Harper, Michael S.

American poet

When he was 13, Brooklyn-born Michael Harper's family moved to a predominantly white neighborhood in Los Angeles, California. The move, Harper would recall later, along with the latent postwar racial tensions bubbling in this West Coast metropolis, were distressing enough to make Harper, who would later be called “Chief” by his friends and students, devote his life to writing poetry. After graduating from a local public high school, Harper first attended Los Angeles City College and later Los Angeles State College, where he graduated in 1961 with both bachelor's and master's degrees. While in Los Angeles, he took a job as a postal worker, a position central to Harper's development as a poet of the American experience. The system of the postal service would “play against your dreams, where you came from and where you wanted to go” (Rowell, 786). In the many long and monotonous hours, socializing with “nonstop talkers and monosyllabic wits” (Rowell, 786) taught Harper “the silences inherent in speech, and how to pace, by duration, a given story” (Rowell, 786). Such lessons have become manifest in much of the conversational musicality of Harper's poetry. The jazz that would inflect so much of Harper's poetry might have found its impetus in Billie Holiday, playing piano for the Harper household, or in Charles Mingus's sister, who worked long shifts alongside Harper at the post office.

In 1961, Harper moved east to attend the prestigious Iowa Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa, where he was the only black student in both his poetry and fiction classes. He received an M.F.A. in 1962. After completing his work at Iowa, Harper went on to teach writing at various universities, including Pasadena City College (1962), Contra Costa College (1964–1968), and California State College (1968–1969). In 1970, Harper took a position in the creative writing program at Brown University, where he is a university professor and professor of English. Harper has received many distinctions, including the Melville-Cane Award from the Poetry Society of Americas and the Robert Haydn Poetry Award from the United Negro College Fund. He has been recognized by grants and awards from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the Black Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Endowment of the Arts, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Library of Congress, and other institutions. He also served as Rhode Island's first poet laureate from 1988 to 1993.

While Harper's credentials mark him as a preeminent academic working in a university setting today, he is primarily identified as a prolific and productive poet. He has published more than 10 books of poetry, including Dear John, Dear Coltrane (1970), nominated for the National Book Award; History Is Your Heartbeat (1971); Nightmare Begins Responsibility (1975); Images of Kin (1977), also nominated for the National Book Award; Healing Song for the Inner Ear (1985); Honorable Amendments (1995); Songlines in Michael Tree (2000); and Selected Poems (2002). He has edited Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown (1980) and coedited, with Robert Steptlo, Chant of Saints: A Gathering of Afro-American Literature, Art, and Scholarship (1979) and, with Anthony Walton, Every Shut Eye Ain't Asleep: An Anthology of Poetry by African Americans since 1945 (1994).
Harper’s work continually wrestles with concepts of history and mythology. For Harper, these two notions, usually divided in American society between what is fact and what is fiction in an either/or fashion, have an important kinship: Neither is a completely whole version of human experience. Poetry is a medium through which a new notion of history and myth, one in which a more holistic, both/and, sense of the human experience of the universal can be accurately and compellingly depicted. In the compact and complex phrasings of Harper's poetic architectonics, personal history and national history are merged, often in the space of a single metaphor. In this way, Harper states, “the microcosm and the cosmos are united.” He incorporates this notion of poetry into a sense of what he has called “redefinitions and refinements of ‘an American self the American of nightmare, and waking up.”

In *Dear John, Dear Coltrane*, the American self is reconceptualized as one through which a figure like John Coltrane might prevail as an exemplary American citizen. “He stands as a banner for an attitude, a stance against the world,” Harper says of the prolific jazz saxophonist. This first collection of poetry, as well as his later works, reshape 19th-century meter with a quintessentially jazz-inflected rhythm. The language is syncopated; words and phrases are repeated, often multiple times; and just as jazz improvisation often quotes, or, to use a term coined by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “signifies on,” other material, so too does Harper’s verse. Historical moments, as well as the actions and experience of Harper’s friends, family members, colleagues, and artistic role models are all relevant material for the jazz poet to signify on.

*Nightmare Begins Responsibility* expands on the stylistics in *Dear John* by furthering an explicit notion of kinship. Often considered Harper’s richest volume, the poetry here addresses the central responsibility of the American individual to notions of empathy, to an awareness of one’s location within a particular history, as well as in the larger scene of a holistic universe. The network of relationships that grows out of this volume encompasses the kinship between Harper and a diversity of other “responsible” African-American literary and historical figures, including Ralph Albert Dickey and Jackie Robinson.

Key to *Dear John, Dear Coltrane, Nightmare Begins Responsibility*, and other, more recent works is a concept Harper calls “modality,” which “describes an environment larger than most words can contain” (O’Brien, 97–98). It is a technique that a poet at work can enter and exit from depending on the context of the work itself. Just as a musician can improvise a multitude of melodies in a single scale or mode, so too can the poet. In this way, historical information, folk knowledges, and multiple vocalities can be voiced in the same poem.

While Harper’s enduring legacy will most likely be his vast and intensive poetical reexamination of the experience of what it means to be American in the contemporary moment, one should also note the importance of his pedagogy to African-American studies. He has been a central and influential teacher to a generation of critics and poets, including Robert Dale Parker, Anthony Walton, Herman Beavers, and Suzanne Keen. Walton states that one of the key insights about books he learned in Harper’s classroom is that they “could be weapons, against ignorance, against forgetfulness, against revisionism” (808). Such a statement deeply resonates with Harper’s poetic output as well.

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