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Clothes, identity, and authority in *Black Thunder*

In *Black Thunder* Arna Bontemps uses his characters' clothing to explore the relationship between power, identity, and material symbols of status. Throughout the novel, Bontemps describes his characters’ clothing in great detail. Some characters dress in fine clothes that denote their heightened status, while others lack the privilege or the desire to do so. On one hand, Bontemps presents this use of clothing to display status as a powerful and necessary means of controlling the ways in which people are perceived. At the same time, Bontemps consistently presents his characters’ fine clothing as frivolous, uncomfortable, or inconsistent with their true identities, and in doing so invites readers to question the actual power of such symbols of status.

Early in the novel, Bontemps establishes clothing as a symbol of privilege and status. As a house slave, Ben is able to wear “satin breeches and shoes with white paste buckles” (Bontemps 10), which denote his higher status, and set him apart from the field slaves. That being said, Bontemps does not give Ben the power or influence to match the elevated status his fine clothing present. By emphasizing the luxurious clothing of a character like Ben, whose struggle with internalized racism eventually leads him to betray the revolt, Bontemps invites readers to question the actual power and meaning behind such status symbols. Moreover, Ben’s clothes are given to him as a condition of his enslavement. He is not wearing fine clothes to present himself in any particular way, but rather to be presentable to white society. This situates him as a passive participant in his own privilege. Ben’s status is not something he fights for, but rather something he receives for following orders. Through this dynamic, Bontemps shows how privileges are inherently limited in power since they must be given by others, rather than taken by will. After Ben’s betrayal, Bontemps describes “his satin breeches were fresh and glossy, but they were a bit too loose around his scrawny old knees. He scarcely filled his coat” (169). That Ben no longer fits in his fancy clothes reflects that he is no longer completely fit for his role as loyal slave. He returns to his old position, but his loyalty is tenuous and quick to errode, because deep inside he still wishes to be free.

Bontemps also shows Gabriel receiving fine clothes as a condition of his enslavement, but unlike Ben, Gabriel takes ownership of the heightened status his clothes give him, and tries to use it to his advantage. Before going to rally his followers, Gabriel recalls his desire to be considered “*Gen’l* Gabriel” (117) by his people, and “turned abruptly, went back into the hut and put on shiny boots, his frock-tailed coat and his varnished coachman’s hat” (117). Gabriel feels the need to return for his coachman’s uniform because his identity is linked to his clothing. When he is dressed as he believes a General should dress, he feels like he is one. After escaping from the authorities, Gabriel claims “a general can’t feel like somebody as long as he’s wearing a pair of sopping wet pants, as long as he can hear water sloshing in his shoes” (182). Through this claim, Bontemps shows readers Gabriel’s need to be seen as an important person, and on the mindset of strong leaders in general. By Bontemps’s description, figures of authority feel the need to set themselves apart in order to feel important. That Gabriel receives his fine clothes, and therefore his authority as a general, from his owner, suggests that in order for the people to rebel against an institution, they must already have some privilege within it.

At the same time, through the dysfunctionality of Gabriel’s attire Bontemps invites readers to question whether Gabriel’s insistence on wearing his coachman’s outfit is an act of necessity, or of vanity. After turning around to put on his shiny boots, Gabriel says “it was all very important when you really thought it over” (117). Through this statement, Bontemps pushes readers consider Gabriel’s priorities, and on a larger scale, the priorities of those we consider strong leaders. Gabriel’s revolt is falling apart, so to prioritize his appearance as a General before attempting to rally the people could be considered an act of vanity.

Moreover, Gabriel’s fine clothes are not functional for the messy work of revolting. As Gabriel flees with Juba, he finds that “The coachman’s boots that had suited him so well as a general were far from comfortable now. They squeaked and pinched his toes. The purple coat, the coachman’s varnished hat and the ruffles on his shirt bosom were all care to Gabriel now that the ranks of his crowd were broken, now that every man had his own skin to save” (157-58). Bontemps intentionally leaves Gabriels newfound discontent with his coachman’s clothes open to several interpretations. On one hand, readers can consider Gabriel’s discomfort as proof that stark class divisions and status symbols are silly, and authoritarian leadership is ineffective. Bontemps’s description of Gabriel’s squeaky boots and ruffled shirt contrasts comically with the direness of his situation, and makes Gabriel’s insistence on appearing important seem silly and unnecessary. At the same time, Gabriel’s discomfort with his coachman’s clothes could also be indicative of his discomfort with his role as general of a failing revolt. Earlier in the novel, when there is still hope of the revolt bringing freedom, Gabriel embraces his clothes as part of his role as general, but when things turn south, his role becomes a burden. Moreover, Bontemps statement that Gabriel’s clothes suited him well “as a general,” but do not suit him any longer, suggests that Gabriel loses his authority (or gives it up) once the revolt starts to fail. By leaving Gabriel’s discomfort open to interpretation, Bontemps pushes readers to question for themselves the power, changeability, and necessity of authority. It is important to note that no interpretation of Gabriel’s discomfort reflects on authority figures in a completely positive manner; through Gabriel, Bontemps presents authority figures as either frivolous and unprepared, or changeable and self serving under the wrong circumstances.

