

Style and the Representation of Agony in the Poetry of Countee Cullen

Anthony Ebebe Eyang

Department of English and Literary Studies

University of Calabar

Calabar – Nigeria

Eyangtony36@Gmail.Com

+234(0)7030473247

Abstract

The somber and tragic mood prevalent in Countee Cullen's poetry is a reflection of the poet's internal conflict as an African American writer against the background of the harsh climate of racial injustice, which the black man was a victim of in American. This paper examines the modes of representation of this agonizing conflict and the African American as an existential victim. It looks at select poems of Cullen from the perspective of psychoanalysis to explore the double consciousness, the motif of inferiority, religious frustration and agony of the symbolic poet-victim while making the argument that in spite of the writer's wish not to be viewed as a Negro poet, his art was essentially influenced by the experiences of the time. Along this line, the paper looks at the creative handling of lexical and syntactic structures and figurative expressions as stylistic strategies to communicate the dual consciousness and frustration of the black man, stranded between paganism and Christianity.

Introduction

African American poetry of the Harlem Renaissance, as all Diaspora literature, has its tone coloured by historical burden on the black man. The poetry, to a large extent, is shaped by agonizing existential realities, about which the poet cannot run away from reflecting on. And this is in spite of how genteel and indirect such a poet may claim to be as is the case with Countee Cullen. Race consciousness would not have been an escapable feeling of the black poet of the Harlem Renaissance, no matter the claim to the contrary. In the literature of the time, there flowed an artistic vision distinctively American and at the same time within the ethnic province of the black race. Huggins' (1971) identification of the responsibility of "Negro Arts... proving racial civility" (6) is a task on the writers of the era, a task that recognizes that arts is a signification of human achievement and civilization.

As was expected, overt treatment of racial issues was considered rather disdainful by the reading audience of the time. But a message was expected from Negro art because of the connection between the black experience and social reforms. Thus, there was a tension between arts and social responsibility. The problem this posed to Harlem writers is captured in Huggins' question: "How could a black man write about his deepest inner feelings artistically rather than sociologically?" (p. 201). But literature can hardly be tangential to the burning issues of injustice, poverty and oppression; hence, social realism becomes a demand on art and the artist by the suffering public over and above any other consideration.

According to Davis (1981), one of the things that broadened the African American's poetic vision and which also had implications for style was what the New Renaissance meant to the writers. It offered the writer a new perspective and confidence in his giving artistic expression for the dual experience as an African and an American. Eko (2005) draws ideological parallels between Harlem Renaissance and Negritude movement and summarises the concerns and vision of writers of these milieus as including the declaration of the collective consciousness of the black people and:

a new self confidence and pride in the beauty and joy of blackness, a deliberate affirmation of Africa as their roots; an artistic liberation unto experimentation; a celebration of the common joys of life among common people; a nostalgic and romantic invocation of a lost pat (pp. 28 – 29)

The stylistic implication of this collective consciousness, which the time offered the writer was enormous. In the face of racial tyranny and epistemic violence, the Harlem Renaissance period also offered a new irony and satirical approach to the writers. Interest was also turned to folk material and Africa as a homeland to engender race pride. The writers, however responded differently to this phenomenon and so had varied styles and approaches to the problem. It is against this background that one of the most talented poets of the Renaissance, Countee Cullen defined his voice, self and artistic ideology. One area in which he expressed his ambivalence and represented the black man's tragedy is in his religious poems to represent an agonizing duality. Some of these poems are chosen for examination in this paper. Religion is viewed in this paper as a means for the poet to portray the

black man as an existential victim and the sadness, lamentation and other unpleasant things that go with all this. In this vein, Cullen's poetry is burdened by the lachrymal and a heavy mood.

Artistic Vision of Countee Cullen (1903 – 1946)

Popularly regarded as the poet laureate of Harlem Renaissance, an exemplar of the dual consciousness that plagues African Americans, Countee Cullen was born Countee Porter in 1903 in New York. One of the Talented Tenth, Cullen was largely influenced by the romantic John Keats, and characteristically, placed primacy of feeling in his poetry exploring "lyrical definitions of truth and beauty and goodness and their seeming transiency in the world of time and circumstance" (Barksdale and Kinnamon, 1972, p. 29). Though Countee Cullen did not want himself looked at as a poet from the racial prism, he was ever conscious of his racial roots and background. This is suggested by the titles of some of his collections: *Color* (1925), *Black Christ and Other Poems* (1929), *Copper Sun*, *The Ballad of the Brown Girl* and *Caroling Dusk*. His other works are: *Medea and Some Poems* (1935), *The Lost Zoo* (1940) and *My Lives and How I Lost Them* (1942). Davis (1981) Quotes Cullen's statement about himself in *Caroling Dusk* as follows; "Born in New York City... and received in the conservative atmosphere of a Methodist personage Countee Cullen's chief problem has been that of reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination. His life so far has not convinced him that the problem is insoluble" (p. 77). Cullen's contemporaries were Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Gwendolyn Brooks, etc. Countee Cullen had a conventional and conservative view of arts, which like McKay, he believed should transcend race bounds, the mundane and ordinary things. Huggins (1971) states that Cullen conceived of poetic language as elevated above the ordinary just as higher emotions and ideas are preferred to sensuality, and purity of language to ordinary speech. His style and preference for traditional poetry are rooted in his education, which to Huggins made the poet:

