

*The Self and Other in the
Poetry of Lucille Clifton*

Dr. Amir Sh. El-Komy

الملخص باللغة العربية

الذات والآخر في شعر

لوسيل كليفتون

يحاول هذا البحث

إظهار كيف تمكنت

وسيل كليفتون من

التغلب على أي مشاعر

سيئة تجاه الآخر والعيش

والحب والأمل على

الرغم من تاريخ طويل من

العبودية والحرمان عانته

هي وشعبها .

Abstract

The Self and Other in the Poetry of Lucille Clifton

This paper tries to show how Lucille Clifton has managed to overcome any ill feelings towards the other and to live and love and hope despite the long history of slavery and deprivation she and her people suffered.

With a publishing career dating from 1969, Clifton¹ (1936-2010) is the author of twelve volumes of poetry and a memoir. Several of her books have received Pulitzer Prize nominations. In 1999, she was elected to the Board of Chancellors of the Academy of American Poets and named a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. The list of honors is long. The scantiness of the critical response to her work is in sharp contrast to the popularity of her writings. Her work has been anthologized in many books, including Louis Simpson's *Introduction to Poetry* and Dudley Randall's *The Black Poets*. Clifton enjoys the distinction of being Poet Laureate of Maryland.

Theoretically speaking, the Other is not monolithic: it can be God, nature, community and the 'self' itself. The dichotomization of the relationship of

the Self and the Other has been prevalent throughout Western and Oriental thought. Throughout Oriental and Western history, dualistic thinking has privileged one concept over another: mind over matter; soul over the body; man over nature; spirit over matter; supernatural over natural; white over black; rich over poor; the dichotomy of the one and the many, the self over the other. This is a long tradition, Hegel, and Sartre will serve as representative examples of this tradition.

Hegel sees the relationship of the self to the other in terms of the relationship of Master and Slave. He sees it as an ontological dialectic. He argues that no individual will rest satisfied with a conquest that fails to secure the conscious acknowledgement of other men. Hence, there is a struggle for both power and recognition. In this struggle some will take greater risks than others. Those who risk the least will become the

slaves or bondsman of those who risk their lives. In order to preserve his life, the slave submits to the master, who regards the slave as nothing but a means to his own designs. The slave is forced to work, while the master can enjoy leisure in the knowledge that the slave is reshaping the natural resources to provide the fruits of his work for the master to consume.

Sartre gives an analysis of the experience of the self/other relationship in which as he says:

I apprehend myself as I am perceived by another consciousness – that is, as an object reified and deprived of the transcendence that is central to my own sense of my being. This is the experience of being looked at by someone else. In relation to this intrusive "other" I can adopt either of two courses of action. I can try to dominate it and suppress its transcendence by which my own is threatened, or I can try to make myself into an object to be dominated by the liberty of the other person. In either case, I am destined to fail because I must recognize my liberty

(or that of the other) in order to suppress it.²

In short, it is a relationship of sadomasochism.

In the East, the situation was no better. Atrocities and injustices were committed against the Other. This can be deduced from Islam injunction to the people to treat the Other (neighbors) well. The Holy Qur'an also is full of verses to this effect. In Surah 49 (Al-Hujurat) God says:

(يا أيها الناس إنا خلقناكم من ذكر وأنثى وجعلناكم شعوباً وقبائل لتعارفوا إن أكرمكم عند الله أتقاكم إن الله عليم خبير) سورة الحجرات : الآية ١٣

13. O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allah is that (believer) who has At-Taqwa [i.e. he is one of the Muttaqun (the pious. See V.2:2)]. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, Well-Acquainted (with all things).

**(Muhammed Taji-ud-Din Al-Hilali and
Dr. Muhammed Muhsin Khan.)**

(يا أيها الذين آمنوا لا يسخر قوم من قوم عسى أن يكونوا خيراً
منهم ولا نساء من نساء عسى أن يكن خيراً منهن ولا تلمزوا
أنفسكم ولا تنازروا بالألقاب بئس الاسم الفسوق بعد الإيمان
ومن لم يتب فأولئك هم الظالمون). سورة الحجرات : الآية ١١

11. O you who believe! Let not a group scoff at another group, it may be that the latter are better than the former. Nor let (some) women scoff at other women, it may be that the latter are better than the former. Nor defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames. How bad is it to insult one's brother after having Faith [i.e. to call your Muslim brother (a faithful believer) as: "O sinner", or "O wicked"]. And whosoever does not repent, then such are indeed Zalimun (wrong-doers, etc.).

(إن الذين آمنوا والذين هادوا والصابئين والنصارى والمجوس
والذين أشركوا إن الله يفصل بينهم يوم القيامة إن الله على كل
شيء شهيد). سورة الحج : الآية ١٧

17. Verily, those who believe (in Allah and in His Messenger Muhammad), and those who are Jews, and the Sabians, and the Christians, and the Majus (Magians), and those who worship others besides Allah, truly, Allah will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection. Verily, Allah is over all things a Witness.

