

Prose Commentary: “The Dragon Can’t Dance”

The extract from Earl Lovelace’s novel, “The Dragon Can’t Dance”, is a highly descriptive prose which reveals the feelings the character Aldrick Prospect has for the loss of his community’s traditional warrior mentality. The piece of prose provides us with a third-person yet detailed account of how ancient customs in Aldrick’s home (presumably Trinidad and Tobago, as the capital of Port of Spain is mentioned as being a part of his locality) are disappearing in the face of more modern and temperate customs. Aldrick, the protagonist of the prose, yearns to reignite the people’s passion for celebrating traditional carnivals, which he portrays in uniquely violent, sinister, vivid and energetic depiction. He has a sense of nostalgia for the past, when carnivals were more beastly. Even with this rather austere rendering of past carnivals, Lovelace insists that ancient traditions supersede the significance, awe and entertainment of modern carnivals, which present ‘clowns’ and ‘fancy robbers’. Aldrick laments at the loss of almost antediluvian traditions, and his sadness is effectively conveyed in the intensely passionate prose.

The passage is structured in two paragraphs, each comprising of twenty lines. The equal organization of the passage aids in making it clearer and more coherent. Lovelace is able to clearly contrast two opposing carnivals (past carnivals and the carnival Aldrick is experiencing in the present), thus allowing readers to make clear distinctions between them. The tone of the prose is generally calm and monotonous, with the narrator exposing a slight sense of dread towards what has become of the famous carnival. Although the language of the passage is generally simple and direct so as to give the reader a clear impression, Lovelace also adds a few colloquial phrases which originate from the West Indies. In Line 23, for example, ‘calypsos of rebellion’ is mentioned, describing Philo’s lost sense of tradition. In Line 30, ‘jab jabs’ are mentioned as being part of the present carnival, again instilling a sense that the narrator is conversing with the reader in a casual manner appropriate for the West Indies.

Rhythm in the passage is achieved through a multifarious number of methods. Most sentences are lengthy, and pauses are created with the frequent use of commas, which are regularly spaced to create a successful rhythm. It is the usage of commas in long sentences which give the passage most of its flow, as it creates a calm and slow-paced atmosphere, in which the narrator appears to be intensely contemplative. The lack of punctuation, however, aids in speeding the pace. Repetition is also used to create rhythm, as it accelerates the pace. Usage of this can be observed in Line 6, where ‘and’ is repeated three times, and in line 6 to 7, in which ‘back’ is repeated twice. Rhyming, especially in Line 1, provides the prose with a smoother flow, when the ‘backs of these thin shacks’ are described. Rhyming, however, is not a very significant element in the passage, and usage of it is minimal. The listing of similar terms is evident throughout the passage and clearly generates a rhythmic beat. Line 10 contains a quintessential example of this technique, where ‘the village, the tribe, warriorhood and femininity’ are grouped. Alliteration is applied for the same reason of creating a smooth beat, as it connects neighboring words more intensely, as is apparent in Line 1, with the phrase ‘Monday morning’.

The usage of imagery in the passage is very subtle, and mainly utilized to describe what carnivals used to be like. The main symbol used to represent ancient customs is the dragon costume that Aldrick wears in preparation of the carnival. When Aldrick wears the dragon costume, he feels 'a sense of entering a sacred mask that invested him with an ancestral authority', accentuating the amount of reverence that only Aldrick feels for ancient tradition. In Line 19 to 20, the dragon is again used to illustrate Aldrick's attraction to ancient carnivals, as the narrator describes his aspiration to reestablish old traditions 'like the open claws at a dragon's hand, threatening destruction'. The terms 'open claws' and 'destruction' serves to reinforce the link between ancient customs with violence and evil. Yet, even with this rather negative characterization of ancient customs, Aldrick urges people to practice them, so as 'to let them see their beauty', as is shown in Line 18. In this line, however, ancient customs are linked with the release of 'beauty'. The fusion of both violence and beauty to depict the carnival celebrated in bygone years creates a particularly strong oxymoron that enhances the mystery and virility of ancient customs. The image of the ancient carnival as evil, violent, and mysterious is further emphasized by terms such as 'stickfighters' in Line 25, 'warriorhood' and 'devils' in Line 26, and 'black' in Line 27, which are used by the narrator to recount an actual description of the ancient carnival. The usage of imagery is a vital component of enhancing the depiction of the ancient carnival, as it adds elements of mystery and fear.

