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The Facade of Names in Benjamin Clark's "The Emigrant"

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Benjamin Clark's poem "The Emigrant" frequently refers to America without naming it directly, which emphasizes his strained relationship with his country of birth and highlights the inherent lie of its concept of freedom. While writing poetry about the issues of racism in America was not unique at the time with poems like "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes or "I Build America" by Gwendolyn B. Bennet, much of this poetry relied on referencing America by name to make their points; Bennet names America seven times in her poem and Hughes more than doubles that with fifteen total mentions, thus establishing their accusatory tones toward America. Clark's poem stands apart here; his refusal to give a direct name to America displays how the speaker feels conflicted with his identity as a Black man in America. Despite being born in America the speaker refuses to address his country by name which emphasizes his distaste for the racism that was so present in the twentieth century. The vague and unidentifiable references to his destination of emigration represent how dreamlike a world without racism feels, considering that oppression is all he has known as a Black man in America. Clark's poem tears down the false promises of America by removing the power behind its name.

Clark's disinterest in names is made clear from the very beginning of the poem; even the title "The Emigrant" purposely leaves out any details of where the speaker is emigrating to and identifies him by his relationship to the unnamed country rather than by name. Clark's title establishes the speaker of the poem as "The Emigrant" immediately, and this instant identification contrasts with the omission of America's name throughout the poem. The speaker's first address to America does establish a certain level of appreciation for it, although

his decision to leave it unnamed hints at his problems with the country: “Adieu to the land of my birth –” (Clark, 1). The word “Adieu” leads us to believe that parting from his country is an emotional event because it can be used to display regret over the loss of something in addition to when bidding someone farewell (Clark, 1). However, his refusal to name the country directly implies that the speaker feels shame for his home country. His disdain is made clear in the following line: “Proud land of the slave and the free!” (Clark, 2). This line makes it clear that the speaker is American but is somewhat sarcastic in its delivery; the implication that America is “Proud” to be a land of slavery displays the speaker’s anger at his country for portraying a false image of freedom (Clark, 2). Clark’s decision to prioritize slavery over freedom in the word order of this line represents America’s refusal to solve its problems of racism, instead continuing to promote false promises of being a free land. This line echoes the final line of the national anthem, “Land of the free and the home of the brave,” further hinting at America’s identity and making a mockery out of the country’s false values of freedom. By replacing America’s name with this biting sarcastic description, Clark is removing the facade of freedom that America so outwardly displays.

The second stanza of the poem continues to reference America vaguely, creating a crescendo of anger from the speaker towards his country that culminates in the fourth stanza. Clark’s speaker further ridicules the false promises of America by referring to it as a “Boasted land of the free” (Clark, 5). Clark’s speaker repeats the word “land” in an attempt to remove America’s significance in his life; by reducing his home country to the literal “land” as opposed to a nation, he is deliberately refusing to recognize America and separating himself from the cruel treatment he has been forced to endure (Clark, 5). However, it is still only an attempt to do so; the repetition of the word “land” also implies that his home country is constantly on his mind. The speaker will never be able to fully disassociate from America because it is an

undeniable part of his identity, despite the cruel treatment that he experienced there (Clark, 5). The word “boasted” continues the poem’s ironic tone and reiterates that despite America’s grand promises of freedom, racism still permeates society selectively deciding who can be truly free (Clark, 5). Additionally, the word “boast” can be used to describe the creation of a threat, which subtly identifies America’s darker side of systematic racism that was less obvious to the rest of the world (Clark, 5). This definition of the word hints towards the “contumely and scorn” that the speaker describes suffering from a line later (Clark, 6).

The speaker’s complex relationship with his home country is made even more heartbreaking by the juxtaposition between his reality and his imagined destination in the third stanza. The lack of specific names reveals the speaker’s despair because he is unable to fathom a place that could be rid of the racism that he has experienced in America. The refusal to name a location is less of a choice here; the speaker is wistfully imagining “places on earth” that are “untainted by slavery’s breath” (Clark, 9-10). The fact that he is willing to scour the entire “earth” to find a place where racism doesn’t exist shows how affected the speaker is by his upbringing in America (Clark, 9). The speaker’s identity has been entirely dedicated to freeing himself from the grips of racism, even if it results in his demise: “I’ll find them, or search the world round / Till my sorrows are ended in death.” (Clark, 11-12). This hypothetical scenario that the speaker creates is the opposite of his life in America, and his decision to not name a place that might be better stems from a fear of setting expectations too high. Based on his own experience, slavery is near impossible to escape, and by creating a vague image of a location in his mind his hopes can remain intact.

The poem’s fourth stanza is the culmination of the speaker’s resentment towards his own country, where the concept of names appears in the poem for the first time. Instead of subtly using sarcasm to disagree with the facade of America’s freedom, the speaker outright

calls out the hypocrisy of his country: “Thy liberty is but a name— / A byword—a jargon, in fine!” (Clark, 13-14). This line reveals the reasoning behind the speaker’s contempt for names: they create a facade that is rarely accurate to the reality of the country. His clarification of what names are in the fourteenth line supports this further; the word “byword” implies that names are pieces of fiction and are used to teach ideas or lessons instead of showing by example (Clark, 14). The word “jargon” gives even less meaning to names, implying that they are utterly useless and provide no actual information about the object they describe (Clark, 14). The lively tone of these lines is the most passionate voice that we see from the speaker, considering that he maintains a civil (while still angry) tone for the first two stanzas. These lines come just after the poem’s midpoint which creates a feeling similar to an epiphany as the speaker comes to terms with the overt lie of America’s notion of freedom. This confrontational moment is the crux of the poem, and the following stanzas look toward the speaker’s future after accepting his removal from America.

The poem’s final two stanzas create a sense of finality by mentioning a somewhat concrete destination for the speaker’s emigration, although no name is used. The first line of the fifth stanza, “Adieu to thy stripes and thy stars” again identifies America, now by the flag that flies over American ships while further emphasizing the speaker’s dedication to leaving his past behind him in his journey (Clark, 17). The repetition of the word “Adieu” shows how distant he has become from any notion of freedom that Americans conjure about their country (Clark, 17). The speaker’s final assertion of “I go to the Isles of the Sea” gives a vague destination to his search for a country without racism, however, the change in verb tense along with the lack of specificity creates a tone that is almost too optimistic (Clark, 21). Regardless of whether the speaker will find freedom in his new location, the act of leaving his “native land” is powerful enough to rebel against the facade of American freedom (Clark, 24). The final

reference to America being “My native land” reveals a level of grim acceptance of the speaker’s past as he moves into a new chapter of his life (Clark, 24).

“The Emigrant” is a very unorthodox poem because of its passionate criticism of America without using direct names. One of the most frequently used words in place of the country’s name is “land.” While Clark echoes the idea of slavery tainting American land in the works of Bennet and Hughes, his refusal to give power to names elevates it beyond his contemporaries. Clark’s poem doesn’t allow his past trauma to define his identity; he instead removes the power behind his home country’s name and declares his identity as a man on a hopeful quest for his deserved freedom. Clark’s speaker’s complex identity is displayed through his reluctance to buy into the facade of the American name.

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