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Lily Jensen
BYU, lilyeejensen@gmail.com

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Claude McKay's Protest Sonnets

Lily Jensen

Claude McKay's protest sonnets are widely viewed as touchstones within the history of African American protest in America. Some critics claim that McKay's choice of the sonnet form shows compromise with the dominant white-colonialist culture; they criticize this choice saying that while his content may be subversive, the sonnet form takes down the radical effect. Others counter this idea saying that these poems signal movement to a more radical and overt protest when compared to black writers of the previous decade, and argue that by writing in the sonnet form, McKay is inserting himself in a space where, historically, black writers like him would not be welcome. In McKay's protest sonnets "If We Must Die" and "The Lynching" the sonnet form is being used as a tool to actively protest against violent racism. I argue that McKay's use of the sonnet—a poetic form synonymous with the conventions of a single mind solving a problem—to call on communities to join in protest is radical and that the sonnet form helps with this protest, rather than hinders it. By taking ownership of the sonnet form, subverting the inherited tradition through a call to communities, twisting the trope of unrequited love, and using explicit imagery of racial violence, "If We Must Die" and "The Lynching" magnify societal crimes, forcing this Euro-centric tradition to grapple with modern, American problems.

Why Write Sonnets?

Scholars have tried to fit these protest sonnets within the goals of modernism. Literary critic, James R. Keller claims that the choice of the sonnet form hurts the message McKay's protest sonnets attempt to make, saying that there is a contrast between McKay's subversive content and his choice of the sonnet form. The sonnet is a traditionally aristocratic European tradition, yet McKay's content overtly pushes against the Anglo-American tradition of racism. Keller points out that some would say this adherence to tradition makes these poems "unsuccessful" but he argues that this juxtaposition is very intentional and calls McKay's choice of the sonnet genre a "poetic compromise" to "create a space in which to challenge white America's claim to cultural superiority" (448). Keller also places Claude McKay within the context of Modernism, linking his "emphasis on alienation" (455) and position as an outsider to that of white male modernists like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, and concludes that McKay's protest sonnets retain some "revolutionary potential" because of their subversive content, despite the appeal to white tradition (456). In his article "Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance," critic Houston A. Baker argues that "an assumed supremacy of boorishly racist, indisputably sexist, and unbelievably wealthy Anglo-Saxon males" (86) was under threat by the presence of educated, black writers. He goes on to explain that "One means of shoring up one's self under perceived threats of 'democratization' and a 'rising tide' of color is to resort to elitism—to adopt a style that refuses to represent any thing other than the stylist's refusal to represent" (86). Sonnets were not fashionable for elite white writers, yet McKay chooses to write several sonnets as a modernist writer. Baker points out that scholars have not been enthusiastic about African American modernism or the Harlem Renaissance, making the critical conversation about how the movement failed or didn't present enough subversion. He argues that we need to rethink the way we approach the Harlem Renaissance, claiming that the voices within this movement created "the most thoroughly modern sound the United States has yet produced" (Baker 96).

If the writers of the Harlem Renaissance were the most "modern sound" coming from the United States, that begs the question, why would Claude McKay, a decidedly modern writer, write sonnets, especially for protest? Timo Müller asks a similar question: "Why were so many black writers adopting the conventional form of the sonnet to attack white racism at a time when the white

avant-garde was already dismantling that form?" (40). He concludes that it was more radical for McKay to be voicing protest, and less radical for him to use the sonnet form, as many poets before him wrote sonnets. He cites "If We Must Die" as a primary example of the movement away from gentility and towards direct protest. In his autobiography, *A Long Way from Home*, McKay describes the great violence that he observed as a railroad worker after WWI, which prompted him to write "If We Must Die":

Our Negro newspapers were morbid, full of details of clashes between colored and white, murderous shootings and hangings. Traveling from city to city and unable to gauge the attitude and temper of each one, we Negro railroad men were nervous. We were less light-hearted . . . We stuck together, some of us armed, going from the railroad station to our quarters. We stayed in our quarters all through the dreary ominous nights, for we never knew what was going to happen. It was during those days that the sonnet, 'If We Must Die,' exploded out of me. (McKay 30)

"If We Must Die" had to be a sonnet. Its protest could not have been voiced any other way. "The Lynching," written before "If We Must Die" but published after, voices a similar alarm to the violence black men faced in America. These two poems use both conventions and subversions of the inherited sonnet form to advance protest against mass racial violence in America and to magnify and investigate the culture that creates this violence.