“But now and then it is possible to observe,” as L. Trilling has observed,

the moral life in process of revising itself, perhaps by reducing the emphasis it formerly placed upon one or another of its elements,³ perhaps by inventing and adding to itself a new element, some mode of conduct or of feeling which hitherto it had not regarded as essential to virtue. (Lionel Trilling 1)

Nowadays, in the era of postmodernism, we see that the moral life is in ceaseless flux and the values of the nineteenth century are not those of the twentieth century. The former put its emphasis on the values of efficiency and progress, its slogan is that the ends

justifies the means; the latter stresses values, its motto: the end is part of the means.

Postmodern ethics also proposes, through contemporary scholars a new dismantling of the long-established dichotomy between Self and Other. Those scholars reject a much wider distinction between eastern and western styles of thinking. What results from this religious and philosophical perspectives is a distinctively non-dogmatic mode of intellectual inquiry.

In an interview, with William Packard Robert Lax considers this "vision" in relation to the whole of humanity and the role of literature and the arts:

When we say that we are all brothers and sisters, what we're really saying is that we are parts of each other; that we are related to each other; and we are related to each other as parts to a whole. ... We contribute to each other's lives in spiritual or psychological ways. We share each other's dreams and we

exchange dreams, and visions. And as we share, the general vision we have becomes larger and sharper, becomes clearer in showing us who we are, and what we are – not only individually, but who are as one being, as a whole person, one humanity. It all becomes clearer through this exchange of dreams and visions. And one of the regular places for this exchange is in what we call literature – in poetry, drama, in novels – in literature and the fine arts (25).

Now one hears slogans such as 'we are all responsible for each other' and 'we are all gathered together on one and the same shore.'

One postmodern philosopher of ethics is Emmanuel Lévinas. His radical reconceptualization of subjectivity utilizes metaphorical language of *the face*, in order to disrupt the humanist notion of the Self as isolated and autonomous, and to replace the primacy of the ontological being with the "otherwise than being." An intersubjectivity of responsibility for the other, prior to freedom – the primacy of ethics. The thought of Lévinas,

according to Jacques Derrida, "has awakened us" to a radical reconceptualization of subjectivity as "an 'unlimited' responsibility that exceeds and precedes my freedom" (3). According to Lévinas, to be human is not first to be; rather, to be human is to "always already be responsible for the other." In other words, ethics precedes and exceeds being; ethics is "better" than being, "otherwise" than being. The assertion of the other's right to be problematizes the humanist view of free will: the other's right to exist precedes and exceeds a human subject's right to exist.

Lévinas's conceptualization of ethics beyond being, otherwise, than being, also reflects an all-encompassing view of the "basic act of man" in relation to the "Infinite." Lévinas finds infinite ethical responsibility for the other to be the norm, and that perceiving ethics, as somehow rare or secondary, is simply

impossible. He states: "the Infinite comes in the signifyingness of the face. The face *signifies* the Infinite. It never appears as a theme, but in this ethical signifyingness itself; that is, in the fact that the more I am just the more I am responsible; one is never quits with regard to the Other" (Ethics, 105).

The speculation that the face signifies the Infinite has its roots in Eastern thought, for example the passage in the Qur'an: "wheresoever you turn is the face of Allah". Lévinas may have come across this idea through Goethe's translation of this idea:

Gottes ist der Orient!

Gottes ist der Okzident!

Nord- und südliches Gelände

Roht im Frieden seiner Hände.

(ولله المشرق والمغرب فأينما تولوا فثم وجه الله إن الله واسع

عليم). سورة البقرة : الآية ١١٥

115. And to Allâh belong the east and the west, so wherever you turn

(yourselves or your faces) there is the Face of Allâh.

Lévinas may have also come across this idea in the French translation of the Qur'an:

115. A Allah seul appartient L'Est et l'Quest. Où que vous vous tourniez, la face d'Allah est donc là, car Allah a la grâce immense; Il est Omniscient. (Muhammed Taji-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Dr. Muhammed Muhsin Khan.)

Such vision is found in the poetry of Lucille Clifton that engages the spiritual and the ethical as inseparable. Her poetry sets the two in play. She is a carrier of vision. Critics have not given Clifton's poetry its due attention, partly because it seems too simple to require or reward analysis. But this paper challenges this dismissal and argues that her poetry's aesthetic is complex, but it is also subtle. Her poetry might be called the poetry of spiritual realism.

In a conversation with Eisa Davis, Clifton says of the function of poetry that "The poem, I think, the thing that poetry can do, is speak for those who have not yet found their ability to speak And to say you are not alone" (1071). She argues that poetry should be like mirrors and windows. Mirrors in which people can see themselves, windows through which they can see the world.