Personification is another literary device used by Lovelace for a variety of reasons. In Line 1, the narrator describes Monday as the 'morning breaks upon the backs of these thin shacks', giving 'morning' the ability to physically influence the structure of 'shacks'. The phrase exudes a slight sense violence with the use of the word 'breaks'. With this, one is reminded of the physically violent ancient carnivals. In Line 4, personification is again used in a similar method, with the term 'awakening Hill'. Bestowing a hill with a human action gives the prose a mysterious and lively quality, which supports the main theme of attempting to prompt a return of primeval and violent traditions to Aldrick's homeland.

The main theme of ancient carnivals in contrast with present-day carnivals is focused throughout the passage, partially due to repetition. 'Rebellion' is a word frequently used in the prose, and underscores the violent nature of ancient carnivals which Aldrick tries to revive. 'Black' is another term that is apparent in copious amounts throughout the passage. The repetition of black heightens the sense of mystery and evil surrounding ancient carnivals. The author Lovelace, primarily to add emotion and drama to the passage, also practices the literary device of onomatopoeia. The terms 'crow', in Line 2, 'beating' in Line 4, 'cries' in Line 9, and 'crack' and 'tinkling' in Line 31 exemplify the use of onomatopoeia, and present readers with a more dramatic narration. Onomatopoeia also amplifies the amount of energy which the ancient carnival contains. All these literary devices effectively give the passage a somewhat poetic quality that enriches the impression of the carnivals to readers.

The passage is a narrative account of how one person (Aldrick Prospect) yearns to revive his community's ancient carnivals, in the face of new, more peaceful carnivals. This ancient carnival originates from Africa, which is presumably where Aldrick and his community of people derive from. His longing for this has a certain dream-like quality, because of the mournful and monotonous tone. The consequential implication is that Aldrick yearning is more a pipe dream rather than a goal, and indeed, his desire for a

return to ancient traditions are unachievable in the end. The narrator reveals that ancient traditions have always been a part of the people of the community, yet it has been suppressed in the face of modernization. This so-called 'warrior mentality' has, instead, remained 'if not in brain, certainly in blood', connoting that people still retain a primitive instinct which could be freed. The notion is starkly similar to Golding's novel "Lord of The Flies", in which children who were taken away from their civilized atmosphere and placed in a natural environment devoid of human interference become more violent, evil, and generally primitive. In the passage, however, it is only Aldrick which retains and exhibits his primeval instincts, as he fails to make other people behave like him. As observed in Line 35, 'the dragon alone was left to carry the message', depicting Aldrick's loss of support. Ultimately, even Aldrick himself admits that his thirst for ancient traditions is diminishing, as it states in Lines 39 to 40 that 'maybe he didn't believe in the dragon anymore'. The last believer in ancient traditions- the dragon, has lost not only support for his cause, but perhaps even his own heart, as the forces of modernization triumph against the people's original roots. The basic theme presented is the loss of culture and primitive passion, which have simply developed into more pacific actions and behaviors with the progression of time. The people's need to 'rebel' and fight has abated, and resultantly there is less of a need to demonstrate violence and fear. Aldrick is plainly a character who is trapped in an age where ancient violent traditions hold no practical value, thus creating a mournful atmosphere of suffering.

In conclusion, I can assert that the passage from the novel "The Dragon Can't Dance", by Lovelace, is exquisite in its depiction of one man's loss of identity. The passage utilizes a combination of different literary devices to instill a lugubrious and melancholic atmosphere to perfectly suit the theme, which is the loss of ancient traditions. This unique theme is thus conveyed to readers in a very idiosyncratic yet effective manner, and the author's message is successfully expressed. On the whole, the passage is able to elucidate the complicated theme of the loss of tradition due to civilization in a simple and artistic and effective manner.