

Student's Name

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Course

Date

Harlem Renaissance Sonnets

The Harlem Renaissance refers to a period during the 1920s considered as a social, intellectual, and artistic explosion based in Harlem, New York. It was a culture representation that African Americans hadn't been able to have before in America, where the white population was abundant. It gave African Americans the chance to create literary portraits of people of color, without playing into the stereotypical expectations of white America. It gave them away to assert their identity and link their struggles with other African Americans (Mays p. 5). A number of the Harlem Renaissance poets, including Countee Cullen and Claude McKay, widely utilized sonnet form. These poets took different approaches in their poems to signal distinctive thematic concerns. This paper compares how different approaches to Harlem Renaissances' sonnets indicate distinct thematic concerns.

In Cullen's sonnet, *From the Dark Tower*, she uses a constant symbol of "planting seeds" and "reaping fruit," which results in a theme of the balance of nature and oppression (Gale). This symbol most likely represents Cullen's belief that the mistreatment of African Americans is viewed as a "natural order of things" in which he firmly believes that this shouldn't be so accepted in their lives. "We shall not plant while others reap," (Line 1) provides the reader to believe that even if this habit has become nature, African Americans should not accept the seed that has been planted non-consensually into their lives. The author paints a picture of a person (African Americans) planting a seed that another (whites) will always end up picking,

symbolizing the anger and repetitiveness of the inescapability that falls upon African Americans. This symbol asks the question of whether or not African Americans will stop succumbing to unjust rules bestowed upon them by whites, or if they, in Cullen's words, will keep planting the seed of their oppression. The seed represents what the whites believe they possess over African Americans, which is why they keep picking what the African Americans planted. Cullen suggests with this symbol that with enough harms and abuse, physically and emotionally, the laborer (African Americans) will finally pull from an arrangement to which he never consented.

In "*If We Must Die*," McKay uses simple and feeling evoking diction to inspire his readers to jump to action. Through his word choice, McKay begins his poem with words that induce feelings of resisting, breaking away from the chains that restrict them. With this, he conveys themes of honor and glory in an attempt to show his readers what they deserve from this fight and what they are fighting for and against. McKay makes this injustice seem like a war that he and his associates are under siege and that the enemy is strong, but they could prevail if they fight back. Contrary to Cullen, McKay establishes from the beginning that this is a fight they must win, something that requires all their strength to beat. This poem serves as a sort of wake up call for all African Americans to fight for their rights and equality among the United States. Cullen calls a more passive response to the oppression with the statement that it has become second nature unjustly, while McKay calls for immediate action, violent or not (McKay). He manages to persuade readers to keep fighting even if the chances of winning seem slim to none.

In summary, the Harlem Renaissance sparked resistance to the oppression of African Americans that was happening for years on end with seemingly no end. The movement was crucial for African Americans finding a sense of identity and meaning as various writers, artists, and musicians spoke out against the chains of society. Cullen and McKay were few of the

countless poets who used poetry as their voice against white rule in the 1920s. Their different poetic tactics conjured different thematic concepts but ultimately led up to the consensus that something had to be done about the injustice against African Americans.

Works Cited

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