Recently responding to the question of Joyce Johnson, "Why do you write?" Clifton answered, "I write to celebrate life" (70). This personal sense of celebration, this affirmation of black life, is apparent in much of her work. Her vision is not impaired by excessive emotion, for she sees all too clearly the bitterness and pains which spring from racial discrimination; however, she consciously chooses to emphasize Black life positively, thereby rewriting – poetically – the reality of Black people

through emphasis on their strength and beauty.

Clifton has the capacity to transform us from fragmentation of reality to wholeness of spirit. Thus, in the poem elliptically entitled "I. at creation," in her 1987 volume *Next*, when she begins with "I and my body," one might think of the traditional duality of body and soul, but Clifton draws them together instead of being in opposition. Hence, this applies to the whole poem:

*... i and my body rise
with the dusky beasts
with eve and her brother
to gasp in
the unsubstantial air
and evenly begin the long
slide out of paradise.
all life is life.
all clay is kin and kin.*⁴

Her poetry animates and celebrates. The genesis of this celebration in Clifton's poetry seems to spring from her expressed world view. In a recent

taped interview, she said that “we must come to understand that we are more than today, and our lives are more than today” (Johnson 75). This is the work of her spirit: when one feels himself more than himself, this is a sign of one’s spirit. This phenomenon is always used to prove the existence of soul/spirit. She is concerned with the danger of our becoming disconnected from our distant and recent past. As a poet, Clifton takes responsibility for seeing beyond the obvious. She says that “it is her artistic responsibility to bring more order into the universe” (Johnson75). She sees it as worthy of notice that “we still *do* live and love and dance and party and hope, despite the long history of slavery and deprivation we have suffered” (Johnson 75). She always contrasts static images of this dejection with lively images of great joy; an early poem about her poetic vocation is "prayer," which asks a listener to "lighten up," wonders why

his hand is so heavy on "just poor / me,"
and receives a response.

answer
this is the stuff
i made the heroes out of
all the saints
and prophets and things
had to come by
this

She thinks of herself as fulfilling the function of Prometheus who stole fire from Olympus and gave it to humankind. Her name "Lucille" which is derived from the Latin for "bright light," shares the same etymology of "Lucifer": the root "leuk" in Indo-European etymology means: light, luminary, luminous, light, brightness.

It is claimed that Gnostic Christianity, up to the Fourteenth Century, mystic Meister Eckhart interpreted the name of Lucifer as a bringer of enlightenment, a hero, savoir, and revealer of sacred mysteries. To this effect, Cheryl Wall writes that

“later in her career, Clifton becomes fascinated by the etymology of the name "Lucille," which is derived from the Latin for "bright light" (526). Thus, in a poem published in *An Ordinary Woman*, she honors her foremother and her name:

light
on my mother's tongue
breaks through her soft
extravagant hip
into life.
Lucille
she calls the light,
which was the name
of the grandmother
who waited by the crossroads
in Virginia
and shot the whiteman off his horse,
killing the killer of sons.
light breaks from her life
to her lives...

Among the things that crystallize her vision of spiritual realism her largest work now is the ten-poem "Tree of Life" sequence, a lyric re-imagining of the role

of Lucifer in Eden. "How art thou fallen from heaven, oh Lucifer, son of the morning," cries Isaiah. Clifton's interpretation of the myth makes Lucifer at once light, lightning, and snake, illuminator of mankind.

Clifton's possession of and by the spirit of Lucifer, whose name echoes hers, and who is "six-fingered" like her, is an identification with masculine creativity. When the rather neoplatonic seraphim ponder "was it the woman / enticed you to leave us," Lucifer confirms and globalizes his sexuality:

*bearer of lightning
and of lust
thrust between the
legs of the earth
into this garden
phallus and father
doing holy work
oh sweet delight
oh eden*

Technically speaking, her poems do not deviate significantly in style or music

from the rhythm and speech pattern of African-American idioms, folk songs, and spirituals. The poems are short, unrhymed, the lines are between two and four beats. The sentences are always direct, the punctuation light, the vocabulary a mix of standard English and black vernacular. Nothing is capitalized. Some poems have titles, others not. Alicia Ostriker commenting on Clifton's style writes:

The work of a minimalist artist like Clifton makes empty space resonate. A spacious silence is not mere absence of noise, but locates us as it were on a cosmic stage. We are meant to understand the unsaid, to take our humble places with a sense of balance and belonging instead of the anxiety and alienation promoted by more conspicuously sublime and ambitious artistries. Omissions, as Marianne Moore remarks in quite another context, are not accidents; and as William Carlos Williams observes, in this mode, perfection is basic (41)

A poetic technique almost always relates to the poet's metaphysics. The critic's task is to define the latter before

evaluating the former. Now, it is immediately obvious that Clifton's metaphysics is a metaphysics of immanence.