... forever committed to the formalism that his education implies... He understood Art to be a slave of Beauty... Poetry more than prose was the pure essence of the literary art, as essential beauty it should allow the human imagination to soar, to live with the gods. (pp. 206 – 207)

In consonance with this observation, Davis (1981) says that Cullen is predominantly a lyrical poet who admits his rank conservatism and love for “the measured line and the skillful” (p. 75). It is worthy of note that Cullen was richly influenced and inspired by the Romantics and so structured his poems based on their models, placing primacy on feelings. His artistic vision was also shaped by the romantic idea. He believed that man can be transformed into an immortal by the imagination, genius and art. In spite of Cullen’s strong idealization of art, and his preference for classical forms and the universalizing dimension of poetry, he still remained conscious of his race. This was because the Negro problems, suffering discrimination, lynching, etc were too hard a reality to be ignored. Remaining committed to his idealized and conservative aspect of poetry, it became difficult for him to consider himself a Negro poet, which would of course affect, if not restrict his artistic vision. However, Cullen’s sense of race provided the strongest emotional stimulation for his poetry. This double allegiance to traditional formalism and the racial made Cullen to allege a kind of malevolence on God as implied in these well-quoted lines: “Yet do I marvel at this curious thing/
To make a poet black and bid him sing” (Cullen, 1947, p.3).

Cullen’s vision of art was the universalization of the particular, which meant the use of indirection in treating the Negro experience couching it in classical religious contexts. This was because he felt that the disturbing issues of lynching, hate and bitterness were not considered as elevating and enduringly beautiful enough to constitute the theme of poetry. For instance, the vexed question of “heritage” is bound to the religious construct seen in antithetical terms of paganism versus Christianity. This vision and approach would have stylistic effect in Cullen’s poetry.

Theoretical considerations

Psychoanalytic theory is considered a suitable theoretical perspective in examining the poetry of Countee Cullen in this paper. This is in view of how much of the poet’s personality and inner cravings are revealed even while attempting to veil his art with the universal as dictated by his poetic vision. In other words, the psyche manifests itself in literary expression despite the attempt to veil it. Literature to Freud whose ideas are foundational to the psychoanalytic theory is an outward expression of unresolved conflicts (neurosis) of the author. In this regard, the work of art should be examined as a dream using the techniques of psychoanalysis to unearth the true meaning: the repressed wishes, desires and motivation. The implication of

this approach is the central assumption that artists and writers are neurotic in a special sense in that through finding an artistic and emotional valve, they escape from many of the outward manifestations of neurosis, the terminal point of which is madness and self-destruction. The literary work becomes in the psychoanalytic framework a "disguised wish", "a dream or fantasy", bearing an outward realization of the unconscious, according to Bressler (1994, p. 94).

This theory is suitable to the study of African American poetry generally because of the psychic assault that racial tyranny and intolerance meant to the black man coupled with the internalized complexes from the slave past as part of the collective unconscious manifested in their works. Though it should be noted that psychoanalysis does not place any importance on the aspects of textual organization required in stylistic consideration of literature as Ellman (1994) has pointed out, insights from the theory are useful in the investigation of Cullen's poetry. To account for the linguistic elements in the texts, used to encode the meaning expressed by the writer, insights are drawn from M. A. K. Halliday's systemic functional grammar (1994), an approach that places primacy on function and context of use of language.

Discussion of style and representation of agony

In this analysis, creative linguistic elements of the poems are identified and discussed as stylistic strategies of evoking a tragic mood through the representation of the Negro's dilemma. The poems treated are from the collection by Cullen - *On These I Stand: An Anthology of the Best Poems of Countee Cullen* (1947).

"Simon the Cyrenian Speaks"

"Simon the Cyrenian Speaks" is a dramatization of the Biblical story of Simon of Cyrene, an African who was compelled to help Jesus Christ with the Cross he was to be crucified on as recorded in Matthew 27, v.32 and Luke 15, v.21. Cullen appropriates this story to express the black man's plight through a narrator, who with courage and dignity responds to the Christian *call* of service and sacrifice (Huggins 1981). The effect of the narrator's automatic response is in the fact that his deed was without his help being enlisted in words. This spontaneity shows the persona's far-reaching readiness to advance the cause of human redemption which Christ embodied.

The second stanza presents an initial doubt in the narrator. It is a doubt arising from the narrator's race, hence he identifies himself as a Black man. The narrator is at first not sure of his redemption in Christ and by extension, the redemption of all blacks in Christianity: "At first I said "I will not bear/His cross upon my back/He only seeks to place it there/Because my skin is black", This expresses a limited vision of Christian redemption by the narrator but this vision is extended in the next stanza - as signalled by the reversive conjunct, "But".

A justification of the narrator's heroic sacrifice is anchored on the behavioural clause, "But He was dying for a dream"; a relational clause, "And He was very meek"; and a material process, "And in His eyes there shone a gleam". The narrator here transcends the barrier of colour to appreciate Christ's vision-"dream", "gleam"-and humility. The lexical items in this stanza tie up to form a quest and promise which are worthy for a heroic sacrifice. The repetition of coordinators creates an effect that there is much that is universal which the persona sees and admires in Christ.

