

Children of Children: The Perverse Cycle of Poverty in African-American Society

“We tend to believe that [the American] free-market system rewards those who help themselves, and that those who are willing to ‘pull themselves up by the bootstraps’ can and will ‘get ahead,’” author Tiziani C. Dearing writes. This concept is exposed by the history of black suppression in America, which runs deep into the roots of American history and grounds neo-slavery, or ‘slavery by another name,’ in black poverty today. Nearly 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation outlawed slavery, some black individuals remain victims of neo-slavery, chronically entrapped by crime, incarceration, drug addiction, broken families, unemployment, and poor education. In the poem “Children of Children,” by Oscar Brown Jr. (1926-2005), the speaker of the poem addresses a primarily white audience and illustrates the negative circumstances of numerous black American youths, especially their early sexual awakenings and premature reproduction. Rather than specifically mentioning poverty itself that is often defined as having a lack of financial means, he shows the poverty of *human rights* being implemented within the black community by illustrating reproductive entrapment, hopelessness, and incarceration. These human rights are what separate freedom from enslavement. Many black youths are teenage parents born from other teenage parents that continue reproducing disadvantaged children in the cycle of poverty. The poem’s concern is the white audience blaming the black youth for their poverty and instructing them to be personally responsible for their actions in order to change their situation. Brown believes this mentality is destructive and does not solve the problem, as the youths are only products of their underprivileged environment. Alleviating poverty needs come from within the white community by having white people change their prejudiced mentality of

black poverty and create anti-poverty programs that help uplift the black community. White readers are important agents in black poverty because they run most businesses and government institutions and their 'privilege' can be utilized for change. Brown uses interlocking formal strategies, juxtaposition, and double meanings in his poem "Children of Children" to illustrate the sick, perverse cycle of poverty in the black community and persuade his audience to enact change.

These concerns of poverty date back to the early life of Brown. He was born Oscar Cicero Brown Jr. on October 10, 1926 in Chicago, Illinois and was raised in a "sheltered" middleclass family. Brown was not aware of many problems within black society until he learned about activism as a college student. He began work in broadcasting with the first black radio news show in Chicago, *Negro News Front* from 1948 to 1951 and was confronted with current events in the black community. He reported on the reality of life in black America, and it inspired him to be an activist for civil rights. Brown became involved with Civil Rights Congress, a movement led by activist Will Patterson that accused the U.S. government of genocide against blacks. He also joined the communist party because "it was the only outlet available to participate in the struggle for black people." Brown then joined the Progressive Party and ran for Illinois State representative in 1952. He lost the race, and his on-air broadcasts became more radical for civil rights. White radio station owners had enough of Brown's radical views, and *Negro News Front* was canceled. The communist party was also not supportive of his radicalism, and Brown was kicked out (LaBalle). This alienation from political organizations and broadcast media attempted to silence Brown and his voice that spoke against black poverty.

Brown discovered that the music and performance industry would give him a platform to express the injustices of black poverty. He wrote in the essay *Music: The Liberating Force*, “The liberation of black people from the domination of racist whites can only be achieved by application of the necessary force. Can music provide this force? Yes, it can, due to its matchless ability to stir the human spirit.” He began writing songs and sang them in clubs to express his views on civil rights. Columbia Records noticed his talent and offered Brown a recording contract. Brown became a national celebrity when his 1960 jazz album *Sin and Soul* debuted to critical acclaim (LaBalle). The album contains social commentary regarding black poverty, and it positions Brown on several controversies in black America.

One of the controversies he illustrates in *Sin and Soul* is the mass incarceration of blacks in the song, “Work Song.” The song evokes the image of work songs slaves sung while they worked on plantations. Work songs in several cultures are used to increase the productivity of work and decrease feelings of boredom, but within American slavery there was the added component of survival. The work songs used rhythm to coordinate physical movement in groups and would prevent an individual from being picked out as working too slowly. One tried to avoid being punished by the master or overseer. Work songs also helped slaves survive by evoking the feeling of unity and helping to release emotions (Jones). When slavery had been abolished through the 13th amendment, racism still had not been purged from the veins of society. Blacks were still being oppressed and discriminated against. Many faced long prison sentences from trumped-up charges for petty crimes. They were forced into prison labor and began singing work songs just as their slave ancestors before them. Brown evokes the feeling of twistedness within black

poverty in “Work Song” using interlocking formal strategies that illustrate a cycle of poverty.

