Beware: Do Not Read This Poem

Ishmael Reed 1970

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“Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” was included in Ishmael Reed’s first volume of poetry, *Catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo church: Poems*, written by the end of 1968 but first published in 1970. The poem was then reprinted in Reed’s second volume of poetry, *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970* (1972), which was nominated for a National Book Award for poetry in 1973, the same year his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) was nominated for the National Book Award for fiction. What one critic has said about Reed applies exceedingly well to “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem”: “Ishmael Reed’s importance to contemporary literary studies stems in part from his ability to channel his encyclopedic historical, political, and cultural knowledge into syncretic poetry and prose that resonate with the voices of diverse ethnicities, locations, and eras.”

Reed was a key figure in the Black Arts Movement; as a poet, he rejected established forms and introduced a new black poetry. “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” employs colloquial language, nontraditional spelling, innovative typography, and unexpected rhythms. The poem is a cautionary tale whose title is a warning. It begins by describing a vain “ol woman” whose obsession with mirrors leads to her disappearance. In the next section, the scene changes to the most present of moments, the time during which the reader is reading the poem. The concept presented here is that a poem is an entity able to engulf and devour the reader—another kind of disappearance. Finally, in the last lines, Reed offers grim statistics concerning the number of people who disappeared during just one year in the United States. The form of the poem ties the various story lines together; with unexplained spaces around punctuation and between words, Reed reinforces a theme of isolation and loss.

**Author Biography**

Eminent scholar Henry Louis Gates called Ishmael Reed “the enfant terrible of black letters [who] may represent the culmination of the postmodern moment in American culture.” Reed was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, on February 22, 1938. His father was a fund-raiser for the YMCA and his mother, a homemaker, also held various jobs. His stepfather, from whom he gets his last name, was an autoworker. When Reed was four years old, his family relocated to Buffalo, New York. At age fifteen, Reed began a job delivering copies of *The Empire Star Weekly*, an independent newspaper. After a year, the editor of the *Star* allowed the teenager to write his first columns and jazz articles, which were characterized by what Reed called “a pungent writing style.” He enrolled in night school at the State University of New York in 1956 and here wrote his first piece of fiction, “Something Pure,” a piece of existentialist fantasy. His English instructor raved about the piece and initiated a petition, signed by members of the English department, that allowed Reed admittance into day school, where he noted he was “quite a celebrity” in English classes. In 1960, however, Reed dropped out of school because, he explained, “I became bored with the university and found that I did some of my best work outside it.” He returned to a job at the *Empire Star Weekly*, writing on assorted topics, and married his first wife, with whom he had one daughter. During this time Reed also conducted interviews on a radio show called “Buffalo Community Roundtable.” The show was canceled after Reed interviewed controversial Nation of Islam spokesman Malcolm X. Reed subsequently left his job and wife in Buffalo and moved to New York City to nurture his career.

In New York, Reed met writer/intellectual Amiri Baraka at the Umbra Workshop, where Reed said he became acquainted with the techniques of “the Afro-American literary style.” In 1965, Reed launched a newspaper, *Advance*, in Newark, New Jersey, but it folded after only ten weeks. The short-lived paper inspired the *East Village Other*, one of New York’s first important underground newspapers.
Ishmael Reed

In 1967, Reed published his first novel, *The Free Lance Pallbearers*; soon afterward, he moved to Berkeley, California, and began teaching. In 1970, he divorced his first wife and married his second, Carla Blank, a modern dancer with whom he would have his second daughter in 1977. That same year, Reed also published his first volume of poetry, *Catechism of the neoamerican hoodoo church*, which included “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem.”

Reed has written nine novels, five volumes of poetry, and four collections of essays. He cofounded Yardbird Publishing; founded Reed, Cannon, and Johnson Publishing; started the Before Columbus Foundation devoted to the production and distribution of works by unknown “ethnic” writers; and, later, began the publishing company I Reed Books. Reed has taught at America’s most prestigious universities, including Yale, Dartmouth, Columbia, Harvard, the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the University of Arkansas. His awards include the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Award for fiction, three New York state and three National Endowment for the Arts publishing grants for merit, and the Pushcart Prize in 1979 for his essay “American Poetry: Is There a Center?” Reed has continued his multifaceted literary work, writing plays and a libretto set to Bobby McFerrin’s music for the San Francisco Opera Company and editing two Before Columbus Foundation collections of fiction and poetry. In 1995, Reed earned an honorary doctorate from his alma mater, the State University of New York, Buffalo.