In the last stanza, the first line comprises a relational and material process, "It was Himself my pity bought". This pity is anchored on the preceding stanza which has already stated the admirable things about Christ as revealed in his suffering. Mainly, in this stanza, there is a juxtaposition of the narrator's sacrifice and the brutality of Christ's tormentor, Rome. This juxtaposition of pity and cruelty foregrounds the narrator's positive quality. The brutality is represented in the adverbial phrase of manner, "with bruise of lash or stone".

The lexical items in this poem belong to the religious domain in congruence with the thematic concern. Christ is cataphorically referred to as "He" until he is identified in the last stanza. The reader immediately understands this pronoun as referring to Jesus Christ because the title "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks" already alludes to the Biblical story of Simon who helped Jesus with the Cross. Accordingly, the first person pronoun "I" refers to the speaker narrator, "Simon". The other lexemes in the religious domain contextually include; "bear", "cross", "seek", "meek", "journey", "pity", "Rome", "Christ" and the pronoun "He" which is written in capital 'H' in its reference to Christ. The only items that express the racial identity of the speaker-narrator are "skin" and "black".

Though this poem does not openly express outrage, it reflects the Christian vision of redemptive suffering and its acceptance by the blacks. The outrage, however, is subtle, and is seen in the ironically satirical reference to the

Style and the Representation of Agony in the Poetry of Countee Cullen

antithesis in the narrator's identification with Christ and the laceration by Roman soldiers. This becomes clearer when taken into cognisance that the Roman tormentors were white and the narrator, Simon the Cyrenian, who had pity on Christ and helped was a black man from the North African town of Cyrene. Cullen characteristically casts his vision and outrage in the classical or religious idiom.

Having looked at "Simon the Cyrenian Speaks", we will now examine the lexical items in Cullen's "Pagan Prayer".

"Pagan Prayer" is a poem that questions Christianity in terms of the black man's place in it. The praying persona entreats God to help his Christian folk, but this entreaty is satirical because he implicitly queries their credulity and uncritical acceptance of Christian principles. The prayer becomes an ironic satire. The persona is from the black race. He tells the state of his heart as a pagan and the things he does to counterbalance what he appears to condemn, though in a prayer. From the beginning the speaker in the poem declares that the prayer is not for himself but his race.

Since this is a prayer, one would expect a humble supplicant-persona enlisting God's assistance. But in this poem, the persona is brazenly unrepentant and questioning, making some justifications for his paganism. The actual instances of entreaty are not only few but also somewhat derisive. What gives this impression is the way lexical and syntactic structures and their semantic import have been mobilised by the poet.

In the first stanza, the fronting of the adjunct "Not for myself as modifying the verb "make" underscores the importance placed on that structure in the context of that clause. It shows some distancing of the maker of the prayer. The second line identifies the beneficiary(ies) of the prayer "this race of mine" which is qualified in the next clause in lines 2-3. Similarly, the adjunct "For me" is consistently placed in the frontal position in stanzas 2, 3 and 4 to accentuate the religious heart of the "I" of the poem. In stanza 2, the persona states in relational process clauses "my heart is pagan mad" (line 5) and "my feet are never still". The adjective "mad" and the noun "heart" do not collocate in the extra-textual sense. But their association in the context of this poem foregrounds the extent of paganism of the persona represented by the synecdoche "heart" which stands for the whole self.

The first prayer petition is in line 7 "But give them hearths to keep them warm". The word "hearths" and "warm" are associated. But in the third

stanza, "faith" and "fallowing" do not go together. However, as used in the poem, the violation of the restriction rule of semantics draws attention to the personal faith which is incredulous. This incredulity is stressed in line 10 - a compound sentence made up of both a material process and mental process clause; "I bow not till I see". The lexical item "these" repeated in lines 11, 15 can be said to refer to the prayer maker's people who have accepted Christianity. Line 11 is both a relational process and a material: "But these are humble and I believe". Both the adjective "humble" and the verb "believe" are related to the same religious domain.

The clause which follows this is the second petition in the prayer, "Bless their credulity", which like the first in line 7 is an imperative material process with a transitive verb. This prayer point is rather unusual because instead of the object of blessing being a material or spiritual thing, here it is "credulity", the tendency to willingly and readily believe that is the object of the blessing.

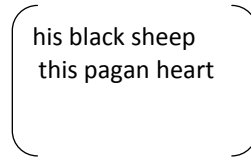
In line 13, a material process presents what the prayer maker believes is the best way of paying back: "For me, I pay my debts in kind." In this context, "debts" is played on to refer to injuries. This is suggested in the third point of the prayer, "Bless these who turn the other cheek". In this expression, this is used mockingly, just as it is difficult in real life for Christians to "turn the other cheek" when assaulted or injured as preached by Jesus Christ. In stanza 5 the vocative: "Our Father, God; Our Brother Christ" becomes the identified addressee in the first line of the remaining stanzas. The "Kinship" in line 19 is that between the addressee, particularly "Our Brother, Christ" and people of the black race. The relational process clause: "Their kinship seems a little thing" conveys the persona's query over blacks' credulity. And this is because they "sorrow all the day". The word "sorrow" is a noun that depicts a feeling of sadness. But in this line of the poem the word is used as an intransitive verb, qualified by the adverbial group of time "all the day". This unusual use of the word "sorrow" in this context clearly highlights the extent of the black people's plight.

