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Robert Hayden, "Crispus Attucks," and the Black Man's Plight

Robert Hayden was an American Poet in the twentieth century, and he wrote several poems about history and, more specifically, black history. "Crispus Attucks" was published in 1975 in *Angle of Ascent*, adding to Hayden's other black history poems "The Ballad of Nat Turner," "Rungate Rungate," "John Brown," and "Middle Passage. While the title of the poem gives the reader a context and specifies who the poem is about, by performing a close reading of the poem the reader can find the plight of any black person in Hayden's words.

The chiasmus that makes up the first line—"Name in a footnote. Faceless name"—emphasizes the lack of representation and visibility of black people in America. In history, politics, literature, art, and so many other spheres, black people are vastly underrepresented. Crispus Attucks was the only fatality during the Boston "massacre," an event that was a catalyst for the American Revolution, but most Americans have never heard his name. The United States as a country was built upon the backs of countless black slaves, but just like Crispus Attucks, their stories are rarely told in the annals of history.

The remainder of the poem is an enjambment that takes up three lines, a long, continuous sentence that drills in the anonymity and seeming insignificance of black men and women. Hayden uses alliterations, "by bayonets" and "flags...forever falling", and consonance, "propped

up”, to string words and thoughts together within those last three lines. He used these word groupings to make a very interesting commentary on the way Americans use the sacrifice of minorities to sway other Americans to their purpose. In the historical context of the poem, the revolutionaries touted the death of Attucks to spur the colonists to action. They “propped [him] up / by bayonets” to make sure the rest of the colonists would continue to see the horrible thing the British had done and the wonderful sacrifice he had made, thus convincing them to continue in their pursuit of freedom from the British.

The word “moot” as an adjective modifying “hero” points to Attucks’ heroic actions and his sacrificing his life being irrelevant, at least on an individual level, to the Bostonians. “Moot” and “hero” are also fairly contradictory terms, ones that would not normally be seen together. Hayden’s word choice in that phrase invokes a sadness for the Black man who sacrifices his life trying to be a better example or to make a better world for those he’ll leave behind, not knowing that his sacrifice won’t be remembered.

Hayden then writes of “shroud[ing]” Attucks in a flag, using his ultimate sacrifice to fan the flames of revolt in New England. A shroud is a burial blanket or covering, typically one that has immense meaning to those left behind. Shrouding a body in a flag is something often done for fallen soldiers, to signify their sacrifice for their country and to give their remains the respect that sacrifice affords them. A “Betsy Ross” flag is the flag that the colonists ended up adopting to represent them as a country separate from England, to demand their own identity. The “Garvey” flag is a flag that was presented to the Universal Negro Improvement Associated and African Communities League in 1920. Like the Betsy Ross flag, this was a flag that could unite people to fight for their rights and their identity and which separated those who bore this flag from those who did not.

Hayden's comparison of shrouding an individual in a Betsy Ross flag and a Garvey flag is interesting. Betsy Ross' flag became the flag of the United States of America and would presumably represent the Black man being used as a pawn or a martyr by an outside party. The Garvey flag, though, is meant to represent African Americans specifically, so Hayden may have been implying that the Black community will use each other and allow those within their ranks to become anonymous as long as they will reach their overall goals.

While Hayden's poem, "Crispus Attucks," can be taken in and understood from a strictly New Criticism point of view, it is a lot more powerful when the reader at least takes into account the historical references of things like the different types of flags. I believe a reader can assume that this is how Hayden meant the poem to be read—by entitling it "Crispus Attucks," he certainly meant for the reader to understand it within the context of the Attucks' life, and then apply it to the overall Black/African-American situation.

Works Cited

Hayden, Robert. *Collected Poems: Centenary Edition*. Ed. Frederick Glaysher. NY: Liveright, 2013.