

LUCILLE CLIFTON

Bearer of Light and Life

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Abstract

Lucille Clifton does not share characteristics of black female contemporaries writing in the late sixties and seventies. Her aim is not to shock, nor to use profanity and violence, nor to encourage outrage and militance. Rather, she explores racial issues, celebrates her own blackness and womanhood, and imbues her work with personal spiritual experiences. She believes that African and African American traditions inform the present. Further, that encouraging black children to develop a mental and spiritual toughness enables them to survive in a hostile world. Family and friends are her strength and inspiration. The key to Clifton's poetic prowess is the unique ability to connect generations of her people reclaiming the values they have passed down through centuries.

I once saw a fantastic production of *Oedipus Rex* at Stratford in Canada. The first act ended impressively with Tiresius, the blind shepherd, bursting dramatically into the rear of the audience shouting, " News! I have good news! " Act II began with a repeat of the same scene. The director, Tyrone Guthrie, wanted to impact the audience with this irony, because later the good news would actually bring on the fall of the great king and his dynasty.

I was reminded of this irony when I began to reread the poetry of Lucille Clifton in preparation for this study. Clifton's first volume of poetry was entitled *Good Times: Poems*(1969). The " good "in the title is as ironic as the line shouted by Tiresius in the ancient Greek drama. The " good times "of the title poem describe an evening when Clifton's family is dancing drunkenly in the kitchen because the rent is paid, the electricity is back on, and an uncle has hit the numbers. The poet's voice urging us to " think about the good times " could be either rejoicing or begging, and yet asks us to recognize how the party is encircled by pain.

Clifton's poetry is evocative because the images present a dual vision of her characters and their placement. They are placed in an urban ghetto where, despite overwhelming hardships, tough women survive and triumph. Clifton herself is one of these tough women. The crux of the

collection presents the horrors that arise from poverty, unemployment, substandard housing and inadequate education. Despite this, the poetry is full of the love and strength that keeps the tough women from dying in desperation.

Marilyn Hacker comments that Clifton's work reminds her of Japanese ink drawings because they move deftly and gracefully (41). Alicia Ostriker is reminded of a woman playing a drum seated on a simple wooden chair or perhaps the earth, and surrounded by her community. She hits the drum with her hands calling out, " Oh children, think about the good times "(43). Both images conjure up other good times when life was uncluttered and pleasures were simple.

As a poet, Clifton is a minimalist. Lower case letters, little punctuation, and basic but evocative words mark her work clearly identifying it with the Black Arts movement. One of her books, *Good News about the Earth* (1972) is dedicated to students killed in the student revolts at Jackson, Mississippi and Orangeburg, South Carolina. It includes verse to Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver and Bobby Seale, all radical activists in the Black Panther Party of the sixties (Oxford 157). Beyond the political nature of these poems, Clifton adopted other principles of the Black Arts movement that included a focus on the African American community, using the grammar, vocabulary and rhythms of African American vernacular speech. She has developed such stylistic devices as concise, untitled free verse lyrics of mostly iambic trimeter lines, slant rhyme, and forms of repetition, puns and allusions.

At a time when many prominent women poets of the sixties and seventies shocked readers by aping their male contemporaries with profanity and violent imagery, Clifton sounded a different note. She celebrated her ancestors, anticipating Alex Haley (*Roots*) and Alice Walker (*In Search of Her Mother's Garden*). Unlike those who converted to Islam, she wrote about the life-giving strength of her African American religion. Unlike those who adopted Arabic and African names, Clifton connected her own with Africa, slavery and her own life in the twentieth century (Rushing 215-217). She begins with an allusion to the Latin derivation of the name " Lucille, " for " light bearer. "

light
on my mother's tongue
breaks through her soft
extravagant hip
into life
Lucille
she calls the light,
which was the name

of the grandmother
who waited by the crossroads
in Virginia
and shot the whiteman off his horse,
.....
mine already is
an Afrikan name (215).

When she began writing in the sixties, Lucille “ the lightbearer ” went beyond the blackness of the Civil Rights and the Black Arts Movements to explore her own personal and individual goals. In *An Ordinary Woman*, she floods her private identity with light, illuminating family histories and relationships in flashes of brilliance. She feminizes, Africanizes, eroticizes and makes mystical the Biblical stories she uses. Some critics believe she is going back to her mother’s garden, recovering and restoring forms of African American myth and worship which white tradition has almost erased. In “ to a dark mooses ” her spirituality looms boldly. Taken literally, God is a black woman who is also Lucille Clifton.

to a dark mooses

you are the one
i am lit for.
come with your rod
that twists
and is a serpent
i am the bush.
i am burning.
i am not consumed.

Clifton has come far from the humility of dutiful servants Wheatley and Hammon. An undeclared womanist, she highlights the strengths of her own ancestors

One of Clifton’s early poems is entitled “ prayer. ” It is about her role as poet and asks someone unnamed, probably God, to “ lighten up, ” as she wonders why his hand is so heavy on “ just poor me. ”

prayer

lighten up
why is your hand
so heavy
on just poor
me?