Poem Text

tonite, thriller was
abt an ol woman, so vain she
surrounded her self w /
many mirrors

it got so bad that finally she
locked herself indoors & her
whole life became the
mirrors

one day the villagers broke
into her house, but she was too

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swift for them . she disappeared
into a mirror
each tenant who bought the house
after that, lost a loved one to
the ol woman in the mirror :
    first a little girl
    then a young woman
    then the young woman /s husband

the hunger of this poem is legendary
it has taken in many victims
    back off from this poem
    it has drawn in yr feet
    back off from this poem
    it has drawn in yr legs
    back off from this poem
    it is a greedy mirror
you are into this poem . from
the waist down
nobody can hear you can they ?
this poem has had you up to here
    belch
this poem aint got no manners
you cant call out frm this poem
relax now & go w/ this poem
move & roll on to this poem

do not resist this poem
this poem has yr eyes
this poem has his head
this poem has his arms
this poem has his fingers
this poem has his fingertips

this poem is the reader & the
reader this poem

statistic: the us bureau of missing persons reports
    that in 1968 over 100,000 people disappeared
    leaving no solid clues
    nor trace only
    a space in the lives of their friends

Poem Summary

Lines 1-4

Thriller is the name of a television program that ran from 1960 to 1962; it was similar to the more well-known Twilight Zone series and usually focused on ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. These first lines summarize the plot of one particular program, which, in the second part of the poem, will become the basis of a comparison between looking into mirrors and reading poetry.

Lines 5-8

The woman gets more and more involved with looking at herself, never leaving her house of mirrors.
Reed does not say why the villagers broke into the house nor how the woman actually disappeared into a mirror—probably because such explanations do not impact the point he will be making. The reader must simply regard the fantasy as ground for what follows.

The recounting of the *Thriller* episode ends with new tenants losing loved ones to the old woman in the mirror. Again, we do not know why, but we might guess that the old woman is desirous of company. One thing is common to all of the people whom the old lady grabs: they are young.

The scene now shifts to the terrain of the poem itself—the actual words that the reader is contemplating. The poem is compared to a “greedy mirror,” as if the poem—like the mirror—had an old woman inside of it who desperately wanted company. In these lines, the reader is taken feet first and swallowed up to the waist. Interesting here is how Reed comments on the poem he is writing; he makes one poem into two by saying that the poem has existed long enough for its hunger to be “legendary.” The reason might be that as the mirrors stand for mirrors in general, this poem also stands for poems in general. In other words, this poem is meant as an example of the species, poetry, more than an individual piece of writing that just happens to be a poem. Poems absorb readers and, specifically, engross them bodily and viscerally. They have always done this, and that is why their power is “legendary.”

A cassette titled *Ishmael Reed Reading His Poetry* is available from Temple at Zeus at Cornell University, 1976.

A film titled *Ishmael Reed and Michael Harper Reading in the University of California, San Diego New Poetry Series* was released by the university in 1977.

Reed appears on a phonograph record, *New Jazz Poets* on AR Records.

Though the reader reads, he or she makes no sound. It is the poem that “makes” the sound and unreels the words, or, in this case, belches as it takes the reader in, perhaps too quickly. The poem has no manners not just because it belches, but because it does not ask permission to swallow the reader and, in fact, attempts to steal him or her. The greedy individual inside of the poem will be even more gratified to snatch the reader if, at first, the reader is opposed to being overwhelmed.

At this point, the poem is attempting to hypnotize the reader to not resist any longer and, instead, “go with the flow.” Whereas before the reader was swallowed feet first, this time it is head first.
Now the swallowing is complete, and the reader merges with the poem. Such a sentiment harkens back to Wallace Stevens’s “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” (1946), where “the reader became the book.” Notice that Reed does not say that the reader becomes the poet, but only the poem. This distinction was also made earlier, when the people absorbed into the mirror did not become the old woman, but just disappeared as themselves inside the mirror.

Lines 44-48

These lines, as if outside the poem, caution the reader not to become too involved in poetry because the engrossed reader is a person not engaging with society. The statistic regarding missing persons ends the poem on a serious aftertaste. While the statistic exaggerates the absorption of the reader by comparing him or her to a missing person, the poem seriously addresses the power of words and literature to so engage readers that they become bookworms and exhibit antisocial behavior. Reed seems to counsel: “Read, but don’t lose touch. Read, but resist becoming the poem or letting the poem possess you.” The lesson is similar when it comes to looking in mirrors; looking too much might encourage you to see only what you want or to desire yourself as did Narcissus. This highly unique, perhaps even paradoxical sentiment comes from a poem we are in the process of reading.

