the incredible vagary of human affection is carefully examined and discussed.

The poem "Be Not Amazed," discusses the theme of love against a backdrop of a painful human separation and the possibility of imminent demise.

The poem's protagonist, being fully aware of his beloved's intense affection for him, admonishes her in a tone reminiscent of Donne's in "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," against shedding profuse tears because, as he believes, their love will survive the threats of space and time. The poem's technique is one of dramatic warning, pleas, and exhortation.

The question of parting, in conjugal relationship, is mentioned in the poem, "I Came With You," a poem whose title is suggestive of very strong affectionate meanings. Examples: I came with you because you love me, and I love you. I came with you also because we both have respect for each other. Finally, I came with you because I believe you can take me assuredly into the Promised Land.

The poem's central metaphor is predicated on the word "parting" which is mentioned toward the last lines: "Is it then night for ever parting never to meet again?" Although this rhetorical question is not directly answered, the sensitive reader is never in doubt that the poet protagonist and his beloved will re-unite again which, from the Christian point of view, will be on the Judgment Day or the hereafter.

Furthermore, the sense of the continuity of life is suggested by the poem's concluding lines: "I will sleep in the silence of my tears/until my forehead is touched by the milky dawning of your/ mouth." Here the image of drinking milk, and of kissing through the mouth, strongly suggests the continuity of life and love which both the protagonist and his beloved must cherish.

In the lyric "Long, Long Have You Held," Senghor adds a new dimension to his complex philosophy regarding the nature of life and love:

Long, long have you held between your black face of the warrior  
Held as if already there fell on it a twilight of death.  
From the hill I have seen the sun set in the bays of your eyes  
When shall I see again, my country, the pure horizon of your face?  
When shall I sit down once more at the dark table of your breast?

Hidden in the half-darkness, the nest of gentle words.

I shall see other skies and other eyes  
 I shall drink at the spring of other mouths cooler than lemons  
 I shall sleep under the roofs of other heads of hair in shelter from storms.

But every year, when the rum of springtime sets my memory ablaze

I shall be full of regret for my homeland and the rain from your eyes on the thirsty savanahs<sup>1</sup>

Although on the surface this poem's thematic structure radiates between the protagonist's patriotic love of his fatherland versus that of his addressee lover, the poem's message can be better understood from yet two other structural levels: Divided into two parts, the first part sees love as a labyrinth, a kind of death whose beginning and its end cannot be navigated or predicted. It is like climbing hills and mountains without end. With persistence and determination, however, the countours and hinges of the climb will wear away and "springtime" -- the beginning of life and love -- will set in. This is the fundamental resolution at the end. The poem's moral denouement is clear enough: after the storm comes the calm, after the winter come the spring. Although this is not a new philosophy or principle, it however enlarges our understanding and appreciation of Senghor's lyric verse. Human love is a process, a continuum which takes time to mature and concretize. The same principle holds true in every other human endeavor.

The other level from which the poem can be understood is religious or philosophical. The poem's title suggests that the protagonist's lover has taken long in coming home. There is, therefore, some anxiety -- even panic -- on the part of the poet-lover in anticipation of the beloved's return home. From the Christian point of view, there is always hope; therefore, the poet should keep hope alive, that his beloved would ultimately return. This is a sacrifice which every Christian must attempt to make.

This archetypal Christian motif reinforces the poem's lyrical structure.

The poet employs comparison and contrast to illuminate his discourse. While the period of anxious expectation of the beloved is characterized by a "twilight of death," "half-darkness," the imagery employed in the home-coming is positive: "I shall drink at the spring," and the "rum of springtime sets my memory ablaze". Without the use of

this device of comparison and contrast, the poem's narrative structure might have turned out to be abstract, dull, and otiose.

Furthermore, the poem's repetitive structure -- symbolized by the frequent employment of the first personal pronoun "I" -- shows the protagonist's self-awareness and knowledge about the subject matters, of which he seems ready to take control and assume full responsibility. Finally, Senghor's ability to turn his poetic narrative from a tragic mood at the beginning into a comic tone at the end is a masterstroke.

