

My City

James Weldon Johnson

When I come down to sleep death's endless night,
The threshold of the unknown dark to cross,
What to me then will be the keenest loss,
When this bright world blurs on my fading sight?
Will it be that no more shall I see the trees
Or smell the flowers or hear the singing birds
Or watch the flashing streams or patient herds?
No, I am sure it will be none of these.

But, ah! Manhattan's sights and sounds, her smells,
Her crowds, her throbbing force, the thrill that comes
From being of her a part, her subtle spells,
Her shining towers, her avenues, her slums –
Oh God! the stark, unutterable pity,
To be dead, and never again behold my city!

A sonnet is a 14-line lyric poem that can have any of several possible rhyme schemes. One type of sonnet is the **Petrarchan sonnet** (named for Francesco Petrarch, the Italian poet who perfected the form). It consists of two parts. The first eight lines, called the octave, usually have the rhyme scheme abbaabba. In the last six lines, called the sestet, the rhyme scheme may be cdecde, cdcdcd, or another variation. Generally, the octave tells a story, introduces a situation, or raises a question, which is then commented on or responded to in the sestet. What characteristics make "My City" a Petrarchan sonnet?

If We Must Die

Claude McKay

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While round us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.
If we must die, O let us nobly die,
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!
O kinsmen we must meet the common foe!
Though far outnumbered let us show us brave,
And for their thousand blows deal one deathblow!
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!

In 1919 there was a wave of race riots consisting mainly of white assaults on black neighborhoods in a dozen American cities. Jamaican-born writer Claude McKay responded by writing this sonnet, urging his comrades to fight back. It had a powerful impact, then and later.

For what reason does McKay say even a doomed resistance is worth while?

The English sonnet (also called the Shakespearean sonnet after its foremost practitioner), is comprised of three quatrains and a final couplet, rhyming ababcdcdefeg. Again, the "turn" comes with the final couplet, which gives a response or extends the ideas raised in the three quatrains.

Any Human to Another

Countee Cullen

The ills I sorrow at
Not me alone
Like an arrow,
Pierce the marrow,
Through the fat
And past the bone.

Your grief and mine
Must intertwine
Like sea and river,
Be fused and mingle,
Diverse yet single,
Forever and ever.

Let no man be so proud
And confident,
To think he is allowed
A little tent
Pitched in a meadow
of sun and shadow
All his little own.

Joy may be shy, unique,
Friendly to a few,
Sorrow never scorned to speak
To any who
Were false or true.

Your every grief
Like a blade
Shining and unsheathed
Must strike me down
Of bitter aloes wreathed,
My sorrow must be laid
On your head like a crown.

I, too, sing America

Langston Hughes (1902 - 1967)

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,
I'll be at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.

Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed--

I, too, am America.

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The Weary Blues

Langston Hughes

Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.
Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway....
He did a lazy sway....
To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!
Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!
Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!
In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--
"Ain't got nobody ain all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."
Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more--
"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied--
I ain't happy no mo'

And I wish that I had died."

And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

A Black Man Talks of Reaping

Arna Bontemps

I have sown beside all waters in my day
I planted deep, within my heart the fear
That wind or fowl would take the grain away.
I planted safe against this stark, lean year.

I scattered seed enough to plant the land
In rows from Canada to Mexico
But for my reaping only what the hand
Can hold at once is all that I can show.

Yet what I sowed and what the orchard yields
My brother' sons are gathering stalk and root,
Small wonder then my children glean in fields
They have not sown, and feed on bitter fruits

Primer for Blacks

Gwendolyn Brooks

Blackness

is a title,
is a preoccupation,
is a commitment Blacks
are to comprehend –
and in which you are
to perceive your Glory.

The conscious shout
of all that is white is
“It’s Great to be white.”
The conscious shout
of the slack in Black is
“It’s Great to be white.”
Thus all that is white
has white strength and yours.

The word Black
has geographic power,
pulls everybody in:
Blacks here –
Blacks there –
Blacks wherever they may be.
And remember, you blacks, what they told you –
remember your Education:
“one Drop – one Drop
maketh a brand new Black.”

Oh mighty Drop.
And because they have given us kindly
so many more of our people
Blackness
stretches over the land.
Blackness –

the Black of it,
the rust-red of it,
the milk and cream of it,
the tan and yellow-tan of it,
the deep-brown middle-brown high-brown of it,
the “olive” and ochre of it –
Blackness
marches on.

The huge, pungent object of our prime ouot-ride
is to Comprehend,
to salute and to Love the fact that we are Black,
which *is* our “ultimate reality,”
which is the lone ground
from which our meaningful metamorphosis,
from which our prosperous staccato,
group or individual, can rise.

Self-shriveled Blacks,
Begin with gaunt and marvelous concession:
YOU are our costume and our fundamental bone.

All of you –
you COLORED ones,
your NEGRO ones,
those of you who proudly cry
“I’m half INDIan” –
those of you who proudly screech
“I”VE got the blood of George WASHington in MY
veins –
ALL of you –
you proper Blacks,
you half-Blacks,
you wish-I-weren’t Blacks,
Niggeroes and Niggerenes.

You.

We Real Cool

Gwendolyn Brooks

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

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