The seventh stanza is a critical question for the addressee. Interestingly, the three clauses that make up the stanza are relational processes. The first is "are we bastard kin" where the identified is "we" and the identifier is "bastard kin". The epithet "bastard" is pejorative and offensive, but it is the only reason for the other accusations: "That to our complaints your ears are closed/Your doors barred from within?" The import of this accusation is that the black race is denied and despised as a bastard. And probably on account of this, God and Christ do not listen to the sad cry of the people. The barring

of the doors signifies that the blacks are not accepted, subtly implying also that some other race(s) is/are admitted and accordingly treated as the legitimate kin.

The absence of a clear point of request from God by the persona can be noticed in this stanza. In the last stanza, there is a request which is open: "Retrieve my race again". The verb "retrieve" suggests that the race is in a situation or place that it should not be, hence the need for recovery. This is better understood in the light of the indignity suffered by the blacks in the United States in different aspects of life. To the persona, the retrieving of the race is the way that he can be directed to Christianity: 'So shall you compass this black sheep,/This pagan heart. Amen'. The word "compass" is a noun but in this poem it is used as a transitive verb, with its object or complement being "this black sheep" which is in apposition with "This pagan heart". This can be represented in the schema:

So shall you compass



The lexical items "black" and "pagan" in their epithetic forms as used in this poem are neutralised; so too is "black ship" and "pagan heart". Again, the word "compass" also suggests that the persona is out of God's range but he tells Him how he can be traced.

The rhetorical organisation of the poem as a prayer and the use of certain words give the poem a cohesive quality. Traugott and Pratt (1980) posit that: The phenomenon of cohesion in literature obviously has everything to do with the fact that literature is art, that literary texts are constructed to produce in us the kinds of experience we speak of as "aesthetic" in which symmetry and interplay of sameness and difference play a major role (p.23).

In "Pagan Prayer", Cullen achieves this cohesion through parallel structures such as "For me", "Our Father, God; our Brother Christ", the use of the imperative in making a prayer request and the semantic relations between words. Some of these words are: "pagan", "faith", "credulity" and the verb "believe" in the context of the poem. There is also a consistent use of the figurative device, synecdoche, as in the following: "my feet", "the other cheek", "your ears", "This pagan heart". All these features endow the poem with some textness as well as contribute to the meaning making.

"Heritage"

Countee Cullen's "Heritage" explores the theme of exile and the burden of the African past on the poet against the background of his social and cultural condition as an African American. This interpretation of "Heritage" revolves around the rhetorical question "what is Africa to me?" In this vein, the poem explores the atavistic pull of Africa on the poet which leaves him confused and struggling to stem the tide of primitive cravings which his African roots beget.

The lexical choices in the poem project these concerns through linguistic foregrounding facilitated by unusual collocation. The first stanza is a soliloquy. In it, the poet wonders what Africa is to him: "copper sun or scarlet sea./Jungle star or jungle track..." The epithets "copper" and "scarlet" belong to the same semantic category and are both descriptive of the natural elements "sun" and "sea". In the next line, the noun "jungle" is used as an adjective for "star" and "track". From an extra-textual consideration, "jungle" and "star" do not collocate, hence a forest does not grow in the firmament where the "star" belongs. But the use of the expression, "jungle star", conveys the depth of the poet's imagination of the distance between him and Africa. Other epithets in the first stanza include "strong bronzed" and "regal black" used to modify men and women of Africa who are the poet's forebears. These "ennobling" adjectives resonate the sentimental romanticization of Africa in Harlem Renaissance literature generally. The word 'Eden' refers to the same romantic sense of peaceful atavistic Africa. But the poet is very distant from Africa; and this is expressed in a historical context of time "One three centuries removed/From the scenes his fathers loved" (lines 7-8). The repetition of the question "What is Africa to me?" at the end of that suggests that it does not mean much to the poet. This, according to Huggins (1971) is self deception because of the primal force heritage has over willful denial.

To underscore this phenomenon of irresistible force of African memory, the poet employs certain words, structures and devices. In the second stanza, for example, "So I lie" is repeated three times (lines 11, 19, and 23). And each time, there are activities of jungle life coursing through the poet. As part of these activities, there are "barbaric birds" that sing songs and goad "massive jungle herds". There are also "juggernauts of flesh", "tall defiant grass", "forest lovers", etc. There is a violation of the semantic restriction rule in "barbaric birds" and "defiant grass". Each of these adjectives pertain to a human being, hence they can be said to have the features {+man,} {-animal}.

Style and the Representation of Agony in the Poetry of Countee Cullen

Equally noticeable in lines 3 and 14 is a case of personification in which birds goad. The verb "goad" ordinarily pertains to human beings; but in this case, its subject is a non-human entity. In the second part of the second stanza, (lines 9-22) the poet is always besieged by thoughts of Africa conveyed through the image of "Great drums throbbing through the air" which he attempts to resist by blocking his ears. Cohering with the sense of hearing are the lexemes "hear", "ear", "drums" and "air". The third part of this second stanza presents the dominant image of a very hot and restless liquid state expressive of the poet's blood and the pressure on him by the African past. The poet's skin and flesh are "sombre" (i.e. dull and black) and the blood is not only "dark" but "dammed within" to suggest its force. Accordingly, these structures such as "pulsing tides", "burst", "surge", "foam" and "fret" help in portraying the restlessness of the poet in the unavoidable confrontation with his African consciousness. The words point to the revolting blood which the poet must give expression to in spite of himself since the course of blood in the human system is not a matter of choice.