## II

Death is another recurrent theme in Senghor's poetic art. Like John Donne, Senghor believes that death occurs to humans through various sources: for example, some die naturally like the dead ancestors; others die through human wickedness or capriciousness like those killed in war or through murder; while others die through other means. However, Senghor also believes in the immortality of the dead ancestors, whose spirits or souls, according to the African cultural mythos, can return to earth to intermingle with the living in order to protect them against harm, or offer them counsel or advice, or simply to visit and relate with them.

Senghor's verse that treats the theme of death can be grouped into two major categories: those that die through natural causes and those that die through murder, or war or other human wickedness.

Senghor's lyrics which focus on this second category of death include "Luxembourg 1939" and "Murders" whose settings are occasioned by some of the lurid and horrible events of World War II. We shall commence our discussion of the topic of death with a consideration of this second category.

In "Luxembourg 1939," Senghor painfully describes some of the unfortunate atrocities of the Second World War, in which "children," "soldiers" and other people were killed, apparently through no innate fault of theirs. The same macabre scene of death is recorded in the poem "Murders:"

They are lying there along the captured roads; along the roads of  
disaster slender poplars, statues of the sombre gods wrapped in long  
golden cloaks  
The prisoners from Senegal lie like lengthened shadows across the soil  
of France in vain they have chopped down your laughter, and the  
darker flowers of your flesh  
You are the flower of the foremost beauty in stark absence of flowers  
Black flower and solemn smile, diamond time out of mind.  
You are the clay and the plasma of the world's vivid spring  
Flesh you are of the first couple, the fertile belly, milk and sperm  
You are the sacred fecundity of the bright paradise gardens  
    And the incoercible forest, victor over fire and thunder  
The immense sang of your blood will conquer machines and mortars  
    The pulse of your speech, lies and sophistry  
No hate your heart without hate, no guile your heart without guile  
Black Martyrs O undying race, give me leave to say the words which  
will forgive<sup>2</sup>

The details of the circumstances surrounding the murders of the elegized souls in this poem are murky. But those murdered certainly include "Senegal prisoners" who were taken to France to fight during the Second World War. The poem's title strongly suggests evil practices occasioned by ill will or human wickedness and capriciousness. Although the poet's intention may not be to celebrate everything that they represent, the positive images and metaphors he employs suggest the pity and the admiration which he has for them. They are a symbol of virtue and gallantry.

The positive images employed to describe them include: "In vain they have chopped down your laughter, and the darker flower of your flesh;" "You are the flower of the foremost beauty in the stark absence of flowers;" "You are the clay and the plasma of the world's vivid spring;" "You are the sacred fecundity of the bright paradise gardens;" and "Black Martyrs O undying race."

Because these dead people are martyrs, their memory will remain indelible in the hearts of the living. Their virtues are numerous: they were handsome ("Slender poplars, statues of the sombre gods wrapped in long golden cloaks"), brave ("The immense song of your blood will conquer machine and mortars") and kind ("No hate your heart without hate, no guile your heart without guile."

In his celebrated poem "In Memory of W.B. Yeats," W. H. Auden avers that "The words of a dead man are modified in the guts of the living." Without aiming at a distortion, Senghor, in this poem, represents the voice of the living.<sup>3</sup> He therefore has the liberty and discretion to articulate the views and sensibilities of the dead men as he has done here with professionalism. Because they are martyrs, the immortality of the souls of these dead "prisoners" will outlive the reaches of time.

If we turn now to the first part of this topic (that is, Senghor's celebration of the dead who were not murdered), we shall discover that it permeates almost the whole spectrum of his verse: "The Dead," "In Memoriam," "Night of Sine," "Prayer to Masks," "Be Not Amazed," and "Visit" are some of the poems that celebrate the memory of the living dead. (They received substantial treatment in Chapter 4 of this book). They represent a mimesis of the immortality of the souls of the dead ancestors. The phenomenon of death, the nature of death, and the cause of death - - especially of those we love - - will always occupy an important place in the bosom of men.

