

WEEK TWO

CLASS: SSS 2
SUBJECT: Literature-in-English
TOPIC: “Black Woman”
SUB-TOPICS: (i) Language of the poet
(ii) Poetic Devices
ASPECT: African Poetry

ENABLE OBJECTIVES: At the end of the lesson, students should be able to:

- (i) Identify the peculiar features of the poem that makes up the poet’s language.
- (ii) Explain vividly the diction, tone and mood of the poem.
- (iii) Identify the various poetic devices used in the poem.
- (iv) Analyze the poetic devices (figures of speech) used by the poet in relation to the subject matter of the poem.

PREVIOUS KNOWLEDGE: Students are familiar with the subject matter, structure and themes of the poem.

REFERENCES

- (i) Obiene Ututu’s “Scholars Literature-in-English” (New WAEC & NECO SYLLABUS (2021 -2025))
- (ii) Ehis O. Osajie’s “Complete Guide to Literature-in-English for WAEC & NECO candidates (2021 -2025)”
- (iii) “Poetry Anthology Book for WAEC & NECO (2021-2025)” by Seagroove Publications.

CONTENT: Introduction to African Poetry: “Black Woman” by Leopold Sedar Senghor.

Language (Diction, tone & mood) and Poetic Devices.

“Black Woman” is one of the best-known poems.

When Senghor writes of Africa, it is frequently in terms of a woman, a woman who is both wife and mother; she is the “promised land” mentioned in the poem.

The first stanza gives the theme of the poem: the natural black woman whose color is life and whose form is

beauty. The poet has grown up in her shadow and has felt the gentleness of her hands. Now that he is grown,

he returns to find her as if he was coming upon the promised land. He views her through a mountain pass at

noon in the midst of summer, and her beauty strikes him directly to the heart, like the flash of an eagle.

In the second stanza, she is seen as a lover, a woman with the flesh of ripe fruit, a woman who can transport

the poet with somber ecstasies of black wine, a woman with a mouth that makes his own mouth lyric. The

poet elaborates, finding her a woman who is like a limitless savanna that shudders beneath the caresses of the

east wind; a woman who is like a tight, well-sculpted drum that resounds under the fingers of the conqueror; a

woman whose solemn contralto voice becomes the spiritual song of the loved one.

In the third stanza, she is almost a goddess, so perfect that even her skin is smooth as the oiled skin of an

athlete or a prince. She is like a graceful gazelle with celestial adornments. Pearls become stars on the

darkness of her skin. The reflections of the setting sun on her glistening skin are delights on which the mind can exercise itself. The poet's anguish is lightened by the sunlike glance from her eyes, when he is in the shadow of her hair.

In the fourth and last stanza, the poet—more philosophical—informs the black woman that he is celebrating in verse her beauty, which is passing, and her form, which he establishes eternally in his poetry, before fate can turn her to ashes in order to nourish the roots of life.

Black Woman 1

Forms and Devices

The poem is a hymn of praise to the black woman—not only as an individual, but also as a symbol of African

women and as a representative of her race. The first two lines serve as a statement of the poem's theme: the

beauty of the natural black woman, who though naked, is “clothed” in her color, which is life. There is also

the poet's response to this beauty, as the black woman is perceived in both sensory and emotional ways. The

poet has experienced the touch of her hand, and he is struck to the heart by her beauty.

Even though the musical language and the rhythm of the original poem may lose something in translation—and

many of Senghor's poems were written to be accompanied by African musical instruments—one nevertheless

perceives the impact of this poem through the imagery, metaphor, and personification that the poet employs.

In an enumerative style, similar to that of a litany, Senghor presents a series of images that are, in effect, the

attributes of the black woman. He thus seems to summarize her qualities, beginning with a description of the

natural woman, then—elaborating metaphorically—he describes her as the promised land, a plain that rustles,

and the nocturnal sky. The poet thereby sees her not only in terms of a person, but in terms of the earth itself,

and even the universe.

There are other metaphors: In the second stanza—more erotic than the first—the black woman is seen in terms

of ripe fruit, black wine, a savanna that shudders beneath the “caresses” of the east wind, and an object—a

sculpted drum—that responds to the touch. Even her voice is the song of the loved one. In the third stanza, the

oil on her skin is seen by the poet as the oil on the limbs of an athlete or on those of the princes of Mali. She is

now more of a goddess, a graceful but celestial gazelle, perhaps a totem for her people.