I

As (the proverb goes) all roads lead to Rome, so do all road lead to the poet's metaphysics: her/his concept of God and nature. Clifton's universe has a mystical unity; no part of it can be altered without effecting the rest. From this concept of mystical unity comes the idea of unity of the creator and creation. Jeannine Thyreen-Mizingou, on this topic, writes:

Clifton's "the lesson of the falling leaves" is a succinct expression of the oneness of God's grace, as well as the interconnectedness of humanity, nature, and God. The simple lines of the poem are contingent upon one another in a profound way; the poem begins with an element of nature (the leaves), moves to an abstract concept of love, then another which is faith, then another concept of grace, and grace is equated with god, and the poem ends on the individual "i" of the poem who agrees with the "leaves,"

thus making the poem return again to the leaves, creating a cyclical, perfectly contained whole. This poem has no room nor cause for hierarchy: leaves let go to love, to faith, to grace, to God, and the “i” agrees with them. This cyclical motion and communal unity has no set divisions, though identities are still differentiated:

the leaves believe

such letting go is love

such love is faith

such faith is grace

such grace is god

i agree with the leaves. (91)

Clifton concept of God transcends religious orthodoxy. It embraces all faiths: ancient and modern and all between. Her concept of God is inspired by Old Testament prophets, Jesus and Kali, the Hindu goddess. She perceives “the light” in the miracle of ordinary things and the divinity of ordinary people.

II

Clifton spiritualizes nature by associating Jesus with the seasons of spring. Her poem “spring song”

celebrates Jesus using vernacular speech. It has no punctuation, no capitalization – except for “Jesus”. Jesus and spring become synonymous in the poem: “the green of “Jesus” / is breaking the ground. ...” Jesus has a sweet aroma, is delicious, and embodies festive music. Clifton locates within the very body of Jesus this awakening spring song and activity; it is Jesus’ body that has graced them and has allowed “spring” to manifest itself. It is in the body of Jesus that “the world is turning” and that “the future is possible” (*Good Woman* 106).

The incarnated grace of Christ that Clifton’s poetry celebrates is one that is intimate, near, personalized, and worthy of passionate response: in “God send Easter” the persona reflects upon the celebration they will have once the Easter season is near. They will “lace the jungle on” and passionately celebrate its coming. And such a celebration creates

in the bodies and souls of those who gather a brilliance and a glory, suggesting that human beings are saved by the grace of the resurrection of Christ, and are fulfilled, made “brilliant,” and become a part of the glory of God’s grace: when God sends Easter, they will

*[...] step out
brilliant as birds
against the concrete country
feathers waving as [they]
dance toward jesus
sun reflecting mango
and apple as [they]
glory in [their] skin (Good Woman77).*

The poem unites the beauty of creation with the Creator, rather than isolating one from the other.

Hilary Holladay recognizes “That ‘the light’ that came to Lucille Clifton, to quote the title of cycle of poems, is spritually heterodox, and she teases out references to the diverse spiritual

traditions that inform Clifton's vision" (542).

With this pantheistic vision where the Creator and Creation are one, the ethical problem of evil comes to the fore. If God is good and He and creation are one, from where does evil come? The answer that Clifton gives is: man.

Clifton's poem "slaveships" reflects, says Thyreen-Mizingou, upon the historical reality of the slave trade.

The enslaved is the communal voice of this poem, asking why Jesus did not protect them from the hardships of slavery, and how this sin can live when there is such a thing as the Grace of God. The answer lies in the poem, which identifies the evil of humanity as the cause of the destruction of a race of people (841).

The poem indicts not God, but men who commit this evil, especially in the name of religion: the ships that transported the slaves had names such as "Jesus," "Angel," and "Grace of God," which reveal the hypocrisy and

misuse of Christianity for which the people of the time were responsible.

As “slaveships” locates the source of evil in humankind, particularly in its hypocrisy and misuse of religion, Clifton’s poem “in the meantime” considers the violence and destruction of war, and also the human indifference to ethical and moral imperatives revealed by Christ. She blends Biblical terms associated with Christ with contemporary injustice and destruction of humanity:

the Lord of loaves and fishes

frowns as the children of

Haiti Somalia Bosnia Rwanda
Everywhere

float onto the boats of their bellies

and die in the meantime ...

Rather than charging Christ with being indifferent, Clifton’s poem suggests that Christ’s ethics is the answer to the world’s evils; it has been human beings who have not taken up the responsibility for following Christ’s

comprehensive ethics and social responsibility as found in his life and in his teachings. She makes this clear:

*we could have become
fishers of men
we could have been
a balm
a light
we have become
not what we were.*

III

One of the keys to an understanding of Lucille Clifton's poetry is the poet's conception of the part to be played by her own work in relation to society. For Clifton is a visionary poet, as well as a socially conscious one.

