
Review Of H. D.'S, The Walls Do Not Fall vs. Richard Wright's, I Have Seen Black Hands

Where you find power, you'll probably find oppression. According to dictionary.com, oppression can be defined as the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner. There will be different levels of it, sometimes slight hints and others severe loads. Oppression can largely shape a person with how they are placed and place themselves within society. Many don't realize the impacts of oppression, especially when it doesn't directly affect them. The way our institutions are created, particularly in America, many are taught to ignore oppression or to try to think around it. Two poems challenge this with their openness and honesty about brutal time periods in history where power intruded sociologically mindful.

H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) brings a lot to the table, more specifically, with her well-known and well-written poem "The Walls Do Not Fall." She carefully sections her poem into parts, where through poetry, she allows herself to express the different emotions being experienced during a historic crisis. The London Blitz was an event H.D., and many others, had to endure during World War II. This time period in London consisted of living with the frequent bombings during the war, a traumatizing period that is illuminated in this poem.

When reading "The Walls Do Not Fall", one can immediately see the explosions or destruction of war. On the surface, we see words like "tomb", symbolizing death, "ruin everywhere" and "fallen roof...open to the air" heavily encompasses the idea of destruction. Also, another line exemplifying this image of destruction is "to another cellar, to another sliced wall where poor utensils show like rare objects in a museum." H.D. is making the connection between the destroyed buildings to abstract art in museum as objects that are so destroyed by war that they are unrecognizable as their original form or shape. H.D. lets the reader's mind wander with the last line in that section as "what saved us? what for?" After this line, the reader is forced to wonder to themselves how are the survivors to feel, grieve, endure and eventually move on? Why were they the chosen survivors?

As the poem moves us through various parts, H.D. shifts from the main setting of the poem to it's themes of acceptance, survival, and then feelings of oppression. As the poem progresses, H.D. addresses how one might feel post-bombings. "Evil was active in the land, good was impoverished and sad," "ill promised adventure, good was smug and fat." An unusual but definitely genius approach with the contrasting sides of good and evil actually switching roles. In this situation, evil seems to offer more than good with additional insight to the victims' feelings of what could be, revenge.

However, when approaching the end of the poem, the idea of revenge actually is quickly put to the side. Gratefulness is what H.D. feels towards escaping and surviving, which she states numerous times throughout the poem. However, when approaching the middle of the poem, she might begins to confuse the reader when speaking of parasites or parasite-like things. A parasite is an organism that lives off another organism at that other organism's expense and she compares this to the victims losing everything, causing the bomb to mirror the acts of a parasite. The bomb's consequences are well known to all, yet many still utilize them to their own advantages. In the end, H.D. points out that "they" (the attackers) say "we" (the victims)

fight for breath but “we” fight for life. The large difference in life and breath is that one can simply be defined as living by breathing while the other suggests living by experiencing. With their actions, the attackers show that, to them, the victim’s lives don’t have value, so these bombs are hardly detrimental. The attackers held a form of oppression over the victims, since they had the power and resources to ambush them. The attackers took advantage of this. Oppression can also be detected in a poem by Richard Wright.

Richard Wright’s “I Have Seen Black Hands” is a poem written in 1934 that indirectly charts and analyzes different periods and events in Black history. On the surface of the poem, the speaker is conducting their teachings to those unaware of the many unspoken and ignored events within Black history. The unknown suffering Blacks have endured throughout the years is finally acknowledged. Wright speaks of the numerous hardships adding gruel and raw details about each and every one of them. Because of a Black history course I’ve taken, I am actually able to connect the details with historical terms and events. I can see that the speaker ties in specific things like convict leasing, sharecropping, the Great Migration, World War II, Civil War and Civil Rights Movement and many more events that don’t make it to the U.S. History textbook or are extensively covered. The speaker is not only trying to unveil the actual history but also portray it through the eyes of the Blacks that actually endured it and bring forth their experiences of surviving and currently surviving oppression. Specific language affirms and highlights this unnoted history.

In the beginning of every stanza the speaker states “I am black and have seen black hands, millions and millions of them.” The speaker is stating that they are desensitized to seeing so many Blacks, especially in the positions they were in during the time of the poem being written, in the 1930’s. “Fought and killed and conquered nations who were customers for the goods black hands made” is a line that clarifies how Blacks created the goods being sold to consumers and now Blacks were at war with the consumers. Blacks were forced into performing the most and the more difficult tasks.

“Reaching hesitantly out of the days of slow death for the goods they had made, but the bosses warned that the goods were private and did not belong to them.” This line defines the act of sharecropping, which was another form of forced labor that debilitated freed slaves’ paths to success by limiting their abilities to carry on through deception and fraud. Not only do these lines illustrate adversity, but they highlight intense levels of oppression. The dehumanization and disrespect placed upon Blacks is characterized in this poem. Wright allows the reader to overlap the hidden history with this injustice through his selectiveness in how he delivers the history, careful to add that not only is this history unspoken of, but it is unspoken of for a reason.

Both poems exemplify their oppressors’ ability to strike and control them on any occasion. This fear derives from man-made destruction, both physical and mental. H.D. and Wright’s poem both contain incredibly descriptive language of the suffering of common people, and possible the same suffering repeating constantly.

I believe that throughout H.D.’s poem, the speaker is accepting the event they are experiencing but, still carrying hope that they will overcome. The title of the poem, “The Walls Do Not Fall,” may translate to “we will still carry on.”

Wright takes a different approach than H.D. where he is expressing anger about Blacks being trapped and forced to build the foundation of a system that may never benefit them. However,

while this poem does depict the preposterous conditions that were placed on Blacks in numerous dictatorial countries, it also reflects a similar themes in H.D.'s poem, which is resilience.

Both poems emphasize the notion of survival, thriving and carrying on even after being chewed, spit out and stepped on. Just because one tries to erase what makes you human and swipes the freedom that comes with being human, doesn't necessarily mean that progression from that is nonexistent. Yes, escaping oppression and continuing on from it is extremely difficult. But, the first step in that process of moving on is reclaiming what occurred, accepting that it happened and that is now forever a part of you. Our hardships are what truly shapes us and how we recover will determine how far we can rise from these situations. Many can learn from both H.D. and Wright, who both wish to educate their readers that resilience is key to survival, and it may just be the only way to truly heal.

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