Another enduring theme in Senghor's artistry is that of beauty. There is beauty everywhere in Senghor's poetic art: In the village of Sine with "The tall palmtree swinging in the night wind" ("Night of Sine"), in the dead ancestors, "Black mask, red mask, you black and white masks/ I greet you in silence" ("Prayer to Masks"); in the streets of Manhattan with "your beauty, by/those great golden long-legged girls" ("New York").

One remarkable quality about Senghor is his ability to create beauty through brief, lyric poetry, as he does in "All Day Long." All day long, over the long straight rails like an inflexible will over the endless sands across parched Canyon and Baol where the baobabs twists their arms in torment all day long, all along the line Past the same little stations, past black girls jostling like birds at the gates of schools all day long, sorely rattled by the iron train and dusty and hoarse behold me seeking to forget Europe in the pastoral heart of Sine!<sup>4</sup>

Here in the above lines we have a synthesis of the images of beauty from two contrasting continents: Europe and Africa.

The beauty of “the long straight rails” of Europe compares with the beautiful “pastoral heart of Sine.” This synthesis has a universal appeal. A similar image of proportionality and beauty is established in the brief and fascinating lyric “Totem:”

I must hide him in my innermost veins the Ancestor whose stormy hide is shot with lightening and thunder my animal protector, I must hide him that I may not break the barriers of scandal:

He is my faithful blood that demands fidelity  
Protecting my naked pride against  
Myself and the scorn of luckier races. (PBA, p.50)

There can be nothing more beautiful than the lines above. The speech shows candor, believability, and integrity. Senghor's ethos, as revealed by the passage establishes him as a man of “goodwill, good sense, and good moral character,” qualities, which according to Aristotle (Rhetoric, 1356 a) would enhance a speaker's/writer's ability to take his message successfully to his audience.

Here the poet's responsibility to the dead ancestors and vice versa is not in doubt. There is a mutual sense of reciprocity, of “give and take” on both sides. (“My animal protector, I must hide him”).

Furthermore, the respect which Senghor extends to the dead ancestors - - symbolized by “He is my faithful blood that demands fidelity” - - is beautiful. All of the above, that is, Senghor's ethos in “Totem,” his universal appeal in “All Day Long,” and his spirit of reconciliation (which we discussed earlier in Chapter 6) can only be considered as “a thing of beauty,” which, as John Keats tells us, is “a joy forever”.

### Notes

1. Leopold Sedar Senghor, “Long, Long Have You Held,” *Poems of Black Africa*, edited Wole Soyinka (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1975), pp.270–271.

2. Leopold Sedar Senghor, “Murders,” in *Poems of Black Africa*, edited Wole Soyinka (Oxford and Ibadan: Heinemann, 1975), p.93. Subsequent quotation from this edition will be included parenthetically in the text as PBA, followed by the page number(s).
3. As F. R. Leavis tells us, “What criticism undertakes is the profitable discussion of literature.” He adds: “Anyone who works strenuously in the spirit of this conception must expect to be accused of being both dogmatic and narrow”. See his *Revaluation Tradition and Development in English Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947), p.19.
4. Leopold Sedar Senghor, “All Day Long,” in *Modern Poetry From Africa*, edited Gerald Moore and Ulli Beir (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p.55. Subsequent citation from this edition will be included parenthetically in the text as MPA, followed by the page number(s).
5. See also, Elder Olson, “Rhetoric and the Appreciation of Pope,” *Rhetorical Analyses of Literary Works*, ed. Edward P. J. Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p.37. Maynard Mack, “The Muse of Satire,” in *Modern Essays in Criticism: Satire*, Edited by Ronald Paulson (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p.19

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