Themes

Isolation

The old woman introduced in the first stanza gets caught up in the mirrors and isolates herself from others. The mind-set of the villagers who break into her house is not explained; they could merely be checking up on her out of concern for her well-being, or her strange behavior may have provoked them into a confrontation. The old woman is so interested in avoiding the villagers that she escapes into a mirror. We cannot be certain whether the mirrors caused the old woman’s isolation or simply contributed to it, but, whatever the case, the woman, once in the mirror world, appears to have found that she is alone there—that she no longer has her reflection to keep her company. In the mirror world, the woman is probably alone and that could be the reason she steals people from the other side—to keep her company. Poems are similar to the woman’s mirrors in that they attempt to absorb readers. A reader who immerses him- or herself in poetry can become withdrawn from others and, in that isolation, look desperately for some connection in the words of others. Solipsism, the theory that the self is the whole of reality, can be an easy way out of dealing with more difficult friendships, relationships, and ideas. Reed cautions us to beware of privately indulging ourselves, of constant reinforcement with our own image. Because no matter how much we multiply our image in the mirror or read poetry that speaks back to us our feelings and thoughts, we remain within our own little world—a world lacking the dimensions of criticism, praise, or feedback from others.

Perception

The old woman who disappeared into the mirror world snatches only young people from the real world. Alone and unreflected inside the mirror, she now desires the companionship of younger people. Or perhaps it is less a need for companionship than a selfish desire to surround herself with youth and deceive herself into thinking that she, herself, is young. She may even have deluded herself about her age before she disappeared into the mirror, based on her isolation and her obsession with her reflection. Forever looking into mirrors allows one to forget how much one is changing and getting older, because one is not able to assimilate all the small changes. When you have not seen someone for a long time, they look much older, whereas viewing your own image in the mirror everyday, you appear to almost stay the same age.

This looking into the mirror that makes us forget our age, then, is a way to slow time and thwart knowledge of death by
keeping us perpetually preoccupied with a present that looks like the past. Such preoccupation leaves us unprepared for not only the shock of realizing one’s age, but that one is going to die. This is why Michel de Montaigne (1533-92), in his essay “That to Philosophize is to Learn to Die,” counsels staring into the face of death:

Let us have nothing on our minds as often as death. At every moment let us picture it in our imagination in all its aspects…. Amid feasting and gaiety let us ever keep in mind this refrain, the memory of our condition; and let us never allow ourselves to be so carried away by pleasure that we do not sometimes remember in how many ways the happiness of ours is a prey to death, and how death’s clutches threaten it…. He who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave. Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraint. There is nothing evil in life for the man who has thoroughly grasped the fact that to be deprived of life is not an evil.

If Montaigne’s philosophy of confronting aging and death was shared by both the old woman and readers, then we would not need to retreat to—and get lost in—reassuring images in mirrors and books.

Sidebar: Hide

Topics for Further Study

- Write a poem or short essay using a television show as the subject.
- Discuss and then write about the differences between watching television and reading, or more specifically, between watching a television soap opera or miniseries and reading a novel.
- Discuss and then write about how reading is not only like dying, but also like resurrection.

Style

“Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” is written in free verse, which means there is no established pattern of rhyme and it is devoid of regular stanzas and meter. Perhaps the most striking thing about the poem, however, is its nontraditional spelling and punctuation, a trait common to many of Reed’s early poems. In an interview with Lee Bartlett, Reed explained, “Well, I was living in New York when my early poems were written, and the thing then was to be experimental. We thought that using slashes and ‘wd’ instead of ‘would’ was experimental writing.” “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” also is characterized by unshackled punctuation; commas, periods, question marks, and colons are set with a space on either side, which frees the punctuation marks from the phrase, clause, or sentence to which they are usually thought to belong. The typographical elements are unexpected and unfamiliar, which contribute to the unease created by the poem. The spaces scattered throughout the text also serve to reinforce the idea of loss and disappearance that the poem examines.

Historical Context

America’s post-World War II years, the 1940s and 1950s, prepared the ground for 1960s unrest with increasing comfort levels that were the result of a boom in production and a new high in private

Sidebar: Hide

Compare & Contrast

- 1970: In northern Peru, a massive earthquake, which included the Mount Huascarán avalanche, kills between 50,000
1970: In one of the worst disasters of the century, a cyclone and accompanying massive sea wave kills 150,000 to 200,000 people in eastern Pakistan (later Bangladesh).

1998: Honduras and Nicaragua are hit by massive earthquakes that kill an estimated 10,000 people.

• 1970: Black Panther Party leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark are killed by Chicago police.

1999: A fence separating buried blacks from buried whites in a cemetery in Jasper, Texas, is torn down in memory of James Byrd, Jr., an African American killed in the summer of 1998. Three white supremacists, two of them former prison inmates, are held and accused of beating, stripping, and chaining Byrd to the back of a truck, then dragging him for three miles.

• 1970: In his work *Infallible? An Inquiry*, Swiss theologian Hans Küng becomes the first modern major Roman Catholic figure to reject the idea of the pope’s infallibility. He was later disciplined by the Vatican and forbidden to teach theology under Catholic auspices.

