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Language of Oppression in Sterling A. Brown's Poem "Ma Rainey"

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Abstract

Sterling A. Brown is an African American poet, best known for writing poetry distinctively rooted in folklore and authentic black dialect. He skilfully uses dialect and brings out the blues demonstrating his inventive genius. He was successful in drawing on rich folk expressions to vitalize the speech of his characters through the cadences of Southern speech. Generally, Brown wrote the narrative poems in a Southern dialect. He began writing just after the Negro poets had generally discarded conventionalized dialect, with its minstrel traditions of Negro life with its artificial and false sentiment, its exaggerated geniality and optimism. He infused his poetry with genuine characteristic flavour by adopting as his medium the common, racy living speech of the Negro in certain phases of life. Though his poems cannot simply be called dialect poetry, Brown does imitate Southern African American speech, using variant spellings and apostrophes to make dropped consonants. He uses grunts and onomatopoeic sounds to give a natural rhythm to the speech of his characters. One of the finest poems of Sterling A. Brown is "Ma Rainey," which presents the major aspects of Black dialect exemplifies how Brown exploits black dialect as a device to reveal the sufferings and oppression of the blacks authentically.

Keywords: Black dialect, Oppression, Negro, African American Poetry, Folk Expression, Blues.

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Author's Note

All poetic lines are taken from the poem "Ma Rainey," and the the Standard English version is given parenthetically.

An exacting writer, editor, poet, critic, Sterling Allen Brown, was a pivotal figure in African American Literature. He is best known for writing poetry distinctively rooted in folklore and authentic black dialect. One of the chief concerns of African American writers was the positioning of the folk within the literary heritage. During the Harlem Renaissance, critics relegated dialect poetry to the 'expression of humour and pathos'. Poets like Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar insisted dialect verse as a vital art form, and elevated the spoken word of African American 'folk' as a recognized and legitimated artistic expression. Perhaps, to even greater extent, poet Sterling A. Brown has been heralded as the master of dialect poetry.

Brown was successful in drawing on rich folk expressions to vitalize the speech of his characters through the cadences of Southern speech. His use of black dialect is both creative and self-conscious. He began writing after the Negro poets had generally discarded conventionalized dialect, with its minstrel traditions of Negro life with its artificial and false sentiment, its exaggerated geniality and optimism, and emotion in order to suit the taste of a white audience predisposed to receive such a pattern of verbal behaviour. Although written by white and black poets alike, dialect poetry emerged as a significant part of African American writing in the mid-1890s with the success of its first well-known black practitioner, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and played a dominant role in African-American poetry until World War I.

This article recounts some major aspects of Black Dialect and examines how Brown exploits black dialect as a device to reveal the suffering and oppression of the blacks authentically in his poem "Ma Rainey." Sterling A. Brown infused his poetry with a genuine characteristic flavour by adopting as his medium the common, racy living speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life. For his raw material, he dug down into the deep mind of Negro folk poetry. Though his poems cannot simply be called dialect poetry, Brown does imitate Southern African American speech, using variant spellings and apostrophes to make dropped consonants.

Black dialect had been increasingly shunned by middle class African Americans due to its associations with slavery and the poor, uneducated masses of the South. Larry Neal says that , "black aesthetic proposes a separate symbolism, mythology, critique and iconology."(29). According to Sinha:

> The concept of Black aesthetic was not what initially was pointed out i.e, integration of Black art into mainstream America. The debate centred around destroying those social images, aesthetic values that have humiliated Black people thus Black Dialect was, about the business of destroying those images and myths that have crippled and degraded

> Black people, and the institution of new images and myths that will liberate them. (126)

Brown was one of a handful of writers incorporating dialect into their work at this time. The dialect of the black folk figures in Brown's poetry is constant with their character. Honed in black folk life, the dialect he employs has none of the "humour and pathos" of the contrived speech used by "black" characters in the literature of the plantation tradition. Neither is the dialect in his poetry a transcription of how blacks are supposed to speak.

Dialect in Brown becomes an extraordinarily compressed register for an ironic sense of cultural difference, for pride in an alternative knowledge amidst racial oppression. Dialect registers class and race awareness, along with a basic understanding of power relations in America, in a witty form that goes unnoticed by the ruling classes. It is a special form at once of wit and wisdom.

