

Racial Injustice and Violence: A Study of Sterling A. Brown

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Transfer

“Transfer,” a poem of nine balladic quatrain stanzas, employs the African American folk tradition that characterizes all the poetry of Sterling A. Brown. The poem is divided into two parts. The first part re-creates the event that caused a black man to be imprisoned, and the second part narrates the circumstances and consequences of his escape from prison. More significantly, the second part concludes with the hero’s folk wisdom concerning the directions and goals of African American life.

Brown published “Transfer” in 1975 in his *The Last Ride of Wild Bill and Eleven Narrative Poems*. It is a literary poem written in the style of the folk ballad. Brown was especially adept at and fond of adapting traditional folk forms such as the work song, folk song, ballads, and the blues in his poetry. These forms were especially expressive of the southern African American culture and ethos that Brown wished to evoke.

The Title

The title of the poem alludes to the last stanza, in which the former convict realizes that he needs to “transfer” from one line of thought and direction in his life to another. He senses that the direction of his life heretofore has been the wrong one for black people to follow in the United States. The term “transfer” also literally refers to the transfer (a piece of paper) that one receives when changing from one bus line to another.

“Transfer” is written in the standard third-person point of view of the ballad form, and the poet acts as the narrator who relates to the reader the poignant story of the unnamed black convict. In the first four stanzas, the poet reveals the circumstances that lead the black man to the conclusion he reaches in the final stanza.

Discussion of Stanzas

The first stanza relates that in a fit of possible absentmindedness, the young man forgets to say “sir” to a white man during the “Jim Crow” era in the South. As a result of his negligence, he is beaten with a crank by the motorman and clubbed by the conductor. Nevertheless, he survives and is sentenced to four years on the prison farm by a supposedly “merciful” judge for “bruising white knuckles” and inciting a riot on the Atlanta Peachtree line. In the third stanza, the poet states that the hero has been beaten so severely that his jawbone is displaced; he is deemed harmless and made a prison farm “trustee,”:

It must have been that the fellow was tongue-tied,
Or absent-minded, or daft with the heat,
But howsoeverbeit he didn't say sir,
So they took and bounced him out on the street.
And then the motorman brained him with his crank,
And the conductor clubbed him with his un,
But before they could place the nickels on his eyes,
The cops rushed up to see justice done.

The city-court judge was merciful to him:
Gave him just four years and suspended his fine,
For bruising white knuckles, inciting to riot,
And holding up traffic on the Peachtree line.

When the boy came to, he was still right skittish,
They figured they had got him rid of his harm,

By beating his head, and displacing his jawbone,
So, they made him a trusty on the prison-farm.

The second part of the poem begins with the fifth stanza. The hero mounts a horse and flees from prison to Atlanta, where he is taken in by the “folks” and fed, clothed, and hidden. He comes out only at night in the black neighbourhood, because the entire white policemen disappear from that part of town after dusk. The seventh stanza reveals that he begins preaching at the car stop.

The eighth and ninth stanzas relate the basic theme of the sermon he always preaches. The convict had thought that if he stayed in “his place” (followed all the laws of segregation and Jim Crow), he would be allowed to live in peace with his white overlords; now, however, he has come to the conclusion that he was on the wrong “line” (this line refers to the bus line), and that he needs to change directions because African Americans can no longer obey the old laws that afford them neither safety nor freedom:

But one day a red sun beat on the red hills
As he was in the pasture, haltering a mare,
And something went snap in his trusty old head
And he started a-riding away from there.

When he got to Atlanta, the folks took him in,
And fed him and clothed him, and hid him away;
And let him out only when the cops disappear
From the streets of Darktown at the dusk of day:

Then he goes to the car-stop and takes his stand,
And some call him daffy, and some call him smart,
But all have heard the one text he’s been preaching,
And some have the whole sermon down by heart:

“I stayed in my place, and my place stayed wid me,
Took what was dished, said I liked it fine:
Figgered they would see that I warn’t no trouble,
Figgered this must be the onliest line.”

