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Audre Lorde and the Power of Provocative Imagery

For Audre Lorde, poetry transcends the confines of literature. In the article “Poetry Is Not a Luxury,” Lorde defines poetry as “the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action” (Lorde 370). In other words, Lorde intends for her poetry to go beyond expression, provoking transformation of thought and action through self-reflection of both the speaker and the readers. As a Black, female poet who is familiar with pain, Lorde uses this framework to give voice to the injustices that threaten the existence of marginalized groups in America. Using poetry as a means of survival, Lorde integrates provocative imagery in her poems “Afterimages,” “Power,” and “Who Said It Was Simple,” to peacefully protest and disrupt the silence of sufferings, exposing the depths of inequality in America.

According to Judith Kohl, a published writer in the *Gay and Lesbian Biography*, much of Audre Lorde’s works are inspired by pivotal moments in her life. Born in New York to immigrant parents, Lorde developed a love for reading and writing poetry at a young age out of her need to express her creativity (Kohl par. 1). This love of poetry became a part of Lorde’s identity to which she dedicated most of her life. Valuing the concept of identity as being crucial to oneself, she changed the spelling of her name, originally spelled *Audrey*, to reinforce her authenticity (Homens 517). Lorde became a teacher and writer during the Civil Rights Movement and the second wave of Feminism. During this time, feminist studies were being

recognized as a formal academic course (Clifford 672), further providing a platform for Lorde as a feminist. Her layered identity as a Black, female, lesbian poet and the racism, sexism, and homophobia she experienced became the driving force behind most of her literary works as she sought freedom from oppression, not just for one group, but for all. As she vocalizes these sufferings through her poetry, Lorde demonstrates the resilience necessary to endure until change occurs.

The multiplicity of Lorde's identity translates to her poetry as scholars analyze her works through multiple perspectives. Roderick Ferguson, a Professor of Race and Critical Theory at the University of Minnesota, highlights Lorde's use of eroticism in her poetry to appeal to the reader's sensuality and foster a connection that yields the self-reflection necessary for personal and social transformation (Ferguson 299). From a different perspective, Lexi Rudnitsky, Associate Director of the Undergraduate Writing Program at Columbia University, emphasizes Lorde's strategic use of grammar and syntactical techniques to convey meaning to her readers instead (Rudnitsky 484). While both scholars present valid arguments, Lorde's use of provocative imagery not only conveys the meaning but delivers the lasting impact she intends for readers to have upon reading her poetry. This sensational imagery simplistically communicates messages to all readers with a much more visceral effect, for survival cannot afford to be hindered by literary complexities.

In her poem "Afterimages," Lorde describes her ability to vividly recall the tragic lynching of Emmitt Till almost 24 years after it has happened. She uses graphic imagery to illustrate the details in such a way that the reader cannot unsee it. For example, Part I of the poem opens with the traumatic effect of what is seen, as an inevitable and lasting influence on the mind: "However the image enters / its force remains within" (lines 1-2), thus her inability to

forget. To paint this natural harmony of the mind and eyes to function in this capacity, Lorde uses words, such as rockstrewn caves, dragonfish, evolve, wild, life, survive, and earth. Her description of eye sockets as “rockstrewn caves” and the eyes as “dragonfish” (line 4) is a metaphor for the power of the eyes, though small, to take in images imprinting them deep in the mind. Part I, overall, illustrates the effects of imagery and sets the stage for Part II.

In Part II, Lorde describes a scene where a flood has taken place, leaving a White woman, also a mother, in despair. Though unrelated, this detail triggers Lorde’s memory to the murder of Emmitt Till and how a large, body of water also played a role in leaving his mother in despair. Parts III and IV recount the details of Emmitt Till’s murder using words such as, “bruises,” “gash,” “severed,” “burns,” “gouged out,” to describe the body of Emmitt Till, a Black 15-year-old boy, who was severely beaten, shot in the head, and thrown into a river by two White men for whistling at a White woman. Described like a scene out of a horror film, one need not have been there to feel or relate to the pain, but only be a child, a mother, or simply human. This incident was not an isolated event but a picture of the racial climate for Black people living in America in the 1950s. Present during the aftermath of this tragedy and unable to unsee what the media has circulated everywhere, Lorde is no longer able to stay silent about this pain 24 years later, and pens “Afterimages” in hopes that it will have the same effect on readers as the memories on her. The hope is to either birth or solidify an intolerance towards the injustices that threaten the survival of Blacks even today.