The twistedness is illustrated in the first verse of “Work Song,” when Brown evokes the idea that the narrator of this song could not help breaking the law: “I committed crime, Lord I needed. Crime of bein’ hungry and poor.” Brown suggests that this individual may not be totally responsible for his poverty. He evokes the repetition of poverty in the song by using the traditionally repetitive format of work songs. Brown repeats the line “breaking up rocks on the chain gang” in the beginning and at the end of the song to evoke how the prison system entraps black individuals. He repeats the lines “been workin’ and workin’” in the chorus to evoke how the narrator is mindlessly working and not moving toward anything. Brown uses repetition of verse in all three of his works discussed in this essay, and they evoke a cyclical feeling of poverty repeating itself.

In the poem “Children of Children,” Brown also uses interlocking formal strategies to create a textual foundation that feels as perverse as the cycle of poverty he illustrates. Brown uses an *abba* rhyme scheme to structure his poem and it creates a static, stately, and dignified address to the difficult issue of black poverty, as it is an enclosing structural pattern. The enclosing pattern also evokes the entrapment of poverty itself:

The children of children by the time they’re half grown
 have habits like rabbits and young of their own
 The children of children from their mamma’s laps
 hop down from the ground to be taken in traps

The children of children are trapped by dark skins
 to stay in and play a game no one wins
 The children of children while still young and sweet
 all damned and programmed for future defeat
 The children of children are trapped by adults
 who fail them and jail them to hide the results
 The children of children unable to cope
 with systems that twist them and rob them of hope
 The children of children with the sin and the shame
 keep bearing and pairing and who do you blame
 The children of children cry out everyday.
 They beg you for rescue and what do you say?

Brown's rhyme scheme in the first two lines shows that he rhymes 'grown' and 'own,' while in the middle of those two rhymes he puts, 'habits' like 'rabbits.' He uses this internal rhyme scheme to give more dimensions to the poem and for it to avoid sounding flat. While the internal rhyme scheme creates a sensation of dimension, it also evokes claustrophobia. Brown is able to create an image of a child within a child and provoke a claustrophobic effect within the reader. The near-rhymes enhance this effect, like "stay...in...wins" and "systems...twist them." Looking closer, there is a 'sing-song' and nursery-rhyme feeling that is created from the pattern. Coupled with the repetition, "the children of children" beginning every line in the poem to emphasize the unnatural and sick aspect of children having children due to poverty, it is easy for one to get caught in the beat and hum to oneself. The cyclical structure is enticing and difficult to shake

away, which simulates what it is like to be trapped in the cycle of poverty. Reading “the children of children” over and over again can also evoke a feeling of alienation from the very meaning of the word and reduce it to a sound. The repetition evokes concept of desensitization of poverty and the numbness one may feel from a prejudiced mentality. It is not until the final line in the poem that Brown stops using *abba* and uses *aa*. Brown’s abrupt change in rhyme persuades the audience’s need to end the poverty cycle. In the last line, he asks the white audience, “what do you say?” Brown is asking this as a rhetorical question; he knows that a majority of the audience has said nothing to help the children. The question provokes a challenge within the audience members into thinking differently about their situation now that Brown has illustrated the realities in the lines prior. It also evokes a herald of the Black Lives Matter movement, as it targets the ways people institute racism in everyday speech and offers an alternative way of speaking. His last line creates the image that the cycle of poverty is not perverse within itself, but as a result of the audience not helping end it. Brown’s strategies of form help throw the audience into unfamiliar territory and evoke the feeling of the same reproductive entrapment, hopelessness, and incarceration that many blacks feel.

On the textual level, Brown uses juxtaposition to evoke the perversity of the cycle of poverty in the black community. Brown compares “momma’s laps” with “traps.” He uses the phrase “momma’s laps” to evoke the protection and safeness of nurtured children. The children then leave their mother’s laps and are “taken in traps.” These images in close proximity create a disturbing feeling because they are a short leap from lap to trap. The words also sonically rhyme, which creates a sensation that there is little difference between the two images. Brown then uses “stay” and “play” when describing

being trapped in a game. A game should eventually end, but this one is twisted and does not. Next, he describes the children as being “damned” and “programmed.” To be damned is to be cursed, while programmed means to be structured. The perversity is if one is being programmed for damnation at birth. This evokes the idea that although American laws state that blacks have full citizenship, social deprecation functions as a supernatural condemnation. Brown then juxtaposes the words “fail” and “jail,” which creates the idea that if the children fail in school, they go to jail. One often does not associate jail with children, which the close proximity of these words creates the idea that for black kids, jail and school are a few short steps away from each other. Brown evokes this image to create the sensation of a twisted sense of time for childhood development. He tries to break the audience’s lethargic attitude by getting them out of a comfortable sense of pace. Brown also contrasts “systems” and “twist them,” juxtaposing a structural device like a system and then the device being manipulated. The near-rhyme of the two words are already twisted sonically and a system should not be twisted if a system’s duty is to maintain order. A system is not a person and Brown evokes trying to break off the personal responsibility of the listener to assist black people from the systematic nature of racism and economic containment. The poem controls its own expression of frustration by provoking white listeners to think that they can help out because they are not part of this system.