Adherence to the Genre

Both "If We Must Die" and "The Lynching" keep several standards of the sonnet. "If We Must Die" is a Shakespearean sonnet that follows all conventions of rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter. There's an element of persuasion and unrequited love, although this beloved is not a powerless 16th-century woman, but a violent country that feeds a culture of brutality towards its black citizens. "The Lynching" mixes elements of the Shakespearean sonnet and the Petrarchan sonnet; the middle two lines of each quatrain rhyme with each other while the last two lines are a rhyming couplet, and the poem as a whole keeps perfect iambic pentameter. McKay uses older language in both sonnets, in a way reaching back to the genteel sonneteers that came before him, using words like "accursèd" and "kinsmen" in "If We Must Die" and "bidden" and "Perchance" in

“The Lynching.” Some critics, like Keller, would argue that these choices show this poem compromising to appeal to the white sonnet tradition and white society. With this view, the choice to adhere to convention acts like a mask that makes the poem more acceptable and allows McKay’s voice to be heard through an appeal to the white standard. However, unlike the genteel sonnets written in the decade before, these sonnets do not hide behind ambiguous descriptions of struggle, that could apply to anyone—these sonnets subvert the tradition by directly talking about the black experience in America.

Subversion of the Genre

While “If We Must Die” and “The Lynching” adhere to traditional sonnet conventions, they simultaneously subvert convention merely by their existence. These poems challenge who owns the sonnet and what the sonnet can be used for. McKay writes eviscerating lines like “The women thronged to look, but never a one / Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue” (lines 11–12) in “The Lynching” and “What though before us lies the open grave? / Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (lines 12–14) in “If We Must Die” waging forceful accusations against a society that has turned its back to such violence. These poems show active speakers directly protesting racial violence in America—hardly a compromise. Müller defines protest as a collective and emotional political attempt to change society, and claims that the sonnet is an excellent vehicle for protest: it’s short, easy to memorize, and has the rhetoric of persuasion, making it a genre fit for protest. He writes:

The publication of Claude McKay’s “If We Must Die” (1919), possibly the best-known sonnet by a black writer, spread a message of radical protest among a mass audience. Reprinted and recited across the country, its memorable message quickly spread beyond the narrow, genteel readership of previous African American poetry and came to include many Americans who could not even read . . . it has been viewed as a key contribution to the unprecedented cultural self-confidence that came to characterize the Harlem Renaissance. (Müller 39)

This sonnet transitions away from a single mind meditating on a personal problem and becomes a call to communities to rally against racism. Because “If We Must Die” and “The Lynching” use the traditional modes of the sonnet,

they affirm that poetry and art are not limited to upper-class, educated, white men, but can be owned by the marginalized and oppressed. Ownership implies that the genre can be used for a purpose unique to the writer—these sonnets are not attempting to imitate Spenser or Shakespeare. By owning the sonnet, the adherence to tradition in “If We Must Die” and “The Lynching” becomes subversive, rather than a compromise to be heard by white society. This genre had existed for centuries; by bending its conventions to put forward his unique argument about his time and place, McKay is doing so much more than creating clever rhymes or playing word games. He is making use of a venerated genre to advocate for real societal change.