“But this is the wrong line we been riding’,
This route doan git us where we got to go.
Got to git transferred to a new direction.
We can stand so much, then doan stan no mo’.”

Folk Ballad

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“Transfer” is a literary poem written in the style of the folk ballad. It is an adaptation of the traditional English ballad form, which is written in four-line stanzas with lines 1 and 3 having four beats and lines 2 and 4 rhyming, with three beats.

The traditional folk ballad tells an exciting story of the tragic and strange. Brown’s adaptation in “Transfer” follows this tradition in both form and content. The poet purposely divides the poem into two distinct sections with Roman numerals I and II separating the time sequence.

On Racial Injustice

The theme of the poem is racial injustice meted out to African Americans no matter how “well they behave.” Since one of the usual topics of a ballad is an event of historical importance to a nation or a people, the theme of Brown’s ballad is apropos the discrimination, suffering, and violence inflicted upon African Americans in the Southern states. The folk hero in the poem is the convict, who, after escaping, comes to the realization that African Americans have been on the wrong track in adapting to the restrictions of a segregated and discriminatory society, and who now finds it necessary to change directions that is, to transfer to a new train of thought.

Since the convict represents a black “Everyman” and his situation is one that was common to the life of the Southern African American, the poet uses the poem to condemn the general injustices suffered by blacks. Violence is a secondary theme in the poem, for in Part I, the hero is brained, clubbed, and beaten until he is senseless, and his jawbone is broken. It is ironic that only when the black man is beaten senseless can he become a trusty, and only if he is “skittish” can the whites be sure that he is harmless.

Darktown

Nevertheless, the hero is permanently neither senseless nor skittish, and his mind returns completely as a result of a long day in the hot sun. Clearly, the sun represents the light that kindles the hero’s intelligence and allows him to have the presence of mind to ride away. In the city of Atlanta, he is hidden away in “Darktown,” a name that symbolizes not only the race of its inhabitants but also their condition. Moreover, the hero cannot afford to come out during the daylight because he will be seen by the white policemen, and he feels safe in Darktown during the day. Hence, Darktown has an inverse symbolic meaning. Instead of being safe in the light, the hero is safe only in the dark, the darkness of the color of his skin and the skin of the residents who ensure his safety by feeding, clothing, and hiding him.

Transportation as a Symbol

Another prominent symbol used by the poet is transportation. Throughout the poem, all the prominent events occur in places where one can get on and ride somewhere. The hero is beaten at the bus stop by the motorman, rides away on a mare from the prison farm, and relates the wisdom of his epiphany at a car-stop. The final words of the hero express his understanding that African Americans have been riding on the wrong route, one that has failed to get them anywhere in American society. Therefore, the hero concludes that African Americans need a transfer to a new direction, not in place but in thought.

Language of Common Man

In order to relate the narrative and the poem to African American folk life and demonstrate the folk wisdom of the hero whose intelligence prevails despite his lack of formal education, the ballad uses the language of the common man. Words and phrases used to depict theme and setting appropriately express implicit and explicit folk meanings; terms such as “daft with the heat,” “brained with his crank,” “skittish,” “Darktown,” “daffy,” and “figgered” are used throughout the poem. In addition, words that refer to transportation abound in the text.

The last two stanzas of the poem further demonstrate Brown’s skilful use of the nuances of folk speech as a poetic device. He closes the stanzas with a proverb: “I stayed in my place, and my place stayed wid me,” The poem employs narrative devices characteristic of the ballad form. When the poet attempts to render the essence of the hero’s actual sermon at the car stop, Brown uses dialectal spellings such as “doan,” “wid,” “stan,” and “ma” to imitate folk speech. The poem stands out as an example of Brown’s characteristic ability to transcend folk material and language to express universal truths about injustice and human suffering. In addition, the poem explains African Americans’ ability to survive in a hostile universe while retaining and manifesting keen folk wisdom and intelligence.

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