1999: Pope John Paul II visits St. Louis, Missouri, and speaks out against the death penalty. In private, he pleads with the governor of Missouri to spare the life of a prisoner sentenced for execution. The governor grants the pope his request and stops the execution.

wealth. The result was two generations: those born in the 1920s and educated in the prosperous war and postwar years, and those born during or just after the war, the baby-boom generation, a generation born into the practice of mass and massive consumption. These two generations were lucky enough to have both leisure time and education enough to think about things other than economic security. Even African Americans, who were disadvantaged in comparison with their white counterparts, benefited from the war years; this period saw an increase in the number of educated, non-impoverished black youth. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, was born into relative economic security, received a college education in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and did his work with civil rights in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The first and most important result of the rising tide of economic prosperity was the Civil Rights Movement, which spanned the period of 1954 to 1965 and is credited with sparking all other American movements of this period: the antinuclear, antiwar, feminist, gay and lesbian, Native American, and environmental movements. The Civil Rights Movement also inspired struggles for freedom in other parts of the world. In 1965, three years before the publication of “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem,” the last major piece of federal legislation, the Voting Rights Act, was signed into law; it was the latest in a series of federal acts aimed to stop state-sanctioned discrimination against black Americans. This was also the year that the pacifism of the Civil Rights Movement is said to have withered: Malcolm X was assassinated, some think by his own colleagues in the Nation of Islam; the Watts Rebellion and other uprisings exploded across the nation; the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) became equated with the Black Power movement; and the confrontational Black Panther Party was born. African Americans seemed through with keeping their anger bottled up. While on the one hand, the Civil Rights Movement produced a whole series of splits in the body politic—among blacks, among whites, and between blacks and whites—it also forced many to heal the split, to take a stand on race as they had never done before.

While whites and blacks fought at home, the U.S. government engaged the Vietnamese abroad. The covert war ended in 1964, and in 1965 America overtly carried on its first extended and extensive bombing attack of Vietnam (Operation Rolling Thunder) and sent in its first regular combat troops, which, by the end of 1965, totaled 185,000. Between 1965 and 1966,
the CIA estimated 36,000 casualties in North Vietnam, 29,000 of which were civilians. Reports of civilian casualties ignited
the burgeoning antiwar movement, which came together nonviolently in its first march on Washington in 1965—a march put
together by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). In the same year, at the University of Michigan, the first teach-ins
against the Vietnam War were held, and at the University of California at Berkeley, the Vietnam Day Committee sponsored
a thirty-six hour event presenting both sides of the war. Shortly thereafter, in 1966, the offices of the Vietnam Day
Committee were bombed. In 1967, Reed began teaching at Berkeley. In an interview where he talks about being denied
tenure there in 1977, he said that a reason cited by a faculty member was that Reed had canceled classes at Berkeley. Reed
responded this way in a 1977 interview: “… during the bombing of the campus, with tear gas and antipersonnel weapons, as
well as three gases outlawed by the Geneva Convention, I wrote a letter to James Hart, then head of the English department.
I said when I signed up to teach a course, I wasn’t volunteering to fight in a war … so I cancelled one summer course.” The
gassing of Berkeley is reported to have taken place in the summer of 1969 at the culmination of a struggle over People’s
Park, a University of California parking lot seized by students and then cooperatively turned into a public park in April of
1969. On May 15, after the park was already constructed, the University retook it. When a violent confrontation between
students and police occurred a week or so later, then-governor Ronald Reagan sent in the National Guard. A rally on the
university campus protesting the continuing presence of the National Guard turned violent; helicopters dropped tear and
nausea gas, and an estimated 100 students were wounded by shotgun blasts. One youth, James Rector, was killed.

Critical Overview

“Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” appeared in Reed’s first poetry collection, catechism of d neoamerican hoodoo
church: Poems, and was reprinted in Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970. While Conjure was nominated for a
National Book Award, the book did not receive substantial critical attention. Most critics choose to focus on Reed’s prose
and his attempt to create a black aesthetic called Neo-HooDoo rather than his poetry. Though Reed discussed other poems
in his foreword to Conjure, “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” is passed over in silence. The poem was included,
however, in Dudley Randall’s influential anthology The Black Poets in 1971. In a survey of Reed’s work for Dictionary of
Literary Biography, Caroline G. Bokinsky noted that Conjure “contains … poems that echo the musical and rhythmical
quality of the black dialect,” but added that “Although the poems attain lyrical excellence, Reed’s anger permeates the
poetry.”

Criticism

Lynn Davidson

Lynn Davidson has a master’s degree in English literature and writes poetry and fiction. In the following essay,
Davidson investigates how “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” challenges the canon of Western literature.

