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Black Arts and Literature

Springfield

Heritage

The poem title “Heritage” is by Countee Cullen. The poem was written during the Harlem Renaissance. The social issue that motivated Cullen to write “Heritage” during the mid 20th century was the repression that blacks faced and their eagerness to go back to their homelands where their ancestors lived. In the poem the speaker reflects on his past heritage and how it affects his life now as an American. The speaker, torn between his African root and the American culture, struggles to pull his self from his original heritage. In “Heritage” Cullen expresses his work by using historical illusions, biblical allusions, and metaphors in the poem.

The speaker uses historical illusions to describe his relationship with Africa. He is of African ancestry but as a descendant of people enslaved centuries ago. He now lives in America and his only knowledge of Africa cultures and continent are limited to images derived from reading and imagination. He begins the first stanza with the question “What is Africa to me.” He has never been there, so he is questioning what Africa means to him and his life. The phrase “I lie” is repeatedly used. It stresses the amount of time that the speaker spends trying to comprehend what Africa is to him. He uses the images of “barbaric birds,” “the jungle herds,” and “juggernauts of flesh” to describe this place. He spends days and nights dreaming of the sights and sounds of his native country. The sounds of the African drums hunt him, and he struggles to block the rhythm from his mind. He describes himself as a man pulled in several directions. He feels his soul belongs to Africa, but at the same time pulling away from it. He speaks of pride, distress, and joy in “somber flesh and skin.” He thinks his connection to Africa is through his skin color. His pride is deep within, wanting to emerge desperately. He describes his blood damned like “high pulsing tides of wine.” He explains how he can feel his blood rushing through his body. Not being able to control his emotions or desires about his heritage causes his physical distress. The illusion of the net is how they brutally captured his ancestors. Africa to the speaker is like a “slumbered” and “listlessly” book that one reads to put him self to sleep. In the book, his sees images of bats, the cats, and snakes that shed their skin. He only remembered these things from the book, not from being there. He has difficulty falling asleep because the noise of the rain sounds similar to the drums beating in Africa. He uses the metaphor “Like a soul gone mad with pain" to explain how he has been stripped of the essence of his heritage to put on this new growth. “In old remembered way” is memories of his forefathers even though he has never walked upon the land.

In the last three stanzas, the speaker uses biblical allusions to describe his past African heritage and his new life as an American. In the fifth stanza, he compares the Gods of Africans and the whites. His conversion from his original religion to the American religion is “high priced.” He feels he had to go through a lot of pain to convert to Christianity. He explains how Jesus Christ was humble and the Heathen Gods were not. He wishes that Jesus were black because he could feel a closer connection to his suffering. His African ancestors made God in their images, but now today Jesus is portrayed as a white man in America. The picture of the flood is fears that the flood of his pride will burst forth and wash away his identity and character that he have already developed. The “timber that was dissolving like wax and flax” are forces of his pride and frustration that may cancel each other out and destroy the character caught in the middle. Regardless of how he feels, he still believes he is civilized and cultivated.

In conclusion, The “Heritage” is a powerful poem about a black man who struggles to break away from his original ancestors and focus on his new life as an American. He has ancestors who lived in Africa, but he has never been there. He questions what Africa means to him. He uses historical illusions, biblical allusions, and metaphors to express his work in the poem. The speaker did great at trying to show how he felt about both his heritage and being an American. He used a variety of auditory and visual imagery in the poem. He made me believe his struggles with his past heritage by describing his physical symptoms and comparing his feelings to real or not – living objects.