This system creates the sensation that it causes the “bearing” and “pairing” that Brown mentions in the poem. The comparison of the two words that are in close proximity to one another creates the feeling that children are producing and then multiplying, which is perverted that those not yet finished with puberty are bearing

children. This 'white definition' of the proper age for reproduction is evoked here in order to show the negative effects of white definitions of appropriate behavior and evidence for the suffering of blacks. Brown uses the mechanical words "bearing" and "pairing" to provoke a cold, distant feeling to the audience members. These words do not evoke a loving union of two people because they only evoke animalistic instincts of sex and reproduction. Brown structures this line by putting "bearing" first and "pairing" second that create the idea of pregnancy coming first and then a union or make-shift relationship coming afterwards to try to justify the conception.

Brown uses double meanings to evoke the abnormalities of the seemingly normal to create a disturbing version of reality and convince the audience that the youth are a product of their environment. When Brown compares the children to "rabbits," he symbolizes both innocence and sexuality. Rabbits are often considered to be happy, innocent, and fluffy creatures to children, but they are also known to reproduce many times during a short period. They are highly sexually active and have a large brood of offspring. Brown uses the symbol of the rabbit to evoke what childhood should represent, innocence, and then turns it upside down to create an image of the perverseness of these children's realities. He wants to create an image a lost childhood and in order to understand the poem fully, white listeners either need to know already something about the black community or they have to discover it themselves.

The absence of a detailed picture of street life to some white audience members in Brown's poem is evident when he uses "trap" to represent a cage of an animal, while also defining it as a location where people sell drugs and hustle for money. The symbol of the cage initially looks like it goes with the rabbit-theme of the poem; however, it might also

evoke America's racist past, in which whites once believed blacks were like animals, less than human. The trap symbolizes the previous enslavement of black people, as well as the current modern-day slavery, or neo-slavery of chronic poverty that keeps blacks from progressing. Trap also represents the modern term, which is defined as a place where people do illegal activities like at street corners and in apartments. It is called a trap because it is difficult to get out of this lucrative business, though it is necessary to survive due to poverty. Brown uses another double meaning when he illustrates the "game" that no one can win, which does not refer to a normal and innocent childhood game. He mentions the children being trapped by "dark skins," which evokes their own black skin and the racism of others that keep them from achieving. The game they have to play is a game of submission and pleasing white society by culturally assimilating. By doing this, they try to be accepted; yet they cannot truly embrace themselves if they fully submit. It is a game "no one wins" because equality is crucial for both the white and black community to be successful.

The audience members that are listening here are whites, middle-class blacks, and poor inner city blacks. Whites are the purveyors of the discourse, while middle-class and inner city blacks do not quite live in freedom, and they try to please the whites as if they are their 'masters.' Brown evokes the idea that it is slavery all over again, or neo-slavery, and persuades both the black audiences that they will not win freedom this way. The game can also be defined as being in a gang, as many young black men are, and see this as a way out of poverty and gaining status or value as a human being. Gangs are a "game no one wins" because they promote violence and often cause devastation to members, victims, and opposing gangs. Yet in a country that has stripped so much of black identity

away, it is not surprising that many black American youths are looking elsewhere to find their own identity. Brown's double meanings persuade the audience to see youth as products of their environment and to convince the audience of the need to break the twisted cycle of poverty.

The interlocking formal strategies, juxtaposition, and double meanings of "Children of Children," illustrate the perverse poverty cycle for lack of human rights in the black community so the audience will want to change the reality. Brown recognizes that it is twisted for whites to blame a group of people that were enslaved for many centuries. He forces the audience to dive into the deep causes of chronic poverty in black culture. "Children of Children" and his other works help illuminate circumstance and why one should not jump to condemnation.

Works Cited

"Def Poetry - Oscar Brown Jr. - Children Of Children." *YouTube*. YouTube. Web. 16 Feb. 2016.

"Def Poetry - Oscar Brown Jr. - I Apologize." *YouTube*. YouTube, 5 Aug. 2007. Web. 6 May 2016.

LaBalle, Candace. "Oscar Brown Jr. Biography - Took to Airwaves as Teen, Fought Racism with Politics and Revolution." Chicago, Black, Music, and Singer. Net Industries, 2016. Web. 6 May 2016.

Jones, Randy and Tinker, William. "The Gospel Truth About the Negro Spiritual." Grinnell College, 12 Nov. 2007. Web. 6 May 2016.

"Oscar Brown Jr Work Song." *YouTube*. YouTube, 17 Aug. 2011. Web. 6 May 2016.