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History of the Caribbean

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Negritude and *The Black Pen*

The emotions toward having black skin can only be known through firsthand experience. This disposition is known as negritude. Negritude refers to the values and beliefs held in black culture and heritage. These feelings shape a person's worldview, and the way they understand society. This effect can be seen through art, music, and writing. The attitudes and feelings of negritude can be seen through the emotional writing in Birago Diop's poem *The Black Pen*.

Author and poet Diop knows the weight of negritude personally. Diop was born in Senegal, West Africa, in 1906. Senegal has a strong, French heritage, due to being colonized. The French colonization in Senegal helps to solidify the feelings of negritude due to the struggles faced by the African natives that had to live and conform to French rulers. He studied at the National Veterinary School of Toulouse ("Birago"). His West African upbringing instilled in him a strong sense of negritude, due to being raised as a black man within a black culture and community. Much of literature, especially poetry, is

fueled by strong emotion. This is what gives it the weight to affect the people that read and interact with it. Diop uses a strong pathos rhetoric in his writing to produce emotion from his readers.

Diop articulates his thoughts and feelings in his poem through the use of metaphors and other figures of speech. Although he never explicitly writes what he is trying to express, he makes the connection very clear through the tone in which he writes. He uses a desolate tone to set a serious mood that helps engage with the readers and keeps their attention through the poem. Toward the end of the poem, Diop's tone changes into a more optimistic or hopeful tone.

Diop also incorporates picturesque vocabulary to help one to visualize the scene he is portraying. He incorporates the use of imagination, which is something author Richard Price does as well. Price wrote a monograph, *The Convict and the Colonel*, and uses imaginative history and language as a way to explain negritude, and life in the Caribbean during the twentieth century. Diop does the same, by using imaginative language to describe his own personal attitude toward negritude.

The purpose of this piece is to bring attention and awareness to the feelings that Diop has, since he is not the only one who feels this way. Millions of other black people have these same emotions, but no platform on which to express themselves. Diop's poem helps others to know they are not alone, and not the only ones who feel the way they do.

In Diop's first stanza of *The Black Pen*, he repeats the term 'Black Label'. Black Label is a type of scotch that Diop says is his usual drink. Drinking alcohol often can be seen as a use for numbing an emotional pain. The term "Black Label" can also be seen as a play on words. It can be inferred that Diop feels he has a "black label", or that people only see him as black and nothing else. He goes on to say "What's the use of changing?", adding a feeling of hopelessness. He may feel that there is no point in changing his attitude or actions, since he will always have a "black label", where people only see his outwardly appearance, not his accomplishments. He feels as though people only see his black skin, and fail to acknowledge the person inside. This may lead him to feel isolated or forlorn. His second stanza of *The Black Pen* shows the same melancholy emotions.

Diop uses words with a eerie emotion in his second stanza. He writes, "On the haunted breadfruit tree the initiated blackbirds coming to pray". The use of the words "haunted" and "blackbirds" are terms that can be used to set a darker mood. This mood helps draw readers in and focus on what he is trying to express. The use of the term "blackbird" as opposed to simply saying "bird" follows along with the theme of his poem: negritude. "Blackbird" is a symbolic reference to how he feels is he judged. Not just as a man, but a black man. The use of the word "haunted" may correlate with how Diop feels about the negative associations that people in this time placed on being black, and how poorly black people were treated. He feels as though he is haunted by unjust

prejudice, and a sorrowful history. Diop's third stanza sets the same tone as the previous stanza.

The last line of Diop's third stanza, he says "taboos of my Afro-Amerindian childhood". Afro-Amerindian is the mixture of a person who is African, but also American Indian. This line refers to how what he did as a child in his culture is still considered different or taboo to those who do not understand what it is like to grow up in West Africa like he did. His normalities were other cultures taboos, adding a painful stigma to what may have been a happy or normal childhood. Even if he is to reflect happily on his adolescence, he still carries the weight and discomfort of not fitting in with other children through their childhoods, making Diop feel like an outsider and different from the rest. He does not feel as though he fits in with the Africans or the American Indians, since he is a combination of both. Being a mixture of two different nationalities can cause inner turmoil when a person tries to discover themselves, since they do not fit into a specific category. The final stanza of Diop's poem has a slightly more hopeful tone.

Diop's fourth stanza ends the poem on both a more hopeful, yet still sorrowful note. He writes "My heart keeps alive the two-fold nostalgia for the (child's) very first awakening to the world's beauty, and for the first Negro who died at the front, or who died crossing the equator". He is saying his heart is being kept alive for both the allure and the darkness of the history of negritude, which pulls all of the previous emotion into

a more optimistic tone. Diop's heart is kept alive and filled through the good memories and feelings of being a child, and simply being alive in a beautiful world. In the same beat, his heart is kept alive and filled with the aching of the sorrow of the black men and women who died crossing the equator, torn from their homes, simply because they were black. He can feel and appreciate the emotion from both sides.

Throughout the entirety of this poem, *The Black Pen*, Diop expresses the feelings and attitude toward negritude throughout his life. These feelings are expressed through his poem in the different tones and figures of speech he uses. Although negritude may be a hard concept to fully comprehend if it is not experienced first hand, authors like Diop help give others a glimpse into the reality of negritude.

Work Cited

“Birago Diop.” *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/birago-diop.

The Black Pen

So it's Black Label
I'll have the usual
Black Label to drink
What's the use of changing?

On the haunted breadfruit tree
the initiated blackbirds
coming to pray
to pray in Creole
so that the creamed corn
the Mass during Lent shall be quite ready to be savored

A midnight that from then on could never possibly be tolerated
by the sleepless power
of the tensely alert taboos
of my Afro-Amerindian childhood

My heart keeps alive
the two-fold nostalgia
for the (child's) very first awakening to the world's beauty,
and for the first Negro who died at the front,
or who died crossing the equator (during the Middle Passage)