Much like “Afterimages,” Lorde uses gripping imagery in “Power,” a poem about the murder of a Black ten-year-old boy named, Clifford Glover, at the hands of a racist undercover police officer who admits to shooting him because of the color of his skin. The poem opens discussing the power of poetry in contrast to the metaphorical indifference of rhetoric and

compares it to “being ready to kill / yourself / instead of your children” (lines 1-4). The setting is 20 years since the murder of Emmitt Till, and the racial climate in America still has not changed. In these lines, Lorde stresses the need for the sacrifice of one’s own self through the protest of injustice that has been perpetuated by indifference, for hope to materialize for the future. This future, however, seems bleak for Black children as Lorde depicts Clifford Glover’s murder: “I am trapped on a desert of raw gunshot wounds / and a dead child dragging his shattered black / face off the edge of my sleep / blood from his punctured cheeks and shoulders / is the only liquid for miles” (lines 5-9). The word “child” in line 6 almost seems to be misplaced in comparison to the graphic imagery Lorde paints, yet this is the explicit account of the cruel extent of racism written to snap readers out of the desensitization that threatens to normalize these acts. The poem continues with exposing the hypocrisy of the justice system as the police officer, sworn to protect and serve, is acquitted by a jury of 11 White men and one Black women for the cold-blooded murder of a Black child.

While the details of the murder of Clifford Glover can incite a righteous anger, Lorde warns of the potential danger of becoming just as corrupt if this anger is not channeled productively, referring to the difference between poetry and rhetoric:

But unless I learn to use
 the difference between poetry and rhetoric
 my power too will run corrupt as poisonous mold
 or lie limp and useless as an unconnected wire
 and one day I will take my teenaged plug
 and connect it to the nearest socket
 raping an 85 year old white woman

who is somebody's mother

and as I beat her senseless and set a torch to her bed

a greek chorus will be singing in 3/4 time

“Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are.” (lines 45-55)

Using rhetoric as a metaphor, Lorde alludes to how the indifference to injustice might breed a counterproductive anger in future generations that will cause them to commit crimes and fulfill the narrative that would falsely justify the racist crimes against them. She further implies poetry, a metaphor for protest in this case, as the more sensible approach to propel a change that will ensure the survival of the future generations of Black children.

Lorde continues the conversation on anger in “Who Said It Was Simple,” using a tree and its branches to illustrate the complexities of anger (line 1). While the manifestations of anger may look the same, Lorde challenges readers to delve deeper and acknowledge the differences in the causes of anger. Unlike “Afterimages” and “Power,” Lorde does not use graphic imagery in this poem; however, her message against injustice remains the same, demonstrating her multifaceted ability to convey this message to readers. In “Who Said It Was Simple,” The poet witnesses an act of inequality at a restaurant as an “almost white” waiter disregards a Black man waiting to be served to cater to a group of White feminists who have gathered before a political rally (lines 8-9). Observing this, Lorde cannot help but to reflect on the inner battles she faces within her layered identities as a feminist who is also a Black lesbian: “But I who am bound by my mirror / as well as my bed / see causes in color / as well as sex / and sit here wondering / which me will survive / all these liberations” (lines 12-18). These lines reveal the hypocrisy and inequality amongst marginalized groups perpetuated by the indifference of the White women who are drawn together to fight against oppression. Unable to sacrifice the freedom from

oppression of one of her identities for another, Lorde writes this as an act of protest on behalf of all her identities and to create an awareness that will catalyze a change.

Throughout her poetry, specifically “Afterimages,” “Power,” and “Who Said It Was Simple,” Lorde is steadfastly committed to the survival and healing of her readers as she speaks up for those silenced by their pain. Her hope for change is evident in her unwillingness to compromise any aspect of her identity even in the face of adversity. She accomplishes this by ripping off the bandage of silence through provocative imagery and airing out the pain so the individual healing process can begin and bring forth a collective change. In another poem, “A Litany for Survival,” Lorde reminds readers that silence is not an option, empowering them to speak their truth in spite of fear: “and when we speak we are afraid / our words will not be heard / nor welcomed / but when we are silent / we are still afraid / So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive” (lines 37-44). Lorde’s unforgettable testimonies through her literary works exude a strength that challenges readers today to rise beyond the struggles of life so they might overcome them and ensure the survival of the next generation.

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