“If We Must Die” and “The Lynching” also break from the sonnet tradition in their calls to communities. Timo Müller claims that “If We Must Die” “resolves the tension between the individual and the collective voice by introducing the speaker as part of a clearly defined community—the “kinsmen” who are “hunted” and “outnumbered” by the oppressor” (46). This call to community expands who the sonnet can speak to; historically a genre that expressed the most private thoughts of a single mind, this sonnet is urging this “clearly defined community” to speak out and act out, instead of ruminating in the private spaces of their minds. Speaking to his community, the speaker gives reason to fight: “So that our precious blood may not be shed / In vain; then even the monsters we defy / Shall be constrained to honor us though dead!” (“If We Must Die,” lines 6–8). The enjambment between line six and seven, with line seven starting with “In vain” makes a rhetorical claim that racial violence is inevitable and that it would be better to fight against their oppressors. This call to community transforms the traditional sonnet form, pushing it to be more than a meditation on a problem. Even though nothing technically happens in this sonnet (it keeps true to the stasis typical of lyric poetry) it is the great windup before a punch, the motivation to action.

“The Lynching” calls out to community in a different way. In contrast to “If We Must Die” the speaker in “The Lynching” is not a part of a well-defined community. Because of their omniscient position, the speaker acts as a moral focus, magnifying the event of this lynching and the aftermath. This sonnet brings the public nature of lynchings into its lines. At the volta, the setting goes from the lynching performed at night, to the viewing of the body in the day: “Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view / The ghastly body swaying in the sun” (lines 9–10). Line nine discusses a “mixed crowd.” There are a host of white people there, women and children included, but the word

“mixed” suggests that there are silent people, both black and white, coming to look at the body. This line represents all of American society, who are standing by, casually watching, saying nothing, as extreme racial violence is perpetuated by a white supremacist world. Like “If We Must Die” this sonnet is a call to the American community to wake up and acknowledge the violence that society is allowing.

These sonnets subvert tradition by complicating the problem of unrequited love; instead of a lover being rebuked by a beloved, these sonnets show African American people protesting against being blotted out by society through racial violence. “The Lynching” has an omniscient speaker, separate from the events they are watching. This single mind acts as an all-knowing narrator with a clear vision, speaking as an advocate for the entire African American population—they give voice to what some in “the mixed crowds” (line 9) will not say. There is no direct imperative to fight back in “The Lynching” but the text does claim that the person who was lynched belongs to the family of God. They do this by making multiple comparisons to Jesus Christ. Speaking of the man who was lynched, the speaker says “His spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven. / His father, by the cruelest way of pain, / Had bidden him to his bosom once again;” (lines 1–3). Some would argue this is a typical example of using accepted western culture to appeal to white society, but these lines are radical; the speaker is claiming divine lineage and a right to live in heaven to the person who was lynched, directly opposing views of white society. The next lines also draw parallels to Christ: “All night a bright and solitary star / (Perchance the one that ever guided him, / Yet gave him up at last to Fate’s wild whim) / Hung pitifully o’er the swinging char” (lines 5–8). This star draws connections to both the star at Christ’s birth and the north star. The poem integrates the problem of racial violence by showing that the lynchers used this sign from heaven to find the man they lynched, going against the will of God. The trope of unrequited love is acting as a tool for criticism.

“If We Must Die” also uses the trope of unrequited love to protest violence. The speaker takes the position of the lover and talks to his beloved community who have faced centuries of violence in the country where they live. Using phrases like “our precious blood” this sonnet must claim personhood unlike sonnets typical of the tradition because this writer is not white and is actively protesting against a society that has deemed him less than human. This single mind is unique when compared to the inherited tradition. Müller argues that the speaker in “If We Must Die” “no longer cares for the oppressors’ point of

view but focuses on expressing his own" (46). We can see this in the text in the first and fifth lines, repeating the phrase "If we must die" (lines 1, 5) and in line nine, crying out "O kinsmen!" The speaker is addressing multitudes, standing in front of a crowd. Dictating the oppressors as "the monsters we defy" (line 7) and then urging his listeners "Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack" (line 13) the speaker is simultaneously claiming personhood for themselves and for their community and denying personhood to the oppressors who subject them to such fear and inevitable violence. This unrequited love has consequences: because of the rebuke and terror inflicted on this community, this speaker is proposing they push back.