Another key to an understanding of Clifton's character is E.M. Forster's phrase "just connect." Thus, her verse uses the communal voice, and emphasizes community as opposed to most white American people's more individualistic voice, or that of the

alienated individual, black hero, anti-hero or victim. Clifton's persona is plural, and much of her poetry refrains from using the pronoun "I", thus affirming the idea of community.

Clifton says, in her *Generations*,

When the colored people came to
Depew they came to be a family.
Everybody began to be related in thin
ways that last and last and last. The
generations of white folks are just people
but the generations of colored folks are
families (265).

Clifton, in prefacing this chapter with the lines "All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses, / And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier" (Whitman 35; qtd. In Clifton 257), recalls Whitman's confidence while at the same time reinterpreting the idea of the autonomous self freeing itself from all constraints. As she reinterprets Whitman, Clifton says that which "goes

onward and outward” is not the expanding consciousness of the self at death, but the generations of a growing and expanding family. While Whitman says that “Folks are around me, but they are no household of mine” (76). Clifton is eager to outline the generations of the member of her family and sees how the people around her are a part of her family tree.

The thing about Lucille’s work that you always see is love. The subtext is always love and the subtext is also her words “Let me do this well, let me give you the best product I can possibly give you” (Davis 1061).

You know, what we’ve tried to do on this earth, I think, in part, is to say simply, “If you can possibly read other political poets and say they do it well, then we too will do it” (Davis 1061). Every poem is political – it either maintains the status quo or it talks about change.

Her family poems are full of connections. Poems to and about her mother grow, and cycle through yearning, sorrow, rivalry, and empathy. Her father is regarded with deep love, pitied, criticized. Her daughters are “my girls/my almost me” and then “my dearest girls/my girls / my more than me.” Or, in a lyrical poem of relation, “lucy is the ocean / extended by / her girls / are the river/fed by / lucy / is the sun / reflected through / her girls ...” She addresses her heroines Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and her own grandmother, with the refrain “if I be you.” In sum, she assumes connection where the dualisms of western culture assume separation – between *self and other*, humans and nature, male and female, public and private life, pleasure and pain– and what comes from her connections, like the wave of energy, is something like joy.

In the final section of *Generations* Clifton lists her ancestors in terms of family connections. But in Whitman's lists, people come together in terms of occupation, or what Ed Cutler calls "the Whitmanian ensemble of laborers who comprise an integrated and abundant American democracy" (73). For example,

*The pilot seizes the king-in, he heaves
down with a strong arm,*

*The mate stands braced in the whate-
boat, lance and harpoon are ready,*

*The duck-shooter walks by silent and
cautions stretchers,*

*The deacons are ordain'd with cross'd
hands at the altar,*

*The spinning-girl retreats and advances
to the hum of the big wheel.*

(41, emphasis added)

In section 15 of Whitman's "Song of Myself," he describes over 40 people in terms of their occupations. For Whitman, people are related to one another in the way that they keep American democracy functioning. Clifton rewrites Whitman's list by

showing how people are related to one another by their generational ties. Her list in *Generations* goes as follows:

The generations of Carolina Donald born in Afrika in 1823 and

Sam Louis Sale born in America in 1777 are Lucille

Who had a son named

Genie

Who had a son named

Samuel

Who married

Thelma Moore and the blood became Magic and their daughter is

Thelma Lucille

Who married Fred Clifton and the blood became whole

And their children are

Sidney

Fredrica

Gillian

Alexia four daughters and

Channing

Graham two sons,

And the line goes on.

(72, emphasis added)

The people in Clifton's lists have proper names instead of titles, and

instead of mentioning profession, she gives the reader their relations.

Clifton's lists here remind us of the genealogical lists in the Bible ("*a* begat *b*, *b* begat *c*, *c* begat *d*. .."). By ending her text with this list, Clifton invokes both Whitman and his biblical source. The Bible, as we know, is constructed, around the House of Israel, but when Whitman employs the biblical list form he takes out the generational aspect and makes the "generations of white folks" that he lists "just people" (Clifton 265). It is worthy of notice that she writes in the margin of the biblical genealogy: "and the blood became Magic," a line that reminds us of West African rather than Christian religion. Ostriker calls this revision of biblical narrative a tendency in Clifton's writing to "feminize, Africanize, eroticize and make mystical the biblical stories she uses. ... recovering and restoring forms

of myth and worship which white tradition has all but erased” (43).

Clifton has also tackled the problem of race relationship. The sequence “in white America” shows a black poet’s loneliness and alienation in a town where she’s been invited to read. Her lady tour guide means well:

“this was a female school,
my mother’s mother graduated
second in her class.
they were taught embroidery,
and chenille and filigree,
ladies’ learning, yes,
we have a liberal history here.”
smiling she pats my darks hand.

