

LYN GRAHAM BARZILAI

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contrast, the behaviour of Massa and his “gentlemen friends” carries more sinister undertones: they guffaw and shout, taking sides, ~~rejoice~~ as they urge the young slaves to display their prowess at wrestling ~~her~~, in an apparently magnanimous gesture, Massa not only rewards but also reinforces this display of unbridled behaviour by offering a shot of whisky to the winner, as long as he can down it in one gulp. Thus the white owner introduces into the young slave’s enjoyment of freedom his own rather degenerate patterns of behaviour, belying his ~~perception~~ as a role model of culture and refinement for the slaves. This control over the slaves by their master is reinforced by the description of the weather as “an odd monkey,” one who is “on [the slaves’] back, his cotton eye everywhere.” The slaves’ lives, it seems, are to be regulated by the harsh realities not only of master, but also of nature. Yet they themselves relax peacefully on this day of ~~rest~~, women “brown and glossy” like beautiful antique wood, their legs tucked gracefully under them.

their circumstances and interpreting their future. Through this introspection on the part

ultimately, this text is about the realisation of one's "longings and yearnings" and how one goes about attaining the dream and the vision. If there is criticism here of the white colonial figure and culture, it derives from the ability of those in power to consider (or reconsider) their position, to look inward rather than outward. Eventually, both the slaves and Massa are victims: the slaves are victims of circumstance, Massa and his fellow-men are slaves to, and victims of, their own self-image. Dove implies that release from victimage comes about through introspection and reflection, without which action is meaningless. The choral speaker, the "we" of "Kentucky 1833" represents voices which, in Kirkland Jones' words, "move and out of the centuries as they transcend the local and the mundane, becoming, as a result, decidedly inclusive in their view of the universe and of humanity." This transcendence, epitomised in Dove's lyrical text, derives from a self-awareness and its potential. The text implies that the way out of all victimage is through a perception of one's circumstances and limitations and the subsequent enlightenment that enables self-realisation.

¹ Rita Dove, *The Yellow House on the Corner* (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1980).

² See "Rita Dove: Identity Markers" (chapter 3) in Helen Vendler, *The Given and the Made: Strategies of Poetic Redefinition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

³ *The American Poetry Review*, vol. 24, March/April 1995, 11.

⁴ *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 120: *American Poets Since World War II*, Third Series, ed. R. S. Gwyn (Lamar University: Brucoli Clark, 1992), 7-51.