American poet and activist Ishmael Reed is one of America’s preeminent African-American writers and certainly one of its
most controversial. His outspoken judgment of individuals—both black and white—and his denunciation in novels, essays,
and poetry of racial divisions in America have attracted both awards and harsh criticism from literary critics and the popular
press.

Reed’s body of work is almost entirely satiric in nature. He uses parody, irony, and jokes to challenge American political,
religious, and literary repression. Reed believes that the pen truly is mightier than the sword, and the device he most often
reaches for to carry his message is irony. In “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem,” the irony is part of the structure of the
poem and creates the double meaning that runs through it. Irony is a double-edged sword and, as such, a powerful way of
opening up interaction, or debate, with the reader. Reed is very aware that there is a person on each side of the poem (the
poet and the reader), and he acknowledges the often comical or bewildering complexity of human interaction in “Beware: Do
What Do I Read Next?

- The anthology *The Sixties Papers*, edited by Judith and Stewart Albert, consists of documents and essays by the leading lights of the 1960s (C. Wright Mills, Allen Ginsberg, Malcolm X, etc.) and on the leading struggles (antiwar, counter-culture, feminist). The volume is introduced by an overview of the 1960s.
- Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1953), is one of the most important books of literary criticism. The subject of the book is the attempt at realism through a history of literary representation or imitation.
- George Bataille’s *The Literature of Evil* (1985) is a study of Emily Bronte, Baudelaire, Michelet, William Blake, Sade, Proust, Kafka, and Genet. Bataille, one of the major theorists of the twentieth century, writes that, “To reproduce oneself is to disappear.”
- Plato’s *Collected Dialogues* (1961), is an indispensable reference book for the humanities student. Included here is the complete *Republic*, in which Socrates discusses whether poets should be banished from his ideal state.

Read *This Poem*: “back off from this poem / it has drawn in yr feet.” The title reads like a warning sign one sees on a building site or factory: “Beware: Dangerous Chemicals” or “Beware: Do Not Enter Site Without a Hard Hat.” Reed is probably aware of the very human temptation to challenge such a bald directive. He may be suggesting that there is something in the poem that will disturb the reader. The irony here is that this is “just” a poem. How could words on paper present a danger? Is this a joke? Of course it is, isn’t it? Already, the reader is in “two minds” about the experience of the poem—just as Reed intended. Reed knows that it takes more than one “mind,” or one entrenched viewpoint, to debate an issue. He refers to the sparring of dual viewpoints in his writing as “boxing on paper.” In juxtaposing opposing forces or ideas on the page, Reed creates a tension in the poem so that ideas can move around, test their muscle—effectively “box it out.” Reed has said, “Regardless of the criticisms I receive from the left, the right and the middle, I think it’s important to maintain a prolific writing jab, as long as my literary legs hold up.”

The first four stanzas of “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” involve the retelling of a story—a thriller. Perhaps this thriller is a movie the narrator has seen on television. In reading the first two stanzas, one has the impression that the narrator is sitting down with a group of friends in a relaxed situation, retelling a story that has captured his imagination. However, he is speaking in the present tense: “tonite, thriller was.” There is immediacy and instant contact with the reader, which comes as a surprise after the warning tone of the title. The story’s colloquial language, with its missing words and word contractions (“abt an ol woman”), evokes the African-American oral storytelling tradition. In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Robert S. Friedman recounted how, in 1985, Reed asserted that his aesthetic “owes more to the Afro-American oral tradition and to folk art than to any literary tradition. The oral tradition includes techniques like satire, hyperbole, invective and bawdiness…. It’s a comic tradition in the same way that the Native American tradition is comic…. I use a lot of techniques that are Western and many that are Afro-American.” His syncretism serves as the base of a satiric wit that spares no one. “It’s a way of subverting the wishes of the people in power,” he maintains.

In stanzas three and four, this very colloquial language changes pace a little into more general storytelling terminology: “one day” and “but she was too / swift for them.” This change in tone shifts the story toward the weightier concept of mythology and lesson learning, the work of myths and legends being to explain ourselves to ourselves. In this context, the vain old woman has been consumed by her own reflection—her own mythology—to the exclusion of the rest of the world: “her / whole life became the / mirrors.” This poem is about mythology, culture, and reflections of self. Locked inside her house, this vain old woman symbolizes the ethnocentric belief that the whole world is like her, or, if it differs from her, it is somehow
wrong or “less” than she is. The old woman loses her connection with the rest of her life, and she becomes cut off from her roots. The “villagers” who represent a healthy diversity and community life are too late to save her from herself; they have become “outsiders.” The villagers are “different,” and the old woman escapes them by disappearing into the mirror. The mirror is a sterile country within which nothing can flourish naturally except illusion. The mirror is hungry. The mirror is an institution that only knows self-love. One could see the analogy here between the vain old woman and Western civilization’s long history of believing itself to be the only “real” civilization. With this in mind, it is interesting to consider another story that is retold in this poem—the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus.