In the third stanza, Africa is compared to a "book one thumbs/Listlessly till slumber comes". This further accentuates the meaninglessness of Africa to the poet. Peopling the African environment, in the poet's imagination, are wild animals and their activities. There are "bats", "cats" and "silver snakes" whose activities form natural and habitual collocation in this part of the poem:

bats - circling
cats - crouching, stalking (in a predatory manner).

Associated with the predatory phenomenon is the expression "monarch claws have leapt/From the scabbards where they slept". "Monarch" and "claws" clash collocationally just as the entire nominal group itself is personified on the one hand and metonymized on the other, hence the "monarch claws" leap and sleep. Other examples of collocations are "leprous flowers" and "Fierce corollas". These are non-existent aspects of the flora of Africa. But these expressions help in portraying Africa's romantic and Edenic aura. In spite of this, Africa has become as insignificant as "last year's snow".

The poet likens the need to divest himself of the promptings of the past to the tree which forgets "How its past arose or set" (line 60). Like that tree, what is important is to be productive. The poet personifies the "tree" and endows it with memory failure. Similarly, the "bird" is "shy" and it "wonder[s]".

In stanza four, the agony of the poet who is under siege by the tidal assault of Africa is presented in instances of collocational clashes. The poet's restlessness is as a result of the relentless "beat" "Made by cruel padded feet/Walking through my (his) body's street" (lines 72-73). "Street" and "body" are not natural collocates, but their association in this poem depicts the seriousness of the disturbance of the beat to the poet's body. From line 80-89 the lexical items that show the soul's agony include among others: "pain", "twist", "squirm", "writhing", "baited worm", "primal measures" and "drip".

Even as this pulsing influence of Africa comes on to the poet commandingly, he attempts unsuccessfully to beat back the pulse. Though he feels attracted to the "heathen gods/Black man fashion out of rods" (line 90-91), he does not want to identify with them. "Heathen gods are not to me" (line 97). From this stanza 5, the poet's concern becomes religion; the Traditional African Religion and Christianity. The rather pejorative adjectives "quaint", "outlandish" and "heathen" show the distancing of the poet from the African religion. But the Christian religion which he embraces, gives him much discomfort. Because of this, his address of the Holy Trinity; "Father, Son and Holy Ghost" becomes "an idle boast". This is because the poet wishes God were black, while believing that -If He really were, He would better understand the plight of the Negroes, sympathise with their suffering and agony and be proactive towards seeing them out of their condition by showing compassion. It is this wish that gives his Christianity a paganistic inclination, endowing God with dark features: "Lord, I fashion dark gods, too". The confusion in the poet derives largely from the fact that he is 'dark' and is stranded between the unwillingness to embrace a paganistic religion or way of life as compelled by the African pull and a reluctance to full-heartedly accept the Christian religion. The poet's race and the sordid treatment meted to the race in America can be interpreted to be responsible for this state of mind.

This sixth stanza is stylistically cast as a confession in which the poet says his mind and wishes as opposed to the things he professes in Christianity, "Lamb of God, although I speak/With my mouth, thus, in my heart/Do I play a double part" (lines 101-103). In line with this, there is a juxtapositioning of opposites. For example, while the "altar" is "glowing", the poet's heart grows "sick" and "falser[s]". This expresses the dissatisfaction with the Christian faith. Similarly, "my heart" and "my mouth" are in opposition since what is said is not in consonance with what is thought and wished in the heart. Furthermore, while the implied meaning here is that God is white the wish is

Style and the Representation of Agony in the Poetry of Countee Cullen

that He were black. But the black features the poet wishes to endow God with are rather discomfiting. For instance, the features are "despairing"; the "hair" though a crown, is "dark and rebellious", the "patience wavers" and with a "smitten cheek" and "weary eyes" and rising anger. The conclusion can then be drawn that if God were black then He would be an image of pain and misery like the Negro. The collocation in the expressions above represent a horrid image of a black man as a victim of different forms and levels of injustice, consequences of which are weariness, anxiety and anger that have come to characterise him in America.

The last part of the poem expresses doubts about the poet's ability to resist the intense pull from the motherland, Africa. However, for stability and control, the poet must "quench" his "pride" and "cool" his "blood". Respectively, the transitive verbs and their complements do not collocate since pride does not burn to require being quenched, nor blood hot to require being cooled. There is a dominant image of a furnace in relation to the heated blood. In congruence with this, words such as "ember", "burning" and "melting" are used to suggest intense heat. Also noticeable are parallel structures such as "Burning like the driest flax/Melting like the merest wax" (line 128-129). The heat burns and melts too.

Looking at this poem psychoanalytically, it can be said that it is a subconscious contrast between legendary Africa where the inhabitants live in idyllic or rustic setting in reverie and freedom and the exiled blacks who live in misery and pain. Commenting on this concern, Davies (1981) observes that Africa, to the black primitivist poets of the Harlem Renaissance, "...is not actually a real place. It is a symbol, an idealized land in which the Negro was once happy and free. The...poets used it to accentuate the differences between the Negro's harsh American existence and that he once led in this legendary "dusky dream-lit land" (p.75).