Clifton says that the function of poetry is to give mirrors and windows. She does the job well, mirroring American Society and her black people. She also gives the readers windows to look at the world at large.

Next (1987), a series of poems on South Africa, and another on the death of Crazy Horse, join poems about Gettysburg, Buchenwald, Nagasaki, Jonestown, and the Shatila massacre in

Lebanon, indicting “the extraordinary evil / in ordinary men.” These in turn join a set of poems describing a young girl’s struggle with cancer, some inspiring elegiac poems about the death of Clifton’s husband Fred, some related to her dead mother, an inspiring pity and compression in a sequence about the act of poetry readings “in white America,” the “shapeshifter poems” on incest, the “California lessons” on race, fate and destiny. Though a book filled with grief and grievances, it makes room for the pleasure of grandchildren; it also makes room for a meditation on the man’s capacity for cruelty – a poem about killing cockroaches. In one poem, “my dream about being white,” Clifton imagines herself with “no lips, no behind, hey” wearing white history -

*but there’s no future
in those clothes
so I take them off and
wake up
dancing.*

Clifton has always kept her eye boldly on the wider world of politics – on Vietnam and Africa and Kent State – as the extension and consequence of unbalanced personal relations between male and female, white and black, parent and child. In *Next*, however, that wider world has become an ugliness unto itself, an ugliness that begins and ends the volume, starting with Johannesburg, Nagasaki, and Jonestown, and leading to Wounded Knee and Japanese internment camps. The result is a round of brutality, of cowardice and needless death, the poet caught between expressing objections and criticism at such a world and holding on to the belief that we all – women especially – are blessed with a tribal wisdom and that our individual deaths are emblems of courage. Thus, on her poem “my dream about God” she says:

He is wearing my grandfather's hat.

He is taller than my last uncle.

When He sits to listen

He leans forward tilting the chair

*where His chin cups in my father's
hand.*

it is swollen and hard from creation.

His fingers drum on His knee

dad's stern tattoo.

and who do i dream i am

accepting His attentions?

*i am the good daughter who stays at
home*

singing and sewing.

*when i whisper He strains to hear me
and*

He does whatever i say.

Clifton has also tackled the problem of death. Like George Eliot before her, she seems to think that memory can fight death. Thus, she deals with the ideas of life and death, invoking the world of plants which to her shows there is really no death, and extends it to include generational connections. She

says rewriting Yeats or may be Achebe, "Things don't fall apart. Things hold. Lines connect in thin ways that last and last and lives become generations made out of pictures and words just kept. ... Our lives are more than the days in them, our lives are our line and we go on" (*Generations*, 275-276). For Whitman, ultimate transcendence is attained by expanding the self to gigantic proportions. Clifton reworks this transcendental expansion in terms of the generations, not just the self. She writes, "Lines connect in thin ways that last and last and lives become generations" (*Generations*, 275).

Accepting Parmenides' concept of time, Clifton considers memory to be the way to make the generations "still here" together and united despite being "still here" in a context of sad stories. Clifton ends this chapter writing, "My father bumped against the earth. Like a rock" (*Generations*, 261). Clifton's father's

body finally finds safe harbor as it bumps up against the earth, not like a physical rock, but like a memory, as "Rock" was the nickname his father Gene gave him (*Generations*, 253).

One side of Clifton's impulse is to connect. In the early work the most obvious form this impulse takes is her stress on memory, and the connection to ancestry and to an Africa that "all of my bones remember." She also contemplates some philosophied issues such as what kinds of knowledge – material and spiritual, external and internal– may be available to us, what the difference is between appearance and reality. Her first poem about her mother's death expresses confusion as much as pain:

*seemed like what she touched was hers
seemed like what touched her couldn't
hold,
she got us almost through the high
grass
then seemed like she turned around and
ran
right back in*

right back on in
Her first poem about her father, describing
his work, asks

*what do my daddy's fingers
know about grace?
what do the coupler's know
about being locked together?*

A poem about an abortion asks

*what did i know about waters rushing
back
what did i know about drowning
or being drowned*

To sum up this section, one can say
that Lucille Clifton celebrates life. Not
just her life, or even our life, but all of
life. She celebrates its realities, its
mysteries, and perhaps, most of all, she
celebrates its continuity.