Answer

this is the stuff
I made the heroes
out of
all the saints
and prophets and things
had to come by
this

What is so fresh about this poem is that the poet questions God's fairness, and gets a fair response in turn. There is a homespun humor in the way that Clifton addresses God one on one. And she has no qualms about placing herself right up there with the prophets and heroes. After all, isn't a poet made of heroic stuff, given an impossible but sacred task? As Ostriker points out, in Clifton's work the high meaningful and the low meaningless converge, along with the sacred and the humorous, provided "one knows enough about both" (44).

In the verse/stories of Everett Anderson, a series of children's books which she has created, Clifton becomes a teacher showing black children the capacity for love, and adults the loving conscientiousness of the single parent wage earner. Everett Anderson is seen, not explained. He takes joy in living in Apt. 14A.

Boys with lots
of boxes
smiles Everett Anderson
spend all day Christmas
opening
and never have much fun (O'Reilly 90).

The storybook shows Everett holding a splendid guinea pig bearing a tag labeled "Merry

Christmas. "The Everett Anderson books won for her the Coretta Scott King Award in 1984. Another book written for children, *Sonora Beautiful* is unusual for Clifton in that it is about a white girl. Most of her work celebrates African American ancestry and culture.

A delicious sense of humor emanates from Clifton's verse. In *Quilting poems 1987-1990*, her various thoughts rest on history, love, tragedy and celebration of the body, There are 2 marvelous poems on the subject of menstruation: "poem in praise of menstruation;" and "to my last period," subjects all women can identify with, but "wishes for my sons" is hilarious, fantasizing for everyone the discomforts of being female.

wishes for sons

i wish them cramps
i wish them a strange town
and the last tampon
i wish them no 7-11.

i wish them one week early
and wearing a white skirt
i wish them one week late

later I wish them hot flashes
and clots like you
wouldn't believe. Let the
flashes come when they
meet someone special.
let the clots come
when they want to.

let them think they have accepted
arrogance in the universe,
then bring them to gynecologists
not unlike themselves. (*Quilting*, 1990)

Quilting Poems places Clifton in the tradition of African American women writers, such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor, who have established the quilt as a creative legacy from

African American women of the past to contemporary women. The titles of 4 of the 5 sections of the book bear the names of traditional quilt patterns: Log Cabin, Catalpa Flower, Eight-Pointed Star, and Tree of Life. Like a quilter, who salvages scraps of fabric from the past to create a comforting whole, Clifton uses her own experiences, however ragtagged they may be, to fashion her vision of possibilities.

Always, Clifton is glad to be alive, glad to be black, and glad to be a woman. She celebrates overweight women but especially herself in the poem “homage to my hips.”

homage to my hips

these hips are big hips
they need space to
move around in
they don't fit into little
pretty places, these hips
are free hips.

they don't like to be held back
these hips have never been enslaved,
they go where they want to go,
they do what they want to do
these hips are mighty hips
i have known them
to put a spell on a man and
spin him like a top! (1980)

The self she celebrates here is a woman who is proud of herself and of her blackness, but also a woman who has descended from black women who were enslaved, in the African American tradition of storytelling. Still, and above all, Clifton is a poet for ordinary people. She says,

I use a simple language. I have never believed that for anything to be valid or true or intellectual or “deep” it had to be first complex. I deliberately use the language I use. I like to think that I write from my knowledge not my lack, from my strength and not my weakness... I am not interested in trying to render big ideas in a simple way... I am interested in being understood, not admired. I wish

to celebrate and not be celebrated (though a little celebration is a lot of fun).
(Clifton 137-138).

In all of her work Clifton immerses herself in the language, strength and lineage of “ ordinary ” black people who have created deep spiritual traditions despite great hardships.

A by-product of Clifton’s reality may be humor, but it is a sacred kind, like that which is associated with traditional religious art, like the laughing monk in Zen imagery or the trickster figure of Coyote in Native American lore, or the Monkey King in Chinese folk tales who leaps to the end of the universe where he urinates on the finger of the Buddha. In similar style Clifton blends humor with seriousness to create a subject other poets might approach solemnly. Her poem “ admonitions ” from the collection called “ good times ” ends with these words addressed to her 6 children:

admonitions

children
when they ask you
why is your mama so funny
say
she is a poet
she don’t have no sense (*Good Times* 1969)

A later verse called “ the making of poems, ” raises questions about Clifton’s calling as a poet.

the reason why I do it
though I fail and fail
in the giving of true names
is I am adam and his mother
and these failures are my job. (Lazer 769)

What does she mean here by calling herself “ adam and his mother ”? Is she Eve, the penultimate mother, or simply any mother doing her housewifely thing, consequently blending myth and modern motherhood in a joke? Or is she meshing, albeit imperfectly, the signified and signifier in the modern world, thereby emphasizing that the singular role of poet is an impossible, but sacred task. Hank Lazer suggests Clifton exercises her power as a namer, one freed from the bondage in which

names were imposed as an exercise of power by someone else, someone not within the family. In this sense “ adam and his mother ” can find meaning for the way African Americans live today.