The stylistic or discursive strategies adopted in this poem are aimed at expressing the ambivalence or the double-consciousness that plagues African Americans. In this direction, Leonard (2006) observes that because the speaker is "divided between present and past, memory and action, restraint and release, decorum and passion...(he) cannot complete the expected iambic tetrameter quite common in verse, nor can he fully comprehend his own heritage". "Each of these seven-syllable lines," Leonard continues, "is in trochaic catalectic tetrameter or evokes it, as Cullen adapts a classical mastered verse that sounds...like a metrical version of the speaker's irresolution in the face of this question of Africa" (p.94).

In this section, lexico-semantic and cohesive features have been analysed. Accordingly, we noticed the creative use of lexis, particularly the purposeful violation of the English semantic restriction rule of collocation for the poets to convey certain messages. The section that follows, treats the use of metaphor in the representation of pain, agony and horror in selected poems of McKay and Cullen. Before the analysis, however, a brief background of the metaphor as a poetic device is given.

“Saturday’s Child”

Cullen's "Saturday's Child" presents the agonising feeling of an unprivileged persona, born in sorrow and difficulty and left to face the vagaries of life. To underscore the persona's unpleasant condition, there is a comparison with those who are born into wealth and comfort in the first three stanzas of the poem. It is this comparison that the metaphors of agony are built and made to stand out. In the first stanza, "silver spoon", and "stars strung for a rattle" suggest opulence, ease and good luck. This congenial circumstance of birth is implicitly likened to the putting together of stars for a "rattle" - a play thing for the fortunate child. For the Saturday's child, he cuts his "teeth as the black raccoon-/For implements of battle" (lines 3-4). The raccoon is a small animal with black fur and markings on its face; it makes a terrible noise when it is angry. Not only is the persona likened to the raccoon, he also prepares himself for battle. "Coon" is a slang word for Negro. Side by side with it, "raccoon" becomes ambiguous as it refers to both the Negro and the animal. As used here, "battle" refers to the tough problems of life which the child is to face by virtue of his unprivileged birth. There is an opposition between "rattle" and "battle" as a way of emphasising the difference in condition and circumstances between the have and have-not.

In the second stanza, the dichotomy between the privileged and unprivileged is in the texture of the material they are dressed with. While the material for the affluent child is "silk", soft and smooth, the Saturday's child's is "sackcloth", stiff and rough. The lexical items "silk" and "sackcloth" are metaphorical with both as Vehicle terms implying respectively the shine and grace of life and the turbulence and agony of poverty. Also informative and congruent with these metaphors are the opposing times of birth stated in this stanza: "And heralded by a star" (line 6) and "on a night that was black as tar" (line 8). Line 6 suggests a good omen while 8 is more or less a sad omen defined in terms of inappropriateness of time.

In stanza 3, there is a concrete and humanising metaphor, "Poverty" and "Pain". According to Leech (1969), in a concrete metaphor, an abstract

thing is endowed with qualities of things which have a concrete existence. The abstract terms in this stanza of the poem are "Poverty" and "Pain" which are given the human attributes or actions of naming and "godfathering" respectively. That is, "Poverty" and "Pain" are personified hence they are used as proper nouns. The deitic "Dame" which is an honorific title does not ordinarily collocate with poverty which is [+ suffering] and [- dignity]. It can therefore be interpreted as being mock-heroic. It follows then that the action engaged by poverty would only engender suffering and agony. In the same vein, the object of the action of "Pain" would certainly be miserable and unpleasant. Equally significant is the use of "godfathered" as verb with "Pain" as subject. A godfather is supposed to be a man of much power and influence to whom one looks up to for favours. But this is not what it does to the "me" in the poem. However, it is powerful, even if it is in a negative sense. The words "Pain" and "godfathered" are unusual collocates that point to the same direction of the mock-heroic earlier identified in the preceding line.

Related to this image of suffering is the significance of the personification of "Death" and "Sorrow" in the last stanza of the poem. "Death" is involved in a material process action of severing "the strings that gave me life/And handed me to Sorrow" (line 17-18). This implies that "Death" killed his mother or parents thereby making his life an all out painful experience. "Sorrow" is appositively identified as a "middle wife" from whom "My folks could beg or borrow". This is an instance of personification used to represent the far-reaching extent of the persona's indigent condition, especially the fact that his birth occurred within the circumstances of extreme poverty and sadness. A "middle wife", in her task of delivering women of their babies, performs a very essential and noble responsibility. As one who assists and encourages, she is well appreciated. But this is not a duty for negative things such as "Sorrow". We can only expect a child mid-wifed by "Sorrow" to be sorrowful as well as represent all the things that cause it. This metaphor foregrounds the feeling of sorrow or sadness making it so real it becomes perhaps, the only companion to the dispossessed and hopeless persona. To "beg" from "Sorrow" is to be at the bottom-level or nadir of hope; and even worse to "borrow" from it. The I of the poem bemoans his ill-timed and unfavoured birth, on Saturday: "Bad time for planting a seed" (line 14). The last day of the week, Saturday", becomes figurative as it suggests the time for winding up as opposed to beginning. But the utterance by the father: "One mouth more to feed" shows he is complaining, and unhappy about the coming of the child probably because of the harsh socio-economic realities.

On the burden of inferiority as a motif in Cullen's poetry, Wagner (1973) notes that Cullen regarded his day of birth, Saturday May 30, 1903 as ill-fated, hence the evocation of the phantom figures, Poverty, Pain, Death and Sorrow in the poem. What this points at is that Cullen associates his skin colour with the unfortunate and sinister circumstances of his birth. This despair and pessimism is also noticeable in "Suicide Chant".