Many consider African American speech to be lazy or a corrupted form of English. While in some cases, the grammar and pronunciation is simpler than Standard English, in other cases, African American speech is much more complex. It is every bit rule based and grammatical as Standard English is. It is just that the rules and grammar are different.

Most of Brown's poems are composed in dialect, but they have as their subjects distinctively black archetypal mythic characters as well as the black common man whose roots were rural and Southern. Brown called his poems "portraitures," close and vivid studies of a carefully delineated subject that suggested a strong sense of place. The portraitures the poet renders are in a style that emerged from several forms of folk discourse and a black vernacular that includes the blues and ballads, spirituals, and work songs.

The following are some sample words that are found in Brown's lexicon:

Ah for I

Bawn for Born

Do for Dough

Muh for My

Poar or po' (poor)

Ole, ol' for old

Wuz for was

Ifn or iffen (if)

Ouh for Our

Den for Then

Dey for They

Natchally for Naturally

Lef' for Left

Deir for Their

Shet for Shut

Dere for There

Brown wrote countless essays, but his collection of poems, Southern Road, includes “Ma Rainey,” which captures real language, everyday racial issues, and the struggles and strife of black communities in the South with humour and honesty. The poem describes a concert by the blues singer Ma Rainey from the perspective of her fans and concert-goers. It is written in their language, from their perspective, and it attempts to show just how much Ma Rainey and the blues meant to the Southern black community of Brown’s day. The poem gives a glimpse of the folk heroine, Ma Rainey, befitting the title Madam ‘Ma’ Rainey on the vaudeville circuit at the age of fourteen. She made her entrance on innumerable stages. This is probably saying “Ma Rainey” would talk a lot about Ma Rainey. She’s hardly even in the poem. We know she sings and that is all about it. Ma Rainey is the high priestess who has the power to articulate the pain and suffering of her people in their own dialect.

Ma is a good picture for her fans and she inspires them. We share the experience of a Ma Rainey concert. The crowd of fans is waiting eagerly and excitedly for Ma Rainey to come out and perform. Even when they do go to a concert, they bring with them all the hardships and difficulties in their lives. We are not talking about the real Ma Rainey here. We are talking about the Ma Rainey of imagination.

Brown, with a conscious artistry, combines the intensely personal music of the blues singer with the heroic tales and epic scope of the balladeer. The genius of his invention is apparent in “Ma Rainey.” Brown takes the explicit, chronological, and narrative elements of the ballad to tell how the people flock in to hear “Ma Rainey do her stuff.” He needs the blues ethos to suggest the massive concentration of emotion present among the folk in Ma’s audience –the work-weary soul, laughing to keep from crying, the unspeakable sorrow, and the needful catharsis.

Like the blues singer, the poet punctuates his phrases with glottal stops and vocal snaps, and he elides words and syllables. And with great dexterity, he effects a bluesy sense of time. We are not sure how long the audience wait for Ma Rainey to appear or how long she stays out there, and slides in and out of tempo, varying the tempo in each section.

The poem is divided into four stanzas which function in effect as movements in a musical sense. In the first, the tone is light and festive, capturing the excitement of the singer’s personal fame:

When Ma Rainey

Comes to town,

Folks from anyplace

Miles around’,

From Cape Girardeau,

Poplar Bluff

Flocks in to hear

Ma do her stuff. . . .

It's a holiday, when "Ma hits/Any wheres aroun'" (Ma hits Anywhere around.) Quickly the poet has established not only Ma's fame but the geography of the backwaters as well –Cape Girardeau, Poplar Bluff, all the way "fo' miles on down/To New Orleans delta/ An' Mobile town." In the second stanza the pace changes as the line lengthens and the focus is closer, tighter. People come "from de little river settlements," from "black bottom cornrows and from lumber camps." The lens zooms in, as people "stumble in de hall, jes' a-laughin' an' a-cacklin', / Cheerin' lakroarin' water, lak wind in river swamps" (stumble in the hall, just laughing and cackling, Cheering Lake roaring water, Lake Wind in river swamps.) The high feelings and the good times and the joking keep going in the "crowded aisles." But others wait for a deeper reason. Then Ma makes her entrance, flashing her famous smile, and "Long Boy ripples minors on de black an' yellow keys." And the poet in stark dramatic terms speaks with the voice of the people. It is the communal voice, the response of the ancient ritual pattern, the answer to Ma Rainey's call to "deir aches an' miseries":

O Ma Rainey, (Oh Madam Rainey)

Sing yo' song; (Sing your song)

Now you's back (Now you are back)

Whah you belong, (Where you belong)

Git way inside us,(Get way inside us)

Keep us strong. . . .