The last poem "Roots" expresses, as
well as any Lucille Clifton's view about
life and that quality of it that allows us
to celebrate so fully. It also says how she
feels about naming that quality:

*call it our craziness even
call it anything
it is the life thaing in us
that will not let us die.
even in death's hand
we fold the fingers up
and call them greens and
grow on them,
we hum them and make music.*

*call it our wildness then,
we are lost from the field
of flowers, we become
a field of flowers.
call it our craziness
our wildness
call it our roots,
it is the light in us
it is the light of us
it is the light, call it
whatever you have to,
call it anything.*

IV

The other side of Clinton's impulse is the almost Gnostic impulse to look inward, into the self. Generally speaking, Clifton defines herself in a quiet voice:

*i got a long memory
and i come from a line
of black and going on women
who got used to making it through
murdered sons*

She defines, in a tone of patient explanation, what young black males feel:

*they act like they don't have their
country
no
what it is
is they found out
their country don't love them.*

Clifton's stance toward white culture varies from the *wry mockery* of the first poem in *good times*, with its irony at repression and high-flown style,

*in the inner city
or
like we call it
home
we think a lot about town
and the silent nights
and the house straight as dead men
and the pastel lights*

to the disdainful pity of "after kent state," written after National Guardsmen had shot four students demonstrating against the invasion of Cambodia during the Vietnam War.

*only to keep
his little fear
he kills his cities
and his trees
even his children oh
people
white ways are
the ways of death*
to a bit of bitter mythmaking:
*the once and future dead
who learn they will be white men
weep for their history. we call it
rain*

Lucille Clifton's first three books of poems, dealing with black consciousness,

street rhythms, and affirmation of women, came closer with each volume to the vision of race and self announced in her 1976 prose sketch, *Generations: A Memoir*:

Things don't fall apart. Things hold. Lines connect in thin ways that last and last and lives become generations made out of pictures and words just kept. "We came out of it better than they did, Lue," my Daddy said, and I watch my six children and know we did. (Jenkins 120)

Two-Headed Women (1980), in particular, struck notes of beatitude and fortitude and praise, with a suggestion of religious rediscovery or conversion fueling the project of affirmation.

Now comes *Next*, a collection of sixty-six new poems whose moods have grown darker. When the dying is close to home, as it is with the woman in the next hospital bed, or when the author herself is being treated for leukemia, or in response to the death of her husband, Fred, mortality can be accepted and

grief resolved. Thus, she writes in “the message of fred Clifton”:

*i rise up from the dead before you
a nimbus of dark light
to say that the only mercy
is memory,
to say that the only hell
is regret.*

But the dying in these poems is mainly not so close to home, and not in the poet's power to resolve.

Clifton, seeing herself and the other, says that:

One of the things that I really believe is that we are all capable of great good and great evil. In America's culture we like to think that for some reason we can tell the bad people. Not only, I guess, because they wear bad people t-shirts or something, but we think we are the good people and they are the bad people, without realizing that we are all capable of great good and great evil. Knowing that allows us to work toward the good if we can, and this is a poem – now I read this poem somewhere and somebody thought I was talking about their child – I assure you I am not. I don't write about other people's children. I've got enough babies to write about my own and also I have a new granddaughter. I'm very proud of her. Every mother

*looks down at her child and thinks
"this is the one." I did it lots of
times. But anyway this is called "The
Baby."*

(Sanchez 1041-2)

*perhaps he'll be an artist
the way his fingers
feel my hand
how his eyes follow colors
in the room
until they settle themselves at white
and while he has not laughed
perhaps a scholar then
lifting our name
in universities across the world.*

*I suppose I am dreaming
as any mother would
I know this
he is mine own
I can teach him to smile
my love will bunker him through
though who can know
what fate decrees
Gunther
I will call him Gunther
no Adolf
yes
Adolf*

Again, Clifton, defining herself in
relation to herself says:

*I am a whole human. I don't
think of that as a theme, first of all,
but if it is, I'm a whole human. It is
human to be angry, it is human to be
glad, it is human to be afraid – all of*

that. I wished to express in all of my humanness. I wish to see myself wholly and to be seen wholly – I wish to see others wholly and to have them see me wholly. What I regret is that I have not been more human – perhaps that's what I regret. But if I do, it is all going to make me what I am. (Sanchez 1071)

Criticism, says E. Husserl, serves to distinguish and elucidate, and so it is profitable to read Clifton's *Generations* alongside Whitman's "Song of Myself".

Clifton, in her memoir, *Generations*, directly responds to Whitman in the first chapter of her memoir, "Caroline and Son," by prefacing the chapter with the opening lines of "Song of Myself": "I celebrate myself, and sing myself,/ And what I assume you shall assume,/ For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman 28; qtd. In Clifton 225). Clifton answers to Whitman in two ways: first, Clifton represents herself in *Generations* as she sings the self-worth of her identity as a Dahomey woman and Caroline as the

matriarch of the generations. She is proud of being associated with Dahomey women and rejoices that relationship, writing, "And [Caroline] used to tell us about how they had a whole army of nothing but women back there [in Dahomey] and how they was the best soldiers in the world" (232). Second, along with the Whitmanian celebration invoked by this passage, Clifton challenges the idea that another poet can tell her story. When Whitman writes, "For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you," he describes the self which contains the whole of American experience. "Every atom refers to the multiple people and experiences which the Whitmanian I subsumes, the multiple voices being articulated in a single voice" (Whitley 51).