The juxtapositioning of opposites; the high and the low, the heraldic and the sinister, the favoured and the disfavoured give the "Saturday's Child" some symmetric quality and balance. This helps in highlighting the agony of the persona as an object in the cruel hands of Poverty, Pain, Death and Sorrow. Though there is no reference to race, the poet persona can be understood to be a black man. The racial undertone is through the expressions like: "Black raccoon" (line 3), "black as tar" (line 8). At this plane of interpretation the poem represents the agony of the blacks in America and particularly that of the poet himself.

"The Shroud of Color"

Countee Cullen's "The Shroud of Color" bemoans the agony of being black and the ardent wish for death by the persona resulting from the self-condemnation which being black in America could occasion. Metaphor along with other figurative expressions, have been stylistically employed to foreground and represent the theme of suicide, agony and psychic pain. These metaphors and frequency of occurrence in the poem give the poem a unique stylistic character. For example, to represent the unbearable trauma of humiliation, the poet uses a number of related metaphorical expressions such as:

... / cannot bear/The further touch of
earth (line 2) ... / am as dirt / Beneath my
brother's heel ... too great a cost this birth
entails I strangle in this yoke ...

In these metaphors, the poet states his dehumanisation and suffering as a result of his being born black as a premise for desiring to end his life. In his characteristically circumlocutory method, he does not mention precisely what indignity has been meted to him. Much of that appears to be subsumed in the expression:

I am as dirt/Beneath my brother's heel.

Style and the Representation of Agony in the Poetry of Countee Cullen

This suggests he is unwanted and therefore treated disdainfully. Living in the "shroud of color", to the poet, is unbearable hence it is implicitly compared to strangling "in the yoke" as a way of drawing out very clearly the unmitigating and harrowing experience of being despised, abused and exploited. "My brother," as used in line 5, seen from this racial perception, refers to the white man and calls into question the kind of brother that he is if he tramples on his fellow brother without compunction. The suffering the black man undergoes is more or less seen as the cost of his birth: "too great a cost this birth entails" (line 9). Underlying the birth and its cost is something expensive. In fact, too dear for the poet to afford or to be endured, hence: "I am not brave enough to pay the price" (line 12).

The innocent vision of the child does not recognise the aching pain of the fact of wrongness in the society. But the child's joys, thoughts and imagination are "defiled/By truths of wrongs". In this expression, the child's vision is personified and at the same time made a concrete object that can be contaminated and defiled. The same concretising process applies to the phrase "truths of wrongs" on whose realization the poet has considered himself worthy of immediate death. The disillusionment that brings about this desire for self-annihilation comes from the great expectation and elevated vision for humanity. The poet conveys in a typically romantic manner in which he admires nature and generously personalises it:

who have burned my hands upon a star (line 14)
For whom all cups have dripped the wine of mirth (line 17)
For whom the sea has strained her honey throat (line 18)
... whose bare brown thighs have held the sun/Incarcerate (1.23-4)

The expression in line 14 shows the vast vision of the poet for his society captured in his becoming one with even the heavenly body, "star". But that the hands are "burned" implies some pain with that experience. In tune with this vision in which he becomes one with the cosmos, a vision of peace and love and conviviality "cups have dripped the wine of mirth". We can interpret this to mean that life as earlier envisioned by the poet is compared to a mirthful experience. In lines 18 and 19 "the sea" and "the sun" are humanizing metaphors which are endowed with human qualities. Beneath the metaphorisation, there is a celebration of the poet's colour which is why his "brown thighs have held the sun incarcerated". But all this vision crashes when the poet takes a descent down Truth's deep abyss" on recognising the wrongs of America. The elevated poetic indignation and the anguish of the

poet persona is a result of the painful discovery of "the truths of wrongs" which negate the realisation or fulfilment of his epic and romantic vision.

The descent into despair as a result of the crash of this ennobling vision for humanity is compared to a fall into a bottomless pit: "I sway athwart Truth's deep abyss" (line 27). In the same vein, the expression, "the altar-slab of Truth" (line 33) suggests a cruel destruction of his dream.

The poem is cast in the form of a dialogue between the I of the poem and his God. However, much of the poem is the reaction of the persona to the existential problem of being black and the description of his experiences in the face of the trial before God. The metaphors connoting anguish in stanza 3 stem from what appears to be God's response to the question that: Or hast Thou, Lord, somewhere I cannot see, "A lamb imprisoned in a bush for me? This question resonates the Biblical experience of Abraham who, when he was about to sacrifice his only son, Jacob, had mysteriously provided for him a lamb instead. By this metaphor the poet sees himself as engaging in a sacrificial rite; and what he is about to sacrifice is his own life. The next question "Not so?" (line 36) which is a retort by the persona implies that God's response is negative. Consequently, the persona becomes more poised for the self-destruction which is again conveyed in metaphors of agony. For example:

...albeit torn,/My heart will laugh a little
yet (39-40) and "grave-locked against the
lure/Of Truth, the small hard teeth of
worms, yet less/Envenomed than the
mouth of Truth, will bless/Them into dust
and happy nothingness".

