



Hart Crane

(1899-1932)

Black Tambourine (1926)

The interests of a black man in a cellar
Mark tardy judgment on the world's closed door.
Gnats toss in the shadow of a bottle,
And a roach spans a crevice in the floor.

Aesop, driven to pondering, found
Heaven with the tortoise and the hare;
Fox brush and sow ear top his grave
And mingling incantations on the air.

The black man, forlorn in the cellar,
Wanders in some mid-kingdom, dark, that lies,
Between his tambourine, stuck on the wall,
And, in Africa, a carcass quick with flies.

ANALYSIS

"Black Tambourine" appeared in a collection entitled *White Buildings*. That same year of 1926, Crane described the poem in a letter:

The word "mid-kingdom" is perhaps the key word to what ideas there are in it. The poem is a description and bundle of insinuations, suggestions bearing on the Negro's place somewhere between man and beast. That is why Aesop is brought in, etc.,--the popular conception of Negro romance, the tambourine on the wall. The value of the poem is

only, to me, in what a painter would call its "tactile" quality,--an entirely aesthetic feature. A propagandist for either side of the Negro question could find anything he wanted to in it. My only declaration in it is that I find the Negro (in the popular mind) sentimentally or brutally "placed" in this mid-kingdom, etc. Tell me if I have made it plain or not to you.

Whoever finds anything he wants to in the poem is not reading objectively. The phrase "tardy judgment" implies criticism of the "world's closed door." Nevertheless, Crane claims to be presenting only the position of "the Negro" in the popular mind. The first stanza defines the position of the black man in the world as in a cellar, like the one in Harlem where Ralph Ellison enlightens his invisible man. Crane does not particularize the man nor the cellar, implying that the meaning of the image is universal. As a result of "tardy judgment," the black man, long theoretically emancipated, remains incarcerated in several senses.

The introduction of Aesop in stanza two makes "the Negro" represent the oppressed in general. According to Herodotus, Aesop was the slave of a certain Iadmon in the 6th century B.C. and met his death at Delphi, where he was sent on a mission by the king of Lydia after Iadmon had set him free. Similarly, in 1926 the civil equality of the American Negro was more official than literal fact, and the first and last stanzas of the poem imply a living death for the black man. His stereotype in the white popular mind is largely responsible for his status. Aesop is an ancient counterpart of the contemporary American black man, as the use of his fable in stanza two indicates. This parallelism suggests a comparison between Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare and the lines

Gnats toss in the shadow of a bottle
And a roach spans a crevice in the floor.

A gnat connotes insignificance and a group of them tossing about is an image of confusion and futility "in the shadow of a bottle"--going nowhere. The shadow makes them almost invisible in darkness and the bottle suggests escape through alcohol. They live short lives popularly regarded as meaningless. The roach has a repulsive connotation of dirt. Spanning a crack makes it disagreeably obvious underfoot and is analogous to the black man's position straddling kingdoms, a version of the "doubleness" theme that extends throughout the African-American tradition since W. E. B. DuBois. Both pests are metaphors of common white feelings about "the Negro question."

The fables of Aesop are the basis of Greek folk literature, accounting for "mingling incantations." Dying like real tortoises and hares, Aesop is united in a pantheistic sense with "fox brush and sow ear." The names of these plants and animals suggest the organic unity of plant, animal and man. At one with Nature, Aesop has an "ear" for the "mingling incantations on the air." Spiritually, his grave is a "mid-kingdom." The black man's social mid-kingdom lies somewhere between slavery and equality, though closer to the former. The last two lines of the poem define his symbolic domain:

Between his tambourine, stuck on the wall,
And, in Africa, a carcass quick with flies.

This places him in the mid-Atlantic, as if still in the dark hold, or cellar, of a slave ship. The tambourine, used in various parts of the world for thousands of years, is an emblem of universal humanity, the heart and culture. The carcass in Africa is an archetypal image of death as old as the human race. These images make the black man an avatar of the universal, affirming his *spiritual* equality. Yet the stereotype of him arrests his development. He is not playing his tambourine--it is "stuck" on the wall, like merely a colorful decoration. Though said to wander, he moves only in the abstract and consequently seems to be static, consistent with the stereotype that keeps him in his place.

The fable of the tortoise and the hare illuminates the potential of the underdog, but the black man's cellar is dark. He is not yet enlightened like Ellison's invisible man. He wanders. If the poem was a statement of his potential for success in the world, this imagery would be contrary to the truth represented by Aesop's triumphant turtle. It would imply that the black man has no social hope. Instead, it defines a

stereotype transcended by Ellison's invisible man. The poem remains significant because, however much the status of the black man has changed since the 1920s, he is embedded in American literature as an icon of oppression, a universal concept that sadly appears will be relevant forever. Pantheism, the consolation offered by Aesop and Crane, is the oldest religion and has become even more popular since the 1960s in an age of environmentalism.

A blend of effects is achieved in the last line of the poem: "And, in Africa, a carcass quick with flies." The last word is united by consonantal repetition with preceding last words of the first and third stanzas, the two pertaining to the black man: "cellar," "bottle," "floor," "cellar," "lies" and "wall." The same sound occurs five additional times internally. In this last line, the soft assonance of *a* and *i* sounds accentuates the hard alliteration of "Africa, a carcass quick." The other kingdom, not so brutal, is stressed through softer alliteration and internal rhyme: "Between his tambourine." The word "carcass" is placed in almost the identical position in stanza three as the alliterated "crevice" occupies in stanza one. This further suggests the identification of the beast-kingdom with the cellar floor, as the door in stanza one identifies the man-kingdom with the surface above.

The invisible black man in the dark cellar of a white building evokes a vertical consciousness that is dissociated from universal humanity as represented by the man, his tambourine and his music. Those of his race are like gnats in this place, tossing around in the shadow of a bottle. Long before Carl Jung explained the archetypal shadow, Melville and other writers used the shadow as a metaphor of negative traits repressed by the conscious mind, which must be faced and reconciled for psychological development to proceed. Likewise, the "Negro question" is a shadow that must be faced for America to develop its full potential. In 1926, the white building is rigid, the door is closed and the tambourine is silent.

Michael Hollister (2015)