

In "An Agony. As Now," from *The Dead Lecturer* (1964), Baraka describes in sensuous phrases his emotional and spiritual paralysis. The title of this poetry collection is a reference to the attempted suicide of the speaker. His sense of dissociation from the self who hates him is a normal part of the recovery process; however, Baraka adds another level of meaning. The inverted symbolism of white implies that assimilation, voluntary or involuntary, is a significant factor of the imprisonment.

Openings in the mask allow the persona to see, but the metal prevents any human contact. Introspectively addressing his ruminations to the soul he has sightlessly abandoned, he recalls a woman who ran from him to the forest of white "civilization" and a man decaying from psychic paralysis, "never beautiful." The speaker's mind races unencumbered to the sun in a series of associational images that offer a brief hope for resurrection with fragmented water imagery. Nevertheless, the torment escalates as he recognizes the corruption surrounding him. The sun is love, self-actualization, God, but the poet is trapped within himself and does not know how to reach the love, despite his need. Therefore, the sun reaches out to him, heating his white metal shell and burning awareness into him. His final scream is a scream of self-realization, a moment of truth, in which he relinquishes his detachment and accepts himself.

Baraka's characteristic devices include the use of open parentheses and commas to stop his reader and to increase the associational possibilities of his phrasing. Inverted symbolism and the repetition of key words and phrases reinforce his meaning as he guides his reader on a journey from mind, through sun, God, and soul, to beauty. The speaker's shell is the corrupting veneer of white civilization. To acknowledge his true identity, the black poet must reject the easy answers and accept his black consciousness as beautiful. Only after he destroys the facade will he again feel.

## "MONK'S WORLD"

**First published:** 1993 (collected in *Funk Lore: New Poems, 1984-1995*, 1996)

**Type of work:** Poem

*The poet recalls his encounter with Thelonious Monk and his music in the jazz quarter of Manhattan.*

One cannot fully understand "Monk's World" without knowing about jazz. To Amiri Baraka, poetry is a form of music guided first by rhythm, without which words, which are rhythmic themselves, do not even exist. To look at "Monk's World," therefore, references to the background and the virtuosity of black music are indispensable. Originally appearing in a bilingual Italian publication *Morso Dal Suono* in 1993, the poem is a dedication to Thelonious Monk, the "High Priest of Bebop" in the 1940's, and to his music, which has continued to inspire Baraka throughout his career.

Written in avant-garde language and free form, the poem begins with one of Monk's most enduring jazz ballads, "Round Midnight," where readers are brought into the jazz scene with Monk improvising the "hot" bebop music—the fire engine solo—in the Village Vanguard, a renowned Manhattan jazz club. Adding to the fervor and musicality of the poem are the terms that Baraka uses: "spaced funk" ("spaced" suggesting the state of being "spaced out" associated with drug taking, particularly marijuana, of which jazz musicians have been fond), "numbers & letters" (musical composition and improvisation), "black keys signifying" (the underlying messages or criticism on which the music plays), "weird birds" (bebop, which is "weird" because it is still new, radical, and somewhat oppositional compared to traditional jazz, and "bird" referring to the great American jazz musician Charlie "Bird" Parker).

Baraka described the music that he encountered with Monk as an "intimate revelation" in which the "black keys" answered his questions, in which the piano collected one's feelings into its "diary." The music speaks not only the words that one uses to communicate but also the unspeakable emotions that one desires to share. The atmosphere of the jazz quarter was brought to great in-

tensity when Monk “dipped” and “spun” the music with which he “danced” at the audience, who in response want to get up and dance. “What’s happening?” appears twice as a question, or rather as an exclamation in the sixth stanza, to convey the celestial state of mind brought about by the music of “every googolplex” (immense quantity) of a second. John Coltrane, another great American jazz musician, was introduced onto the scene when Monk played with him. The second-to-last stanza makes references to Monk’s composition “Straight, No Chaser” and to *Interstellar Space*, in which Coltrane recorded compositions named after the planets.

The poem ends as an echo to the opening stanza where the fire engine solo becomes screaming blues and “cats” standing around turn into scatted flying things, bringing the music to its height and

filling the night and the empty street with vigor and vibrancy—this is Monk’s world.

### SUMMARY

Baraka is a crucial figure in American literature. His indomitable insistence that the oppressed be freed and that art be an active factor in the process has led him to the creation of versatile forms of expression in poetry, drama, fiction, and nonfiction prose. A leading black aesthetician, he consistently extends his art into action. A critical concern, however, has been that he fails to reach his intended audience, the black masses. As his experimentation continues, his writing grows ever more esoteric and may become accessible to smaller and smaller audiences.

Kathleen Mills; updated by Selina Lai

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- The Baptism*, pr. 1964, pb. 1966  
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*The Slave*, pr., pb. 1964  
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*Experimental Death Unit #1*, pr. 1965, pb. 1969

## DISCUSSION TOPICS

- How would you describe the interaction between Lula and Clay in *Dutchman*? What does it suggest about the relationship between the black and white races?
- Amiri Baraka considers violence as the ultimate means to bring about a black rebirth. How does violence function in *Dutchman*?
- How is racism addressed and dealt with in *Dutchman* and “An Agony. As Now.”?
- What are the changes that the poet has experienced in “An Agony. As Now.”? What is the significance of these changes?
- What are the two selves presented in “An Agony. As Now.”? Can they coexist? Why or why not?
- Identify some of the avant-garde techniques that Baraka employs in “An Agony. As Now.” and “Monk’s World.”
- What is “jazzification”? Draw examples from “Monk’s World” to illustrate such elements in the poem.
- What do you think Monk is “signifying” with the “black keys” in “Monk’s World”?