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Home to Harlem: A Classic African American Narrative

Behind the African American culture there are several narratives that can be considered a classical portrayal of its culture and history. Among these narratives we can find Claude McKay's novel Home to Harlem. In his novel, McKay illustrates the life of the streets of Harlem and its people. Through several of his characters we can identify the sense of home that Harlem represented to the African American community of New York, as well as identify their struggle with racism and segregation, their search of identity and the battles some encounter in order to achieve their aspiration. A more clear and realistic picture of the African Americans at that time is brought up by McKay's work and as readers we open our eyes to experience pieces of the life, culture, and history of the African American Community.

The structure and strategies that a writer uses become one of the most important aspects to overlay a vivid image along his or her words. In the case of Home to Harlem, Claude McKay does an incredible job in incorporating the language of the community, sounds, music, expressions, poetry, and color. Not all the sentences have a perfect grammatical structure or the correctly spelled words, instead sentences and words are structure in the way they would be naturally pronounced by the type of characters that are been described. We can often see expressions such as "boh," "lawdy," "mah," "leggo," "I gwut," and "I jest." As mentioned before, all of these expressions are considered misspelled, but they are part of the true voice of the African American community that existed during the time the novel takes place. Along with

the language, we can find the feature of color, used to describe the skin color of characters. For example we are able to find colors such as: “brown,” “white,” “black,” “yellow,” “potato yellow,” and “chocolate brown.” Certainly, the use of these descriptive colors brings a more vibrant image of a person’s appearance. Referring back to the structure MacKay uses for his writing, along his sentences we can also find pieces of poetry and songs that bring a musical sense and a rhythm to the reading, as well as contribute to the description and imagery of the night life of Harlem and the feelings of its characters. The ways in which McKay chooses to right his story and the strategies he incorporates help make his narrative of the African American community of Harlem richer.

Harlem is the most important setting in McKay’s novel and it leads us to discover the importance of its unique African American community. We are introduced to Harlem by the main character of novel, Jake, who alludes with a great sense of belonging to his home of Harlem. After having been away for a long time, Jake’s only desire is to head back home to his unique Harlem; which as a community represents a great deal for each person who are part of it. “The deep-dyed color, the thickness, the closeness of it. The noises of Harlem. The sugared laughter. The honey-talk on its streets. And all night long, ragtime and “blues” playing somewhere,... singing somewhere, dancing somewhere! Oh, the contagious fever of Harlem. Burning everywhere in dark-eyed Harlem” (15). As we uncover through this words, Harlem is a place where everyone is similar; with their dark eyes and their color skin they go around feeling as part of that place. There is life on its streets, people forming relationships, music and noises that bring brightness to the community. Through the eyes of the rest of society or in particular “white” society, Harlem can be seen as a vicious place where people drink, where everything is surrounded by violence, prostitution, and simply it can be consider an atmosphere that is not of

the greatest moral. However, for the people of its community it is what they know and what are and aside from its negativity, they survive it with a positive sense of belonging. “Its brutality, gang rowdyism, promiscuous thickness. Its hot desires. But, oh, the rich blood red color of it! The warm accent of its composite voice, the fruitiness of its laughter, the trailing rhythm of its “blues” and the improvise surprise of its Jazz. He had known happiness, too, in Harlem, joy that glowed gloriously upon him like the high noon sunlight of his tropic island home” (267). These last words come from Ray, a Haitian whose origins are far from Harlem, but he embrace in the community an found that sense of home that Harlem seemed to offer. Again, the importance of Harlem to its people and the African American community was simply imminent. With the description that is brought up of the place and the personal thought of the characters, we can see how Harlem is built with the souls of the African American people.

The importance of finding a place like Harlem where there was community, where people felt much alike and had a sense belonging seemed merely important, especially due to the struggles that African Americans encounter with racism and segregation. The harshness of both racism and segregation, are themes brought up through the experiences of McKay’s characters in Home to Harlem. Ray’s character is able perceives the classification of races as a great oppression that gives power to the white and lives the color ones behind in adversity. “Races and nations were things like skunks, whose smells poisoned the air of life. Yet civilized mankind reposed its faith and future in their ancient, silted channels. Great races and big nation!” (153-154). Having the existence of races appears to be a simple scale of power were the “great races” will be part of the “great nations” formed by those who have called themselves to be from a civilized world. People like Ray and Jake and the rest of the character who belong to the African American community or are placed among that raced, are set to suffer for the greatness

of others. It seems clear that the harshness they lived was quite depressing and although it made the characters mad, the oppression seemed to be endless keeping them under the shadows of racism and conformity. “ ..All the black and brown hybrids and mongrels, simple earth-loving animals, without aspirations towards national unity or racial arrogance” (155). The number of members in the African American community could have been large, but their minds were not set at that moment with an ideology that was able to see they could achieve better conditions. At this moment at McKay describes moments of frustration, mere oppression and harshness among color people; as readers we are to have a sense of the thoughts and experiences in the lives of the African Americans who lives through the oppression, segregation and racism of this time.

The segregation of the races and oppression seem to go along with the lack of education, as overseen in McKay's novel. The theme of education comes along as the people of Harlem are portrait with a lack of a proper or formal education. This could be perceived in their actions, the language that is expressed and the ideologies that the characters seemed to have. Living in Harlem did not appeared to asked much of the people who lived there, but as the story progresses the characters open their eyes to see what learning could bring to them: “Ef I was edjucated, I could understand things better and be proper-speaking like you is ...” (273). At the beginning of the novel being educated and acting proper could be related to a “white” action that will tell the community of color you were trying to blend into the white community, but as the novel progresses, characters like Jake itself begin to open their eyes to see the need for an education. This consciousness of education can be broadly related to the awareness that began to come of the African American community as they intended to look for better conditions among the rest of society. “We ought to get something new, we Negros, but we get our education like- like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead

stuff that this age has no use for” (243). Again, we can perceive a shift from conformity to an understanding of a need for change and education comes along as a first step for the community to move forward.

The themes, the characters and the strategies that Claude McKay brings together in his novel *Home to Harlem* place his work as a classical African American Narrative. Through his writer we learn and experience issues that lived among the African American community, particularly in Harlem. After reading this work and experiencing the lives of the character, we are able to create more vivid image of the lives of the African Americans during the time of the novel and understand more of their culture and past.