Narcissus was a beautiful young man who was much desired by youths and maidens in his community. However, Narcissus was so proud that no one dared to touch him. One day Narcissus lay down at a spring to quench his thirst and, in the spring’s clear water, saw his own reflection. He gazed in wonder at his beauty, and soon fell deeply in love with his reflection. Eventually, reaching into the water to try and embrace his own image, he fell into the spring and drowned. In Classical Mythology by Mark Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, a section of the Narcissus myth in Ovid’s Metamorphoses is reproduced: He marveled at all of the things that others had marveled at in him. Unwise and unheeding, he desired his very self; one and the same person approving and being approved, seeking and being sought, inflaming and being inflamed He did not understand what he was looking at but was inflamed by what he saw, and the same illusion that deceived his eyes aroused his passion.

This tragic story of self-love and self-destruction is one that has been retold in many forms throughout literary history. Why did Reed use this story, given that Greek mythology is at the center of Western European civilization? Why did he allow this powerful story to cast its spell over a poem about racism and exclusion? The answer, I think, is to be aware that this poem is not saying black culture is good and white culture is bad. In including the mythology of Narcissus, Reed is acknowledging both the richness of Western culture and the tragedy that it fell in love with itself, thus entering a relationship of deception, sterility, and exclusivity.

In stanza five, there is an abrupt shift of point of view, from telling the story of the hungry mirror into the immediate, dangerous hunger of the poem. This hunger is “legendary.” Reed might be warning that this poem also has a long tradition that may or may not be reflecting an emptiness into which the reader could disappear. The narrator entreats the reader to “back off from this poem,” as though it were a bomb about to explode or a gun.

Sidebar: Hide

“By literally drawing the reader into the poem, Reed demonstrates how poems can also be mirrors within which we can be lost if the experience of the poem negates our culture or presence on the earth.”

about to fire. However, in line 3 of the fifth stanza, the reader is in the poem. The narrator’s point of view has shifted again—from warning the reader against the poem, to telling the reader how far he or she is already “lost” in the poem: “you are in this poem. from / the waist down.”

The way the poem changes shape and point of view, its metamorphosis into which the reader is drawn, is an example of the colorful mixture and magic of Reed’s writing. Reed believes that the black artist should function as a conjuror. To this end, he devised the concept of Neo-HooDoo, a modern version of the old idea of Voodoo, or “Black magic.” In Contemporary Poets, Charles L. James wrote: “Reed’s poetry is committed to no style, save ‘The Neo-HooDoo Aesthetic,’ the title of one of his poems.” A passage from “Neo-HooDoo Manifesto” iterates the point. “Neo-HooDoo believes that every man is an artist and every artist a priest. You can bring your own creative ideas to Neo-HooDoo…. Reed has developed the view that the black artist should function as a ‘conjuror’ who employs Neo-HooDoo as a means of freeing his fellow victims from the psychic attack of their oppressors.”
“Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” parallels the magic in western mythology with the more ancient and non-Western source of “black magic.” The black poet is a “conjurer”; the poem is a shape changer. The familiar becomes unfamiliar; the poet shakes us up just as we get a foothold on the poem. We, the readers, are made to see through different eyes and different points of view.

In stanza six, the line “nobody can hear you can they?” is a sinister high point in the poem. The “you” in the poem is silenced and isolated. The tone of the narrator is knowing, as though this entrapment was planned. The poem belches rudely; it is not well-mannered or pleasing (“this poem aint got no manners”). In a total shift from the warnings of stanza five and the first two lines of stanza six, the narrator begins to champion the poem. Stanza six reads almost like a rape scene, in that the reader is trapped, silenced and told not to “resist”: “you cant call out frm this poem / relax now & go w/ this poem / move & roll on to this poem // do not resist this poem.”

It moves from the personal “yr” in “this poem has yr eyes” to the impersonal pronoun “his” in “this poem has his head.” The poem has moved into an area of extreme discomfort. This is not the experience one expects when reading a poem; one does not expect trickery, muteness, and rape. A question rises out of this discomfort: is this negation of self in the poem what black students experience when they read through the canon of (white) English Literature? Is this why Ishmael Reed—in the foreword to his *Conjure: Selected Poems, 1963-1970*—said: “I wrote my second poem at the age of 14 (1952) while serving time at Buffalo Technical High School…. I didn’t write another poem until dropping out of college in 1960.”