Associating her with eternity, the poet uses terms dealing with things eternal: earth, wind, summer, noon,

stars, night, suns. The poet thus sees the woman not only in terms of a person, not only in terms of the earth,

but also in a more cosmic sense. The poet also employs words dealing with color, many of which are synonymous with black—shadow, dark, and somber. These words that are images of darkness are contrasted

with words that are images of light: brighten, gold, stars, and suns.

The poet also uses the device of inversion. The first line of the first stanza—"naked woman, black woman"—becomes "naked woman, dark woman" in the second stanza, and these words are inverted in the first lines of the last two stanzas. Inversion is again used, as the repetition of the theme in the final stanza uses the words of the first stanza—life, form, and beauty—but in inverted order. Use of punctuation is sparse, the ends of the lines serving as the ends of the word groups. A change of tense occurs only in the third line of the first stanza, where the poet uses the past tense in order to recall the comfort that black womankind has given him. He immediately resumes the present tense for the rest of the poem. This effect helps to connect the past with the present. He had grown up under the black woman's shadow; now he seeks solace again in the shadow of her hair. Personification is another device, as the poet writes in the fourth stanza of Fate, which is jealous and capable of reducing one to ashes. It is in this stanza that he reveals his vocation of poet, as he informs the black woman that he is celebrating her beauty and her form in poetry, before she returns to ashes in order to nourish the roots of life. Thus the poet has moved, by means of description, metaphor, and personification, from praise of the black woman herself to an affirmation of the continuation of life. He has saved the best for last as he ends on a note of optimism.

Forms and Devices 2

Themes and Meanings

The meaning of this poem revolves around Senghor's contemplation, description, and glorification of the natural black woman. Woman holds a place of importance in Senghor's life and in his poetry. When he writes of Africa in his poetry, it is frequently in terms of a woman. His glorification of the black woman is quite different from that of Western poetry, which had so often glorified women of Western society. The black woman of this poem is more than an individual person; she is also the progenitor of his race, and thus symbolic of Africa itself and an embodiment of Senghor's African heritage. Senghor takes pride in his race, and here especially, he shows his love and respect for the black woman. He uses her very color as part of his praise and seems to abstract her characteristics into an idea of a black woman in order to praise her. This deservedly famous and often-quoted poem was written when he was away from his homeland. The nostalgia that one finds in the other poems of his collection *Chants d'ombre* is reflected in this poetic return to an Africa that was almost unspoiled by the ways of the Western world and that was, for him, a sort of paradise where all seemed to be in harmony and at peace, where he felt secure in his place in the world. In this Africa of his childhood, there was a sense of a life spent in common with his family, his village, his clan, his

tribe, and even his ancestors.

In this poem, he sees, in his imagination, an idealized African woman in several roles: in the first stanza, as

mother, and thus comforting; in the second stanza, as lover, and thus erotic; and in the last line of the last

stanza, as nourisher of life. There is a certain sweetness in this poem, a contemplative quality, a quiet

appreciation of the African woman, and the emotions the poet experiences at her sight and at her touch. He

details his pleasure in contemplating her and the comfort he experiences in her presence.

He realizes that life is transitory, that even though beauty seems permanent, time works on the individual

woman. He is a poet, however, and he informs this woman that he is celebrating her beauty and her form in

poetry, before she returns to ashes. The final stanza affirms the gift and the mission of the poet as someone

who can relate the temporal to the eternal; as Pierre de Ronsard wrote to immortalize the passing beauty of his

Helen, or Cassandra, or Marie, so can Senghor immortalize the beauty of the black woman. Thus the last

stanza, even though potentially tragic as to the fate of the individual black woman, ends on a note of hope.

These very ashes will be used to nourish life anew.

ASSIGNMENT: (1) Discuss the mood and tone of the poet-persona.

(2) “Black Woman” is a hymn of praise to the black woman. How?

(3a) Mention the poetic devices employed in the poem, “Black Woman” by Leopold Sedar

(3b) Explain any two of the figures of speech used in the poem with examples.

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