She uses the simplest language here calling her poet role a job, not some impossible task. This takes the mystery out of poetic labor and lends some dignity to the work of mothers and of men. Perhaps Clifton is telling us that the lowly and the mighty do come together to form a union, just as do the comical and the holy.

Clifton was born in a suburb of Buffalo, New York in 1936 to hardworking, poor parents. It is from her upbringing that she learned ordinary people want and need poetry. Her father worked in the Bethlehem steel mills, and her mother was an uneducated laundress who wrote poetry which she read to her children. Her father delighted in the telling of family stories to his children. Unfortunately Thelma Sayles died very young when Clifton was twenty-three Clifton has written many poems mourning her dead mother. One of these I especially like is called plainly, “ the death of thelma sayles ”.

i leave no tracks so my live loves
can't follow. at the river
most turn back, their souls shivering,
but my little girl stands alone on the bank
and watches. i pull my heart out of my pocket
and throw it. i smile as she catches all
she'll ever catch and heads for home
and her children. mothering
has made it strong, i whisper in her ear
along the leaves.

Simple yet powerful in an economical, musical language. Sentimentality is offput by the heart imagery, and fortified by technical devices like alliteration. The theme of her mother runs through most of Clifton's books.

Much of Clifton's work, specifically her 1976 memoir *Generations*, traces her ancestry from her great-great-grandmother Caroline Donald, who was born in Dahomey, West Africa in 1822. Along with most of her family, Caroline was kidnapped by slave traders and brought by ship to America. Clifton's namesake was her great-grandmother Lucille, Caroline's daughter. It is significant that their name means “ bearer of light. ” The elder Lucille shot to death the white father of her son, born of rape. It was a source of pride to Clifton's family that this ancestor had not been

lynched for the crime as would have happened to other slaves, but legally hanged. " They didn't lynch her, Lue,' cause she was Mammy Ca'line's child, and from Dahomey women " (Braxton, 34), her father would tell her. " First Black woman legally hanged in the state of Virginia. He said Black like that, back then. And he would be looking proud. "(27-28) The sense of triumph at surviving the horrors of slavery despite living in a racist culture resounds throughout much of Clifton's work.

After the death of her parents, Clifton wrote her one prose autobiographical work, *Generations: A Memoir* (1976). Toni Morrison was the editor. This is a narrative about the death and burial of her father woven together with stories about the various generations of her family. Each of the 5 chapters focuses on a different ancestor that connects Clifton to the African matriarch Caroline. The theme is that things do not fall apart but are held together by connected lines in which lives become generations made out of pictures and words " just kept " (Ward, 369).

The voices in *Generations* are multiple: her own, her father's and Caroline's. By blending past and present events, Clifton shortens the gap between the generations in a way that connects past, present and future. She writes of her family:

When the colored people came to Depew they came to be a family. Everyone came to be related in thin ways that last and last and last. The generations of white folks are just people but the generations of colored folks are families (*Generations*, 64).

There is another voice that gains entry into the memoir, Walt Whitman's. Quotes from " Song of Myself " preface each chapter, making us think of DuBois' stylistic device. Accompanying each excerpt are photographs of Clifton's ancestors, which make a strong connection between Clifton's family and American culture. Joanne Braxton states that this sense of connection places Clifton firmly in the tradition of African American women's autobiography in which " many streams converge, improvising, dancing, playing, together and with the rivers from which they emerge " (Braxton, 208). The text concludes with a funeral oration in the style and language of America's great orators, Negro preachers (8).

Clifton attended Howard University in Washington, D.C. and Fredonia State Teacher's College in a small city not far from Buffalo. As a student, she was part of a group of African American intellectuals, writers and dramatists that included Amiri Bakara (Leroi Jones), Ishmael

Reed, Gwendolyn Brooks and Morrison. Their influences on her work were strong. Reed brought about the publication of her first book in 1969 which made the *New York Times* best sellers list that year. While at Fredonia State, she met her husband, Fred Clinton, later a professor of philosophy at the nearby University of Buffalo, whom she married in 1958.

One of Clifton's loveliest poem works is a spiritual piece, a sequence of 10 poems called "Tree of Life" in which the poet imagines the role of Lucifer in the Garden of Eden. In the final lines where Lucifer's voice merges with the poet's, Clifton's body of work, that of the "Light Bearer," is summarily described:

illuminate I could
and so
illuminate I did.

Perhaps this is the simplest description of Clifton's work. Her poetry clearly addresses Black people, but speaks to all of us and all varieties of human experience -- womanhood, motherhood, Blackness, six-fingered hands, big hips. In the celebration of these details, life becomes a magical transformation for Clifton and for us.

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