It’s important at this point to be aware of the irony that Reed employs in the poem. The message in the poem is to resist stepping into the mirror. By literally drawing the reader into the poem, Reed demonstrates how poems can also be mirrors within which we can be lost if the experience of the poem negates our culture or presence on the earth. The dense and sinister stanza six is underscored by the simple, two-line stanza seven: “this poem is the reader & the // reader this poem.” If the reader is the poem and the poem the reader, there is no debate; there is only acquiescence. This is the infertile ground on which nothing will flourish. There will be no real criticism or extension of mind.

In this poem, we are encouraged, or goaded, into an awareness of a variety of viewpoints, unlike Narcissus or the vain “ol woman” who only see themselves. It is this awareness of a common and diverse humanity that will prevent societies from moving in ever-diminishing circles and creating spaces where there once were lives. The warning tone of the title echoes the grim statistics at the end of the poem. Set out in formal, dry language, the first three lines of the final stanza give figures on missing persons. The horrible finality of these statistics is redeemed by the last two lines that acknowledge—in understated, poignant simplicity—the sadness that occupies the spaces where people have been lost: “leaving no solid clues / nor trace only / a space in the lives of their friends.” These human spaces are symbolized in the poem by typographical spaces and floating punctuation.

The story in “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” drifts down the page until the “list” in the last lines of stanza four lead into the drawn-in, threatening tone of stanzas five and six. The language of these two stanzas becomes more and more oppressive as the shape of the poem becomes denser and more orderly. The final lines of stanza nine start to drift again when the language of the poem finds its heart and acknowledges a sadness for those lost loved ones. The final word of the poem is “friends.” This word strikes a note similar to the beginning of the poem, when the relaxed and slightly vulnerable narrator begins to tell his story, as if to a group of friends. This circular structure is used in mythology, folk tales, and fairy tales. After an important journey, the main character or characters return to where they were in the beginning, but they are wiser and better people for having been out in the world. I believe this poem argues for a new mythology, one that includes cultural diversity and difference, providing a fertile ground for the growth of a truly representative literature.

Alice Van Wart

Alice Van Wart is a writer and teaches literature and writing in the Department of Continuing Education at the University of Toronto. She has published two books of poetry and written articles on modern and contemporary literature. In the following essay, Van Wart shows how Reed uses voice and technical skill in “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem” to create a poem that works through wit and political nuance.

Tell a person not to do something and there is a good chance it will be done. So Ishmael Reed cleverly entices the reader with the title of his poem “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem.” Not only is the imperative provocative, but so is the use of the word “beware,” which suggests danger in the poem. Who wouldn’t want to read it?

As a prolific writer of novels, poetry, essays, plays, as well as having worked as a publisher and an editor, Ishmael Reed knows the power of language. His writing is imbued with political and social intentions, often satirizing American culture and white social values and white society’s perceptions of black people. Growing up in the working class of Buffalo and Harlem, Reed saw firsthand the disadvantages of being poor, uneducated, and black in America. As a young man during the years of the Black Power and Civil Rights movements, he became associated with a group of artists concerned with fostering innovative, authentic artistic expression by African Americans that would be meaningful to black people. Alienation from white society and its values, along with its art forms, led these artists to initiate the Black Aesthetic Movement. (In his first novel, Mumbo Jumbo[1972], Reed provides an autobiographical depiction of the movement, showing it to be an extension of two earlier periods of black creativity, most notably the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.)

Along with other poets of the movement, most notably Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), Reed rejected the poetic forms imposed by a white culture to create a new black poetry. For their material, they turned back to the earlier folk songs and stories of black people, adopting the colloquial language of the street, innovative typography, and the rhythms of jazz for its expression.

Critics have praised Reed’s poetry for its power and versatility, but they have also condemned it for its stridency. In his poetry, Reed fights for and celebrates black achievement. It is often politically motivated by issues of race, class, and gender. The best of Reed’s poetry is graced with power, simplicity, and rhythm, exemplified in his poem “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem.” Using colloquial language, stanzas of varying length and line, voice, rhetorical device, and typography, Reed creates an organic form of theme and technique imbued with political nuance.

The poem begins casually when the poet announces he has just finished watching a thriller on television “abt an ol woman, so vain she / surrounded herself w / / many mirrors.” He summarizes the plot, telling us the woman ended up locking herself in the house with her mirrors. One day the villagers (presumably afraid of her strange habits) broke into her house, but “she was too swift for them. she disappeared / into a mirror.” Thereafter any person who bought the house “lost a loved one to / the ol woman in the mirror.” After listing the people who disappeared into mirror—“a little girl,” “a young woman,” “the young woman /s husband,””—the poet abruptly shifts away from the subject of the movie to what appears to be a non sequitur, “the hunger of this poem,” in the fifth stanza. The poet announces that the poem “has

Sidebar: Hide

“Using colloquial language, stanzas of varying length and line, voice, rhetorical device, and typography, Reed creates an organic form of theme and technique imbued with political nuance.”

taken in many victims.” He warns the reader “to back off from this poem,” but, in fact, it is too late. The poet tells the reader, “you are into this poem.” In the final part of the poem, the subject shifts to a “us bureau of missing persons,” which reports
the disappearance of people never heard from again. All they leave behind is “a space in the lives of their friends.”

