

EL 5000

Senior Thesis Proposal

Subject

I came to Robert Hayden, or rather he came to me repeatedly through out this semester. Beginning with “Those Winter Sundays,” again with “Middle Passage,” and once more with “Frederick Douglass,” Hayden captured me with his voice and the messages he was delivering via his poetry. Reading through Hayden’s *Collected Poems*, the song of and for Freedom echo off of each page. If one were to read his cumulative work, one would find that Hayden’s unifying theme, the strand running through his poems over the course of his literary career, is unification itself.

Strongly influenced by his Bahai faith, a faith that propagates the idea of social unity, many of Hayden’s poems take on the Bahai belief that universal brotherhood is achievable, though it may mean many years of great suffering. Also influenced by the struggle of his people, Hayden’s poetry is rich with African American history, a history that echoes the ideas set forth by his Bahai faith. Add to this the considerable amount of social and political unrest surrounding him at the time of writing, and Hayden’s poetry becomes a heightened call for social unity while displaying the social reality of both past and present, which is anything but unified.

Placing images of oppression alongside the vision of freedom gives rise to tension. From this tension, comes a social consciousness in Hayden’s reader, which one scholar suggests, causes ethical answerability. Reading the horrific details of “Middle

Passage,” or combing through “Night, Mississippi,” one would be hard pressed to ignore the brutality of the past and not see how those ideologies have trickled into the present. Thus, in effect, Hayden’s poetry is channeled as a medium for social change.

Coming to understand Hayden through the literary discourse and his own words in interviews and *Collected Prose*, I intend to emphasize Hayden’s belief that the responsibility of the poet is to find the universal, the human, and use his poetry as a means to keep communication alive in the face of tyranny and hegemonic proprietors.

I will focus on one poem from each of his major works to serve as chronological pinpoints of Hayden’s literary career. I hope to show with my thesis how Hayden was able to use history and present day reflections, was able to draw upon his African American heritage and Bahai faith, to foster the image of unity and his call for a world where man is “permitted to be man.”

Significance

While Robert Hayden garnered any literary awards throughout his career, his work has not received its due recognition. While considered a great Black poet, Hayden wanted to be considered as a poet who was black, rather than *just* a black poet. Many scholars focus on this “repudiation” of culture for it produced a large degree of backlash from the Black Arts movement. While it may have appeared as if Hayden was the poor Negro poet who longed to be white in Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artists and the Racial Mountaintop,” as one Hayden scholar suggests, Hayden falls more closely to the poet at the end of the piece—the poet who does not look to be labeled black or white, but

simply an artist. That is not to say, however, that Hayden did not have pride in his culture,

Reading through his work one can easily find poetry that is rich in its knowledge and usage of African American history. His own explorations into the history of his people, led to poetry endowed with historical context and culture. One of Hayden's techniques, however, is to sometimes display this history through the voice of the Non Negro. In fact, as "Middle Passage," one of Hayden's most well known poems can attest, he writes in the *voices* of the oppressors—the slave ship captain, the slave trader, etc. Hayden captures, then, not only the African American culture of the time, but also the ideologies of the culture keeping them in bondage. In form and structure alone Hayden can be considered a multicultural poet.

Many of his poems center around the African American experience, which places the emphasis on freedom. Though not narratives from direct sources, one can learn quite a bit about the struggles of the African Americans through Hayden's literature. One can also learn quite a bit about the cultural mindset of those who oppress. While this lends itself to the importance of Hayden in the realm of multiculturalism, his influence doesn't end there.

This historical knowledge, coupled with his Bahai faith, only continues to stretch the significance of Hayden's role in the world of Multicultural literature. The faith, which draws upon the nine major religions and philosophies of the world and preaching a message of universal brotherhood and love, has been the subject of many of the literary discourses. However, few scholars seem to unite the two.

In fact, many scholars don't seem to discuss Hayden at all. Hayden's role in Multicultural literature is a profound one. Yet, for the level of his profundity, he seems, at least in opinion, to be under recognized in the literary world. This may be due, in part, to the thrashing his career received in 1969 from the Black Arts Movement. I hope to show with my thesis the importance and value of studying Hayden, and the high level of significance his voice has in the realm of multicultural literature.

Outline

I plan to center my beginning discussion around the importance of Hayden's contribution to the world of multicultural literature and also speak of the undervaluation of his work by the literary world. I would like to discuss how the backlash from the Black Arts movement hurt the reception of his poetry by the literary community, but did not hurt the poetry itself. I plan on emphasizing Hayden's own view on the matter, making reference to Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountaintop." Ultimately I would like to show that Hayden's perception of being a poet, rather than a labeled poet, influenced his work and gave a greater voice to his vision of social unification.