All criticism of authority beside, Bontemps does use his character’s judgements of one another’s clothing to explore the possible effect of status symbols, like clothing, on people’s respect for each other’s authority or identities. According to M.Baptiste, people believe Laurent to be a Jacobin because “with his round face and run down stockings. He is just the type” (38). Through this statement, Bontemps confirms that clothing does play a role in what others believe one’s identity to be. This is seen again through Bontemps’s description of General John. After fleeing, General John describes his own clothes: “These rags ain’t fitten for a hog” (173). General John is not dressed like a general, and this almost allows him to escape unnoticed. Throughout the novel, General John is referred to as a general much more often than Gabriel, despite the fact that John wears the “most thoroughly patched homespuns in Virginia” (40), but his authority is not respected in the same way that Gabriel’s is. Still, Bontemps leaves open for debate whether or not people’s respect for Gabriel is at all dependent on his clothing, and in doing so drives readers to reflect on how clothing affects their own perceptions of others.

Like Gabriel, Melody uses her clothing to present a certain identity to the world. As Melody watches the executions “She was swinging a scarlet parasol with a vacuous air” (144) despite her discontent, and when Melody goes to the look out her window later in the novel she must first take off her head cloth because she “couldn’t let folks see her through the front windows with her hair tied” (181). Melody masterfly manipulates the way other people see her. Gabriel describes her as having a “lazy, indolent air” (183), when in fact Bontemps presents her as quite thoughtful. This shows the success of melody’s work to seem unattached and contented, and confirms that things like clothing can have an effect on the way that people are perceived.

The identity that Melody presents to the world is a false one, and she feels oppressed by it, as Bontemps shows through his description of her “heavy bracelets” (144). On one hand, Melody’s heavy bracelets are part of the “indolent” image she presents to the world. At the same time, Bontemps use of the words “heavy” and “jangled” bring to mind a pair of shackles, suggesting that Melody is shackled by the false identity she is forced to present to the world. Gabriel’s identity as a general could be considered false as well. Earlier in the novel, Bontemps describes Gabriel as he “flipped his coat a little self consciously” (46). Although Gabriel covetts the prestige of being a general, he is not fully comfortable in his fancy clothes, and therefore not completely comfortable with his role. For both Melody and Gabriel, their clothes serve as a costume to present versions of themselves to the world that are not necessarily accurate, but that they believe are necessary. Through this, Bontemps shows how people use symbols of status to create new identities for themselves, and manipulate the ways that others perceive them.

Still, Bontemps pushes readers to question the necessity of such manipulation by presenting characters as at their most powerful in their natural states. In the beginning of the novel, Bontemps describes Ditcher before his fight with Gabriel as “naked to the waist” (17). Ditcher’s partial nudity allows for a “wanton display of strength” (17), that Bontemps describes as “muscles tightening until they shivered and two giants tumbling to the ground” (17). The onlookers of Ditcher and Gabriels fight are awed by them, despite their lack of fancy clothes, and after the fight one man comments that Gabriel “ain’t biggity neither,” suggesting that the people actually had more respect for him before he became “General Gabriel.” This description of half-naked strength returns several times throughout the novel. When the slaves are praying over old Bundy, Gabriel “stood naked to the waist in the hot cabin, stood above the others with his hands on his hips and head bowed sorrowfully. His shadow, among the waving hands on the wall, was like a giant in a field of grain” (34). Bontemps’ presentation of people being at their strongest in moments of partial nudity suggests that it is a more natural, humble, sort of authority that people respect the most. It is not until later in the novel, when Gabriel embraces his identity as “General Gabriel,” that seeds of discontent are sown, and the revolt begins to fall apart. To be half naked, and still strong, draws not only on humility, but on one’s status as an African American. Early in the novel, Bontemps claims that “the Negroes remembered Africa in 1800” (52). Bontemps’ descriptions of Ditcher and Gabriel naked from the waist up is reminiscent of African stereotypes, which connect the characters and their power back to their heritage and their community. When the revolt fails, the slaves suggest that it is because Gabriel forgot the rituals of his ancestors, in essence forgetting the community. Strangely, to go into battle half-naked harks back to the community in a way that embodies the spirit of fraternity. Through this, Bontemps suggests that to lead a community of people, you must be a member of said community, rather than setting yourself apart from it, as Gabriel does in the novel.

Bontemps uses rich descriptions of his characters’ clothing to question the power of status symbols in shaping one’s authority and perceived identity. The identities characters present through their clothes are not necessarily realistic to who they are as people, or how they perceive themselves, nor are they necessarily true to how others perceive them. Above all, Bontemps shows characters as *attempting* to use clothing to control the ways they are perceived, or the ways perceive themselves, when in the end it is not the clothing, but the person in the clothing, and their actions, that truly affect the identities that others connect to them.

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Works Cited

Bontemps, Arna. *Black Thunder*. Beacon Press.