While there has been violent imagery in sonnets for centuries, "If We Must Die" and "The Lynching" subvert this tradition by explicitly commenting on and depicting racial violence. In both "If We Must Die" and "The Lynching," the focus is on black bodies and what becomes of them. In "The Lynching" we see the progression of a human being, a son of God, losing their personhood. After "his spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven" (line 1) the poem describes the body as "the swinging char" (line 8) bringing in the imagery of burning the body after they were dead, "the ghastly body" (line 10) and "the dreadful thing" (line 14) with this unnamed person completely losing their humanity under the white gaze. This stark imagery is cast against the indifference of a white audience who witness the lynching. When the sun comes up "the mixed crowds came to view" (9), bringing in the public nature of lynchings.

"The Lynching" brings in characters who in the tradition of the sonnet, would be seen as passive or innocent, like the women and children in the community. McKay writes in "The Lynching," "The women thronged to look, but never a one / Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;" (lines 11–12). For hundreds of years, the gaze of a woman in a sonnet was something sought after by a lover, for example, the speaker in Sonnet thirty-four of Spenser's *Amoretti* says he has hope that "My Helice the lodestar of my lyfe / will shine again, and looke on me at last (lines 10–11), and the speaker in a sonnet by Sir Thomas Wyatt says "The lively sparks that issue from those eyes, / Against the which there vailleth no defence, / Have pierced my heart, and done it none offence" (lines 1–3). In McKay's sonnet, the woman's gaze is not passive but is a part of the violence done to this body. "And little lads, lynchers that were to be, / Danced round the dreadful thing in fiendish glee" (lines 13–14). This last rhyming couplet, which signals finality or inevitability, shows that violence corrupts the innocent, and this horror will continue as long as it is accepted by American society (Equal

Justice Initiative 70–71). By implicating women and children in the violence, this sonnet comments on the culture of lynching and racial violence; it is not simply the work of a few villains, but the result of a monstrous system that involves everyone in America. The sonnet form allows for a compact view of this culture, and a biting analysis and criticism of the violence it breeds.

Like “The Lynching,” “If We Must Die” uses imagery of violence against black bodies. While not explicitly using the terms “black” or “white,” this sonnet uses imagery associated with racial violence, such as “round us bark the mad and hungry dogs” (line 3). “Hungry dogs” symbolizes mobs of white people, hungry for violence, and evokes the sign of tracking dogs used to hunt fugitive slaves. As part of the problem-solving narrative, the African American community is urged to fight back. “For their thousand blows deal one death-blow!” (line 11) This fighting is shown as a necessity as a result of the world they live in. The violence is inescapable. The speaker continues, “What though before us lies the open grave? / Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack, / Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” (lines 12–14). As it worked in “The Lynching” this shocking imagery of racial violence depicts a small part of the immense problem. This departure from the typical imagery you would expect in a sonnet serves to move protest forward. The genre, through its intense scrutiny of a problem, ultimately opens up the festering wound of racial violence for all to see.

Timo Müller claims that “Harlem Renaissance protest was hardly more successful than earlier periods when it came to the short-term, practical effects of reform. In the discursive space, however, it laid the foundations for later African American achievements by reversing the direction of its re-formative efforts” (47). Instead of focusing on making black culture more prolific, the Harlem Renaissance aimed to help African American people look closely at society. “If We Must Die” and “The Lynching” are perfect examples of this. By using the sonnet form, these poems investigate the mass culture that leads to racial violence against African American people. This compact form carries centuries of history; by plugging this political argument into the sonnet tradition, these poems expand the tradition. These poems negotiate modern problems and demand that African American minds and bodies belong in the world, especially the literary world.

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