The poem’s surface simplicity—with its use of colloquial language and prosaic free verse—is deceptive, betraying a complex intent. The story of the woman who disappears into the mirror prepares the reader for a series of associations played out in the second part of the poem. The old woman who disappears into the mirror recalls the story of Narcissus, who drowned while gazing at his own reflection in water. Narcissus symbolizes the dangers of introverted self-contemplation. The mirror is an instrument for self-contemplation. The image of the mirror suggests the danger of drowning in the image of the self, and in the film, the danger becomes reality. The horror in the film rests in the fact that each person who later lives in the woman’s house loses “a loved one … to the mirror.”

The abrupt shift in subject matter in the fifth stanza is accompanied by a change in tone and voice. The colloquial speech patterns and casual voice of the first four stanzas give way to the consistent use of phrasal repetition that creates a rhetorical effect quite different from the previous stanzas. The casual tone of the poet’s voice becomes oracular. Despite the shift in subject, voice, and tone, the story of the woman in the mirror is intricately connected to the poem and its hunger.

The poet’s announcement that “the hunger of this poem is legendary” connects to the legend of the woman who disappeared into the mirror and thereafter claimed victims. The poem, like the mirror, “has taken in many victims.” To reinforce the association with victims, along with the suggestion of danger in the poem, the poet tells the reader to “back off from this poem.” In other words, reading the poem holds a similar danger to staring at oneself in the mirror; the reader could disappear into the poem. The poet’s pronunciation that the mirror is “greedy” confirms the connection. The parallel repetition of “back off” and “it has taken” points to the warning in the title and underlines the danger of reading the poem.

The poet, however, is crafty. He tells the reader, who has (obviously) come this far in reading the poem, that it is too late. “It has drawn in yr feet … yr legs.” In fact it has you from “the waist down,” so there is no running away. Like the mirror into which people noiselessly disappear, the poem silently consumes. Like the mirror, it is totally indiscriminating in who it takes.

The association with consumption in “this poem has had you up to here” is wittily confirmed in the poem’s “belch.” The rude belch shows the poem’s lack of concern for polite behavior when it comes to its appetite. In fact, the poet tell us, “this poem ain’t got no manners.”

Having taken the reader in—literally and figuratively—the poet has established the poem’s intention and now advises the reader to relax and go with the flow (“relax now & go w / this poem”). The sexual innuendo in “move & roll on to this poem” suggests a union of sorts, confirmed in the coming together of “Yr eyes” with “his head,” “his arms,” “his fingers,” and “his fingertips.” The use of synecdoche connects the words written by the poet’s fingers onto the page with the eyes of the reader. The reader and the poem become one. The phrasal repetitions of “this poem has,” concluding with “this poem is the reader & the / reader this poem,” lends powerful effect to the confirmation that the reader colludes in silence with what is written in the poem.

The shift again in the subject, voice, and tone in the poem’s concluding stanza further enhances the poem’s purpose and its effect. The mention by “the us bureau of missing persons” of the disappearance of more than 100,000 people (in 1968) who have left “no solid clues / nor trace” suggests they have disappeared either into the mirror or into the poem. If the person who disappears into the poem is a “victim” as the poet says (“it has taken in many victims”), and the poem and the reader are one, then there must be an identification between victim and victimizer. However, if the danger of looking in the mirror is one of self-absorption and the inability to see beyond the self, the danger in reading a poem is the power of the poet’s words to shape and form.

Reed suggests the differences between self-contemplation and the act of writing and reading is that one limits and narrows and the other expands. Where one only absorbs and reflects, the other has the power to bring about change. In this final
implication, Reed illustrates the truth of the saying, the pen is mightier than the sword. Watch out for this poem: It might change the way you think.


Sources


For Further Study


These three fiction writers are brought together in order to examine their revolutionary and iconoclastic styles.


Randall’s anthology begins with anonymous “folk poetry,” continues with “literary poetry,” and then concludes with poetry from the 1960s. The book was first published in 1971 and includes “Beware: Do Not Read This Poem.”


Reed’s first novel is narrated by Bukka Doopedyuk, an incredible naïf who is disillusioned and crucified at the novel’s end.

This novel continues Reed’s critique of the irrational blend of faith, fascism, and racism rampant in modern society.

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