Beginning with Whitman's "Song of Myself", as a text symbolic of male autobiography upon which to take as a

reference to the history of an African American family, Clifton continues to deconstruct an individualistic understanding of the self all the way back to the Bible itself, the text she puts on the title page of her memoir: "Lo, mine eye hath seen all this, mine ear hath heard and understood it. What ye know, the same do I know also; I am not inferior to you – Job 13: 1-2" (*Generations*, 223).

In Clifton's response to Whitman, she puts emphasis on the idea of the individual self of traditional male autobiography. Autobiography, Caren Kaplan argues, "has historically focused on individuality and the universal, autonomous self" (115-19).

As independence and self-consciousness have been the main trait of autobiography since Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*, this image of the self in autobiography is mainly male, scholars such as Margo Culley have

argued, and creates what she calls the “‘hallowed ground’ of a genre for which men still write eighty percent of the texts” (6). When women do tell their life stories, scholars like Estelle Jelinek have noted, “[t]he idealization or aggrandizement found in male autobiographies is not typical of the female mode” (15). Birch, elaborating on this theme, writes, “[Autobiographies] by men tend to be success stories charting professional and intellectual progress, in which family is diminished in importance” (129). Whitman's self from “Song of Myself” fits the notion of the unified, coherent, autonomous, self-present subject, which James Berlin describes as dominating the West's image of the individual:

From this perspective, the subject is a transcendent consciousness that functions unencumbered by the social and material conditions of experience, acting as a free and rational agent. ... In other words, the individual is the author of all his or her behavior, moving in complete

freedom in deciding the conditions of his or her experience (62).

The traditionally male autobiography imagines the self, as Whitman does in "Song of Myself," "Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am / Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary" (Whitman 32).

Clifton takes the metaphysical questions posed in Whitman's poem: "What is a man? What am I?" And she gives her answer to these questions.

In "Song of Myself," Whitman tries to define the individual as self-contained and self-realizing. Stressing the primacy of the self, he says, "And nothing, not God, is greater to one than one's self is" (Whitman 86). Whitman locates the undefinable something which makes up the essence of human existence in the self: "There is that in me – I do not know what it is – but I know it is in me". (Whitman 88) While Clifton, through

the story of Gene, puts it in terms of relationships with others, rightly within the generations of a family. Clifton tells how she and her members of her family thought that their grandfather Gene was crazy for throwing bricks through Main Street shop windows. She writes, "Daddy, we would laugh, your Daddy was a crazy man. We had us a crazy grandfather" (*Generations*, 251). Clifton and her young brothers and sisters interpreted their grandfather's actions through the model of humanity which says that a person "is the author of all his or her behavior, moving in complete freedom in deciding the conditions of his or her experience" (Berlin 62). Clifton's father, though, tells his children that what makes a person is not something constructed individually, but that an individual is part of a generational line: "No he wasn't crazy. He was just somebody whose Mama and Daddy was dead" (*Generations*, 251). In other

words, he was just an ordinary human being like anyone else.

In conclusion, one finds that Lucille Clifton's poems tell us that high and low things can meet along with the union of the sacred and secular if one knows enough about both. She shows us what joins us to a world beyond ourselves, body and spirit inextricably connected. To fulfil this aim, the poet turns at times to traditional religion or myth. She gives us mystical longings, a desire to transcend empirical boundaries and material limitations. Clifton's poems assert responsibility for the other, in contrast to the typical white American culture of individualization.

Notes:

1. Lucille Clifton is virtually unknown in Egypt except for one study by Dr. Maher Shafeek Farid in his book *Hall of Mirrors* published in Dar Al-Adab (2011), pp. 341-2, and a translation of selected poem by Ahmed Shafy "Ordinary woman: Poems and memories", in addition to a study in English by Dr. Hadeer Abu-El-Naga in Conference at Helwan University published in the proceedings of the conference 2003.

2. Frederick A. Olafson, "Jean-Paul Sartre" *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (1967), 287-293.

3. The concept of Justice in the *Iliad and the Odyssey* of Homer is unknown, but in the *Works and Days*, as well as, the *Theogony* of Hesiod, justice sets beside Zeus. This is because of the fact that in Homer's time the Greek society was a society of pirates who need a god who is on the side of the strong. But in Hesiod's time, the Greek society become agrarian, so Justice was needed.

4. Lucille Clifton, *The Collected Poems of Lucille Clifton 1965-2010*. Ed. Kevin Young and Michael F. Glaser. Rochester, New York: BOA edition, 2012. Unless indicated all Clifton quotations are from this volume.

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