O Ma Rainey,

Li'l an' low;(Little and low)

Sing us 'bout de hard luck(Sing us about the hard luck)

Roun' our do';(Round our do)

Sing us 'bout de lonesome road(Sing us about the lonesome road)

We mus' go. . . .(We must go)

The expression "Sing yo' song" is still current in the Black community. People say it spontaneously when they are moved by someone who appeals to their deepest concerns, whether a gospel singer or Aretha Franklin singing about hard times in love. And they compliment her by saying, "Sing your song" because the song is theirs too. She gives them back themselves and they return the love and the truth: "Now you's back" with us, "Whah you belong" –and now with this kind of singing, you're affirming our truth. And the language resonates on the mythic level, for the singer is priestess, and before that, the surrogate of the god. This was her role, in that time before time. But here it is compressed, transubstantiated into song,

personal commentary transmuted into communal statement. And they know, they understand the ultimate tragic truth of human experience, and they accept it and thereby transcend it. Hard luck is irrational, but there it is. Call it fate, call it mischance, it is still there. And it will remain. “So sing yo’ song”:

“Sing us ’bout de lonesome road/Wemus’ g. . .”

One would think perhaps that the possibilities of the poem had been exhausted at this point, but the poet moves into a different perspective and amplifies his effect by letting the blues speak for themselves. In stanza four, then, he returns to the narrative mode of stanza two. Here the point of view changes to that of a single persona:

I talked to a fellow, an’ the fellow say,
“She jes’ catch hold of us, some kind away.
She sang Backwater Blues one day:
‘It rained fo’ days an’ de skies was dark as night
Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night.
‘Thundered an’ lightened an’ the storm begin to roll
Thousan’s of people ain’t got no place to go.
‘Den I want an’ stood upon some high ol’ lonesome hill,
An’ looked down on the place where I used to live.’
An’ den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an’ cried,
Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an’ cried,
An’ Ma lef’ de stage, an’ followed some de folks outside.”
Dere wasn’t much more de fellow say:
She jes’ gits hold of us dataway.

The communion is complete. Even song is now necessary, and Ma Rainey, the priestess, is spent –the spirit has left her, the spirit is loosed and surrounds and hallows them all. It is like the end of a sermon, or a baptism.

Technically, there is one final touch as the persona picks up the language of the “fellow,” which has been enclosed in quotes, as an account, and repeats it, compressing and melding the account, the reminiscence, the historical flood, and the present into an acknowledgement of his oneness with the people and the experience. “Dere wasn’t much more de fellow say / She jes’ gits hold of us dataway.”(There was not much more the fellow say / She just gets hold of us that way.) Not “somekindaway” (some kind away) but the way you have just experienced it –“dataway” (thatway.)

Just as Sterling Brown celebrates his people’s health and sanity and their heroic confrontation with adversity, he attacks anything which oppresses or corrupts them. The enveloping event of the poem again is the great flooding of the Mississippi in 1927, but whereas “Ma Rainey” demonstrates the heroic resiliency and

philosophic maturity of the people through an authentic blues ritual.

Though the poem is titled "Ma Rainey," and would talk a lot about Ma Rainey, she is hardly present in the poem. The poet even drops the G's and D's at the end of words just to bring out the rhyming sounds all the more. Lives for the blacks in the racism were facts of everyday life. The hardships of African Americans endured in the south both inspired and were alleviated by the blues music that came out of the region.

In the 1920s black poets' use of dialects became more refined as poetic form merged with content. Black dialect gave way to black idiom, and poets made even more extensive use of features from the Southern black oral tradition.

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