This brings me to my second discussion: the vision of social unification. I intend to discuss Hayden's personal view on the responsibility of the poet, especially the American poet, using his discussion of poetry in *Collected Prose*. It is here that Hayden discusses poetry as being a medium for social and political change and a means to keep communications between people open. I plan discuss the nature of the Bahai vision for

universal brotherhood, and how this echoes the vision for freedom and equality of all races set forth by the African American experience. I will suggest that with these two motivators, Hayden, over the span of his literary career, used both history and present reality to shape his poetry into a means of expressing a social and political message of equality, of “man permitted to be man.” My paper will focus on the following poems, selected from each of his major works: “Frederick Douglass,” “Words in the Morning Time,” “Traveling through Fog,” “Stars,” and “[American Journal].”

I will begin proving my argument with a critical look at “Frederick Douglass,” suggesting that it is here that Hayden makes his vision clear the most. First, I will discuss the imagery Hayden uses to convey the life sustaining necessity of freedom and liberty, making it them instinctual, “brain matter,” the involuntary movement of the heart, and “reflex action.” Next, I will focus on Hayden’s repetitious use of “when,” to signal that his vision is indeed achievable. I will finish my analysis of “Frederick Douglass,” expanding on Fred Fetrow’s idea that Hayden turns freedom from abstract to something real, using the last four lines of the sonnet as points in my discussion. I will connect the spirit of the poem to the Civil Rights movement, and show how Hayden, in his collected work *A Ballad of Remembrance*, was lending his voice to the song of Freedom.

I will then shift my attention to “Words in the Mourning Time.” I will discuss the usage of King and Kennedy, as martyrs for the cause. Unlike “Frederick Douglass,” “Words in the Mourning Time,” acts as a current reality snapshot. It is here that I would like to expand on the idea of ethical answerability set forth by Maria Scanlon, as Hayden directly implores the reader’s sense of morality with direct questions and the depictions of violence. The purpose of this discussion will be to show how Hayden is able to shift

his words from being used for mourning to morning, that is the proposed dawn of universalism. This shift occurs in between the sixth and seventh stanzas, where Hayden depicts a wild riot and then juxtaposes that with a quiet “voice in the wilderness.” From here, the poem then goes on to prepare readers for the last stanza where Hayden makes a declaration of witness for the Bahai faith. I hope to have shown how Hayden uses imagery of the race struggles and the Vietnam War as a backdrop for the Bahai belief that from great suffering comes unity.

This of course brings us to the next of the chosen Hayden poems, “Traveling through Fog,” a title which serves as a metaphor for History’s hazy course. It is here that Hayden makes the point that history, or rather the past, is abstract, and the future is like “memories of earth/ the traveling dead take home.” It is uncertain. I would like to discuss how this plague of uncertainty leads to fear and inaction. I would also like to focus my discussion on the allusion to Plato’s Cave, the idea being that when in the dark for so long people are “afraid” or can not readily adjust to the light. I plan on bringing the discussion closer to the African American experience and how Hayden is making the case that if African Americans were to look back in history they would not be able to see past their starting place, a cultural memory that is rooted in the sufferings of human bondage and racial inequality. Yet, the use of Plato’s cave suggests that beyond the fog there is clarity, there is a light, despite our current inability to adjust our eyes and focus on it. This echoes the idea of “Frederick Douglass,” that freedom and liberty, that social unification, will indeed belong to everyone in the future.

From this image of light I would like to launch into the next chosen poem, “Stars.” Once more, Hayden references something as “abstract.” Like Freedom, the

abstract concept turned real in “Frederick Douglass,” Hayden does this once again, turning stars into a “Cosmic Ouija,” board and the mind of Sojourner Truth. Once more he calls upon history, choosing Sojourner Truth, the woman who helped many slaves escape slavery through the Underground Railroad, to be a metaphorical star, much like the stars that guided sailors home. I would like to discuss the nature of the paradox, as one scholar notes, as well as the final stanza, which talks about the future light.

With “[American Journal]” I hope to show that the voice of the other, the alien, serves as juxtaposition to the current reality of America. As an outsider’s critique of American Society, Hayden lays out the foibles of our system but also highlights our strengths, namely our spirit, our “some thing essence/ quiddity i cannot penetrate or name.” At the same time this image is juxtaposed by the alien’s country where he is ruled by the counselors, which take away individuality as emphasized by the diminutive “i” and the only capitalization being “The Counselors.” I intend to show that toward the end of his career, Hayden was still aware of the violence and horrors of his current reality and by incorporating the voice of the other is able to place side-by-side two societies with different values. One could make the case that the alien is much a communist as he is from another galaxy. The tension created from the subtle critique of *both* societies is what stresses the need of social unity, but also adds the American legacy of individualism to the cause. I would also like to point out that over the course of his literary career Hayden moved from the individual to the universal, using the image of space as his final platform of observation.

I would like to then reach my final conclusion discussing the significance of the chosen sequence of poems and relate them back to Hayden’s career as a whole. I will

sum up Hayden's techniques of turning abstract into real, juxtaposition, and the use of light (and star light) imagery, Hayden is able to brighten his vision for universal brotherhood. I hope to be able to emphasize the importance of Robert Hayden's work in the world of multicultural literature and to have successfully shown his role in the ongoing revolution toward social unification.

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