

Questions for Class #7

Lois' comments and questions to consider three poems about Harriet Tubman:

"Three different poets' voices give Harriet Tubman a voice in our anthology. I'd like to consider each poem separately, then compare the three. Two are in the section on leaders, while the third was in the section on slavery and its legacies."

"harriet" by Lucille Clifton pg. 126 (Note: Isabella Baumfree was the slave name of Sojourner Truth.)

1. I read a description of Clifton's work as showing "depth, yet simplicity." In what way(s) does "harriet" demonstrate this?
2. How is Clifton's handling of Harriet Tubman unique to herself? How did she make the poem personal? Could this poem have been written by a male poet?
3. Although this poem is written in one stanza, it could be divided into three. Why do you think Clifton presents it as one?
4. Why do you think Clifton pluralized Gods?
5. What do you think is the main message in this poem?
6. What could the word "wait" at the end connote?
7. (If time, compare this poem to "song at midnight" pg. 170)

"Harriet Tubman" by Sam Cornish pg. 127-128 (This poem appeared in Cornish's anthology Generations, 1971, in the section entitled "Slaves." Cornish wrote at least two other poems about Tubman.)

1. Cornish's poetry has been described as "clear and sharp, with no excess fat." Do you agree with this description for this poem? Why or why not?
2. A review of Harriet Tubman points out that Cornish "speaks history in a double-voiced dialogue with the present." How is that evident in this poem?
3. What are the differences between the two parts to the poem? Do you think either part could have stood alone?
4. What do you think is the purpose of having Harriet's mother in the first part?
5. What do you make of the second part?

"Runagate, Runagate" by Robert Hayden pg. 49 (Note: Runagate is a term for a runaway slave.)

1. Rampersad has referred to Hayden as a "historical muralist." In what ways is "Runagate, Runagate" an example of this?
2. What are the main differences between Sections I and II?
3. What are some of the symbols used in Section I? Section II?
4. What are some techniques that Hayden uses to make ideas stand out in this poem?
5. What is Harriet Tubman's role in this poem?
6. Compare this poem to "Middle Passage."

Comparisons

1. Which poem do you think conveys the essence and importance of Harriet Tubman the most?
2. Which poem do you think is the most powerful?
3. Which poem do you like the best? Why?