In the first example above, the pain is represented by a heart that is torn. This heart is also personified as being able to laugh. At another level, the heart can be seen as a synecdoche, a figurative expression in which a part represents the whole. The heart therefore represents the disappointed and suffering persona. Desirous of death, he appeals to God to take his life while the heart still has some mirth. In the second example above, "Truth" is personified and is a dominant metaphor in the entire poem. It nullifies the poet's earlier vision and elevated ideas, "wild chimeras" (line 45). Endowed with animate qualities, "Truth" possesses a mouth, in fact, more poisonous than "the teeth of worms" (line 46). Similarly, "the teeth of worms" are given a human quality of being able to bless, but in a paradoxical sense, since they bless "into dust and happy nothingness". By reducing the poet to dust, his

Style and the Representation of Agony in the Poetry of Countee Cullen

dreams become "protected" from the devastating reality of truth. Death to the poet becomes synonymous with dust, and the "safest protection" from the angst of violent truth: "grave-locked against the lure/Of truth" (line 45).

In the expression "teeth of worms" (line 47), it can be noticed that worms have been arbitrarily endowed with teeth. While this conveys the destructive capacity of this boneless creature, it shows more pointedly a greater ability of Truth to destroy, hence "the teeth of worms" are less venomous than "the mouth of Truth". In representing the intense feeling of agony the poet uses concrete images. For example, the earth palpitates (line 51) and "I trust/My mouth into the grass and sucked the dew,/Then gave it back in tears my anguish drew" (lines 52-54). What is suggested in these lines is the poet's intimate friendship with nature. The metaphor here conveys the seriousness of the poet's psychic torment and the fervent wish for death. His anguish draws tears to show the level of desolation and hopelessness. In line with the poet's desperation, he presses to the earth so hard that "I (he) felt the smallest sandgrain like a knife" (line 56) and this is because of his desperation. Expressions such as these illustrate the intensity and vividness of the poet's pain.

Through the different experiences, the poet suffers emotional transport to another level of consciousness, and he sees the existential blend between life [and death; glory and-fall (as in Angel Lucifer) and the dying and blossoming flowers. However, the experience which shows the magnitude of the poet's psychic agony and by extension, the entire black race comes in the form of a troubled race. First, it is the music of the jungle stirring every of the poet's nerves awake: "...a note/Of jungles, primitive and subtle, throbbed/Against my echoing breast..." (line 50-53). The wild music is here personified as a way of underscoring its penetrating impact on the perceiver; it liberates him from emotional agony as it is conveyed in lines 155-157.

However, when the rhythm of this music changes, it becomes that of bitterness, death, exploitation and lamentation, which are the black man's lot. Some of the metaphors representing these are identified below:

- i. The cry the lash extorts (line 160)
- ii. The broken breath/of liberty enchained (line 160-161)
- iii. How being dark, and living through the pain
- iv. Of it, is courage more than angels have (line 169-170).

In example one above, the "lash" is personified as having the ability to "extort", and what is extorted is a cry, which is another concretised image in this context This expression resonates the bondage and sub-human

condition the black man has been subjected to, a pointer to the black experience during slavery and even after the emancipation up to the early period of Twentieth Century. Examples i, ii also endow liberty with an animate quality, hence it has "breath" and can be "enchained". The metaphor in example iii shows the magnitude of the pain borne by the blacks which, in the poet's feelings, surpasses even the endurance of angels. This means that living through being black and its pangs suggest some level of rare stoicism and courage. It still further implies that the black man's life is dominated by pain and agony which can only be faced by courage and determination. Some of the other metaphors that typify the feeling of pain in the poem include:

i. I knew what storms and tumults lashed the tree that grew this body that I was..."

ii. ...Others struggled in Life's abattoir

iii. The cries of all dark people...billowed over me

The expressions, "storms" and "tumults", "Life" and "The cries" are personified. The object of the lashing of storms and tumults would actually be a thing of misery against the elements of nature. And coping with life in this context is analogous to being in an abattoir where animals are ruthlessly butchered. So "Life's abattoir" as used by the poet is a compressed comparison between the life of dark people and what happens in an abattoir. "The cries of all dark people" are concretised in example iii in the same manner as in line 160 of the poem as pointed out earlier. "The cries" become like a cloud, a concrete reality, hence they "billowed over me", in this regard, the word "billowed" expresses the concreteness of the cries. It is as if the cries were so much that they could be seen moving slowly across the sky. This depicts the extent of lamentation of the tormented black people of the world, whose suffering is again compared to "a mighty surge" (line 177) into which the poet's personal agony diffuses; and eventually he begins to see the need to aspire to be alive again.

Some of the figurative expressions examined thus far in this poem use natural phenomena such as storms, tumults, and sea surge to represent the pain and agony of not just the poet as an individual but the collective suffering of the entire race groaning under the yoke of exploitation and dehumanisation. One of the dominant stylistic features in the poem is the concretisation of the abstract through metaphors as a way of portraying the poet's anguish.

Conclusion

The poems of Cullen examined in this paper all demonstrate the use of collocational clashes, figurative expressions, religious and biblical allusions as stylistic strategies to portray the double consciousness, ambivalence and the agony of the poet as an individual and as an African American. Through these stylistic devices, there is an unmitigated somber and lachrymal mood in Cullen's poetry, which is a reflection of the writer's conflicted personality resulting from racism, the black man's travails and the crisis of identity. It can be concluded that the social climate of America profoundly inflected Cullen's poetry even in spite of the writer's claim of universalism.

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