

CREATIVE SCHOLARSHIP

On Neoclassicism and the Numbing of the Negro Mind

Joe Hughes

Virginia Tech, US
jlhughesiii@vt.edu

Neoclassical art of the 19th century utilized classical techniques that highlighted the norms of western culture. This umbrella of technique was applied to Americans of both European and African descent. Black neoclassical artists were constantly negotiating between the prescribed rules of the white art world and their unique personal experiences with black culture. As a result, Eurocentric constraints limited the African American voice and resulted in African Americans framing their perspective within a Eurocentric lens. "On Neoclassicism and the Numbing of the Negro Mind" is a commentary on the stifling effect of westernized expectations on black artists. This free-verse poem explores the relationship between white influences and the black artist while acknowledging the contradiction therein. The poem concludes by praising the enduring nature of black artists' unique perspective.

Keywords: Poetry; African American Art; African Studies; Cultural Writing; Black Culture

The Father runs his finger through my curls
and tells me of the ways that the pencil should feel
when I am to grab it and speak of
Michelangelo
or Washington or Zeus,
the men that spread ivory spores
through my blackened mind,
and corrupt the synapses of the back of my stem.

White men wrestle and bellow
in the back of my mind,
reminding me that they are idols
and I am an afterthought in the world of whiteness.
Crevices of the blackened mind once filled with tar
are now ridden with marble, limestone, and gravel.
I ponder these remedies in half-words
as my eyelids fall and open like the sun between clouds.

It is only when I rest
that I envision a darker world—
muddy fields with rough rocks and wild bears,
and blackbirds flying with no hurry.
But even in sleep,
they are blotched away in favor of white dandelions
and poop from bald eagles.

From my bed, I watch the Father
as he moves to my brother.
his legs clumsy, stumbling stilts,

hurrying in breath-rushed steps
towards the head of curls.
Oh, how he loves the curls
but denies the blackness that creates them.

The Father is a curious man.
He hacks blood and spews words from his mouth,
telling me from his cobbled teeth
the healing ways of whiteness.
He spits phlegm at the idea of black scars
and scoffs when I cry for the past,
proclaiming superiority over my fleeting thoughts
in favor of
the beauty of his intellect;
how white history will cure the world
and usher a period of enlightenment
and respect.

Yet his wan face speaks a paradox;
whiteness the cure but whiteness is sickness;
how is the sick to be cured by the sicker?
Don't doctors clean their hands
before operating on the ill?
Put me on display, Father.

But not by your hands,
for I only accept the darker world
to craft the image of the dark;
the strokes of brown pastels on canvas
and the etching of eternity into mahogany.

I picture the world through shadow
to bring forth the rough cuts and blunt blows,
the stained reds and brutal browns
that show that my art does not kneel,
that greatness is not whiteness.

There is ever a latency
of the dark intelligence
and the subdued blackbird.
Oh, how the bird strives to be unbound,
to be itself in the face of darkness,
and to know the face he holds
is not the only of its kind.

This is all that I wish for, Father;
for you to use your whiteness you love
to turn numbing into praising
and to bring forth darkness,
which the dumbed negro mind may say
that you created.

Competing Interests

The publisher is committed to transparent and bias-free research. To ensure that all publications are as open as possible all authors, reviewers and editors are required to declare any interests that could appear to compromise, conflict or influence the validity of the publication. This process is designed to reinforce the readers' trust in the research data.

How to cite this article: Hughes, Joe. "On Neoclassicism and the Numbing of the Negro Mind." *Philologia* 12, no. 1 (2020): pp. 11–13.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/ph.227>

Submitted: 31 March 2020

Accepted: 31 March 2020

Published: 20 April 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.