

SENEGAL



LÉOPOLD SÉDAR SENGHOR

Léopold Sédar Senghor, poet, politician, polemicist, and intellectual, was born in 1906 in Joal, a small coastal town in Senegal. The son of a prosperous Catholic family, he attended local missionary schools but remained in touch with the ancient customs of his community through contact with peasants and fishermen. A brilliant student, he attended secondary school in Dakar and later graduated from the prestigious Lycée Louis le-Grand in Paris. Subsequently, he earned advanced degrees from the Sorbonne. As a student in Paris, Senghor, along with Aimé Césaire of Martinique and Leon Damas of French Guiana, inaugurated the intellectual and artistic movement known as "negritude." The aim of negritude was to redeem and restore pride in Africa's culture and history. Until the outbreak of World War II, Senghor taught in a French lycée. During the war, he served as an officer in the French army and was captured and interned in a German prison camp. Upon his release, Senghor co-founded the black cultural journal *Présence Africaine*. Senghor became a leading political figure in the nationalist movement for independence in French Colonial Africa, and from 1960 until 1980 he served as the elected president of Senegal.

Senghor's achievement as an artist lies in implementing the ideals of negritude. With strong verbal rhythms, a wealth of African allusions, and an exaltation of traditional communal values, he delved beneath the layers of colonial history to rediscover Africa's own cultural legacy. Many of his books have been translated into English, among them *Nocturnes* (1969) and *Poems of a Black Orpheus* (1981). "Prayer to Masks" and "New York" are examples of Senghor's search for the truth and beauty of the black experience.

Prayer to Masks

Masks! Masks!

Black mask red mask, you white-and-black masks

Masks of the four points from which the Spirit blows

In silence I salute you! 5
 Nor you the least, Lion-headed Ancestor
 You guard this place forbidden to all laughter of women, to all
 smiles that fade
 You distill this air of eternity in which I breathe the air of my
 Fathers. 10
 Masks of unmasked faces, stripped of the marks of illness and
 the lines of age
 You who have fashioned this portrait, this my face bent over
 the altar of white paper
 In your own image, hear me! 15
 The Africa of the empires is dying: see the agony of a pitiful
 princess
 And Europe too where we are joined by the navel.
 Fix your unchanging eyes upon your children, who are given
 orders 20
 Who give away their lives like the poor their last clothes.
 Let us report present at the rebirth of the World
 Like the yeast which white flour needs.
 For who would teach rhythm to a dead world of machines and
 guns? 25
 Who would give the cry of joy to wake the dead and the
 bereaved at dawn?
 Say, who would give back the memory of life to the man
 whose hopes are smashed?
 They call us men of coffee cotton oil 30
 They call us men of death.
 We are the men of the dance, whose feet draw new strength
 pounding the hardened earth.

Translated from the French by John Reed and Clive Wake

New York

Jazz orchestra: solo trumpet

1

New York! At first your beauty confused me, and your great
 longlegged golden girls.
 I was so timid at first under your blue metallic eyes, your
 frosty smile
 So timid. And the disquiet in the depth of your skyscraper
 streets

Lifting up owl eyes in the sun's eclipse.
 Your sulphurous light and the livid shafts (their heads
 dumbfounding the sky)
 Skyscrapers defying cyclones on their muscles of steel and their
 weathered stone skins. 10
 But a fortnight on the bald sidewalks of Manhattan
 —At the end of the third week the fever takes you with the
 pounce of a jaguar
 A fortnight with no well or pasture, all the birds of the air 15
 Fall suddenly dead below the high ashes of the terraces.
 No child's laughter blossoms, his hand in my fresh hand
 No mother's breast. Legs in nylon. Legs and breasts with no
 sweat and no smell.
 No tender word for mouths are lipless. Hard cash buys 20
 artificial hearts.
 No book where wisdom is read. The painter's palette flowers
 with crystals of coral.
 Insomniac nights O nights of Manhattan, tormented by fatuous
 fires, while the klaxons cry through the empty hours 25
 And dark waters bear away hygienic loves, like the bodies of
 children on a river in flood.

2

It is the time of signs and reckonings
 New York! It is the time of manna and hyssop.
 Only listen to God's trombones, your heart beating to the 30
 rhythm of blood your blood.
 I have seen Harlem humming with sounds and solemn colour
 and flamboyant smells
 —(It is tea-time for the man who delivers pharmaceutical
 products) 35
 I have seen them preparing at flight of day, the festival of the
 Night. I proclaim there is more truth in the Night than in
 the day.
 It is the pure hour when God sets the life before memory
 germinating in the streets 40
 All the amphibious elements shining like suns.
 Harlem Harlem! I have seen Harlem Harlem! A breeze green
 with corn springing from the pavements ploughed by the
 bare feet of dancers in
 Crests and waves of silk and breasts of spearheads, ballets of 45
 lilies and fabulous masks
 The mangoes of love roll from the low houses under the police
 horses' hooves.

I have seen down the sidewalks streams of white rum and
streams of black milk in the blue haze of cigars. 50
I have seen the sky at evening snowing cotton flowers and
wings of seraphim and wizard's plumes.
Listen, New York, listen to your brazen male voice your
vibrant oboe voice, the muted anguish of your tears falling 55
in great clots of blood
Listen to the far beating of your nocturnal heart, rhythm and
blood of the drum, drum and blood and drum.

3

New York! I say to New York, let the black blood flow into
your blood
Cleaning the rust from your steel articulations, like an oil of life 60
Giving your bridges the curve of the hills, the liana's
suppleness.
See, the ancient times come again, unity is rediscovered the
reconciliation of the Lion the Bull and the Tree
The idea is linked to the act the ear to the heart the sign to the 65
sense.
See your rivers murmuring with musky caymans, manatees
with eyes of mirage. There is no need to invent the
Mermaids.
It is enough to open your eyes to the April rainbow 70
And the ears, above all the ears to God who with a burst of
saxophone laughter created the heavens and the earth in six
days.
And on the seventh day, he slept his great negro sleep.

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STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Why is the speaker in "Prayer to Masks" paying homage to the masks?
2. Who is responsible for the world's rebirth? What is meant by "a dead world of machines and guns" (lines 23-24)?
3. Contrast the first two sections of "New York." What is the difference between Manhattan in the first section and Harlem in the second?
4. What is the poet proclaiming in "New York" when he writes, "the ancient times come again, unity is rediscovered . . ." (line 63)?
5. How does the author use imagery in "New York"? What are some examples?