

The Black Unicorn: Line Breaks, Punctuation, & Double Meanings, Oh My!

While Audre Lorde's 1978 *The Black Unicorn* was not one of my favorite poetry collections, respectfully (apples and oranges – no discredit to Lorde's undeniable talent), throughout my time reading and analyzing it, I couldn't help but notice her technical feats and mastery. Notably, how her line breaks are strategic and intentional, often giving the lines – and the thoughts behind them – multiple meanings. Furthermore, her minimalistic approach to punctuation allows her words to flow sonically, opening the lines to numerous interpretations. To clarify, in this exploration of Lorde's work, a “ / ” will indicate a line break.

In *For Assata, New Brunswick Prison, 1977*, Lorde writes:

“In this new picture your smile has been to war
you are almost obscured by other faces
on the pages
those shadows are sisters
who have not yet spoken...” (Lorde, 28)

Here, “on the pages” not only concludes the description of the person in the picture from the preceding two lines but also introduces a new description of the picture carried on by the following lines. “You are almost obscured by other faces / on the pages” (Lorde, 28) isn't a conclusion, as “on the pages” can also fit with “those shadows are sisters.” Here, Lorde allows the poem to speak for itself without smothering it by not including punctuation. Here is another example from *In Margaret's Garden*:

“When I first saw you blooming the color was now
protests sprang from your rapid hands
like a second set of fingers
you were learning to use
the betrayal of others
in place of your own pain...” (Lorde, 48)

The simile in the third line, “like a second set of fingers” (Lorde, 48), furthers the thought from the previous line, allowing it to be read as so, “protests sprang from your rapid hands like a second set of fingers” (Lorde, 48). But the line doesn’t end with any punctuation; therefore, when you’re reading the piece, you can allow that line to flow and connect with the fourth line, giving the third line a new interpretation when it’s read as “like a second set of fingers you were learning to use” (Lorde, 48).

As a final example of this element of Lorde, take the second stanza of *Coniagui Women*:

“Boys burst from the raised loins...
they run...
avoiding the sweet flesh
hidden
near their mother’s fire
but they must take her blood as a token” (Lorde, 8)

In this case, breaking the line at “flesh” and allowing hidden to serve on a line of its own gives the stanza two meanings while seamlessly transitioning the narrative/chain of thought. The stanza begins with describing the little boys of the Coniagui women, how they beat other women and avoid the sweet flesh. Now, “hidden” serves as a descriptor of said flesh, but it also introduces a new image of the boys hiding by the fires of the mothers (the Coniagui women). However, reading these lines as one quickly (thanks to the absence of punctuation), you could interpret it as the boys avoiding the flesh hidden near the physical location of their mother’s fire. There are countless more examples of this throughout the collection, but this is the overall goal Lorde’s line breaks and minimalist punctuation serve.

As a writer still learning, this has allowed me to reflect on how a piece can remain “open” instead of “closed.” Lorde has shown that an open text is not solely dependent on its diction, syntax, language, meaning, or themes. Rather, a text can be “open” (to interpretation) due to the technicalities – where you break lines, where you place punctuation (and where you do not). This mastery of such specifics reaffirms the saying *in poetry, it’s not what you say, it’s how you say it*. As a writer, speaking from experience, we sometimes overwhelm our work and forget to allow the poem to do what *it* wants to do. A lot of times, less it more. In some ways, incorporating

punctuation into every line robs the reader of the option to take multiple interpretations from the piece through the way they arrange thoughts in connection to the flow of the line(s). Ironically, I see the basis of this argument while still being a very punctuation—melopoeia-heavy writer. Similar to many writers, I often use commas and dashes to indicate where the reader should take a pause. But I have been trying to remain conscious of the possibilities that can become reality by simply giving the line(s) room to breathe. With that being said, I leave you with a poem of mine that takes some technical inspiration from the previous points made. The first format is the original structure, and the second is a rework, with Lorde's technical use in mind. While writing, I was reaffirmed of the skill Lorde is applying. It's not as simple as breaking a line here and removing a punctuation there – certain words have to fit with both the preceding and following lines. It's definitely, for me, not an element that will write itself; instead, it's a skill that needs flexing.

fermented rice wine

Hot sake scorching plains of cleared meadows
stretched across her wounds a babe is bestowed life
and given the taking of living

in the room fashioned purely for sitting
with the cantankerous ivory of bone cancer
all the springs within the davenport aflame

colors her cheeks – he thinks the flush of red is his doing
English Walnut refectory table shaking from the goblets
of cherry wine with notes of the sweat from an 80s mosh pit

stop where he releases her as water in his hands
upheaving the Earth's veins through the barren soil on which she lands
cold dry sherry anchoring in the later months, a mother becomes sin

fully present but never aware. Arizona diners
and maps crinkled about the dashboard – a white lotus in her hair
her cape a transparent apron because her bosoms never stopped all the leaking
of her loins.