

Eloy Romero-Munoz: On "Fragment"

The Harlem Renaissance has been presented as the emergence of a black, predominantly male aesthetic. This phallogocentric view has often left gender out of accounts of race, which has inevitably obscured our understanding of black women and their concerns both within and without the movement. For instance, sexual discrimination against women from black communities, apparent in the lack of support for women of colour (Nelson 96, Drake 229), has hardly been dealt with at all. I propose to briefly discuss Angelina Weld-Grimké's untitled "Fragment" in the light of intra-racial sexual discrimination, and show, without falling into the trap of *l'écriture féminine*, how women poets gendered "the color" line in their writings.

Grimké's "Fragment" starts with a superimposition of race and gender issues:

I am the woman with the black black face

Grimké gives us no name or other personal information. Instead, she creates a character defined only in terms of race and gender and, by doing so, stresses the importance of these socially constructed categories. The "woman" may remain as unidentified as the (untitled) poem that describes her, but the lack of details by no means renders her anonymous, let alone voiceless. Together with the use of the definite article, this fundamental indeterminacy elevates her to the status of Everywoman. The peculiar use of the modifier "black" in lines 1-2 creates a pattern of omission and repetition that suggests that the poem deals with the gender of the I-persona as much as with her skin colour, but never syntactically mixing the two. What we have here is thus a black Everywoman.

In any case, the poem puts a lot of emphasis on self-representation as a bold political gesture. The I-persona claims herself by using a first person singular pronoun together with the verb to be in its active form. She thereby ceases to exist as a "third person consciousness" (Fanon 110) stuck in a secondary, objectified position. By re-appropriating herself, she also leaves very little room for males, both black and white, to objectify her as female-other. She re-appropriates her gender and colour and thereby becomes a speaking subject in the racial as well as gender conflict.

Her self-confidence, further apparent in her incessant "laugh," eventually proves to be a mere façade. She confesses that she is subjected to a life of sacrifice, toil and fear "just to eat" (line 4). Most readers, I assume, would blame the white master for the woman's physical and emotional sufferings. Yet Grimké says nothing about that, leaving as it were the door open for any interpretation. She could very well be talking about the white man, or the black, or both. This fundamental indeterminacy indirectly serves to stress the relevance of gender concerns in a discourse about race.

It is well worth noting too that the focus of the poem gradually shifts from gender and race (lines 1-2) to gender alone (lines 7-8). In the end, the I-persona is only identified as a "woman." Were it not for the first two lines, one could almost read the poem as portraying any woman. Should we understand this as an attempt to give precedence to gender concerns over racial concerns, and to put forward the femininity of black women? Maybe, but Grimké did put the lines "I am the woman with the black black skin / I am the laughing woman with the black black face," and we cannot ignore their contribution to the meaning of the poem altogether.

In a period marked by "twofold discrimination" against women (Nelson 97), Grimké thus manages to include thoughts on gender in an apparently conventional discussion of race problems. Ultimately though, her short "Fragment" leaves us somewhere between race and gender, never really telling us what to make of the poem. Some might say that this was too ambitious a goal for such a short poem. I would rather believe that Grimké did not expect us

to choose between race and gender. On the contrary she wanted us to see the articulation of gender and race, and believe in the possibility of gendering the "color line."

Bibliography

Drake, Williams. *The First Women Poets in America, 1915-1945*. New York: MacMillan, 1987.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. Translated from the French by Charles Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

Nelson, Cary. *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Copyright © 2001 by Eloy Romero-Munoz

Publication Status:

Excerpted Criticism ^[1]

Criticism Target:

Angelina Weld Grimké ^[2]

Author:

Eloy Romero-Munoz ^[3]

Poem:

Fragment ^[4]

Source URL: <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/criticism/elay-romero-munoz-fragment>

Links

[1] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/category/publication-status/excerpted-criticism>

[2] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poet/angelina-weld-grimk%C3%A9>

[3] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/creator/elay-romero-munoz>

[4] <https://www.modernamericanpoetry.org/poem/fragment>