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Themes in “Revelations”

The performance “Revelations” by Alvin Ailey reflects both black southern culture in the early twentieth century as well as its creators’ childhood. Ailey once said that the performance was based on “blood memories” that he had acquired from his years growing up in the South, particularly Texas. This perhaps explains the existence of blues, gospel, ragtime, and folk music that have all been incorporated in the dance performance. In addition to this, Ailey endeavors to make bold social statements by addressing racism in the society where he grew up and most directly experienced such inequality. Ailey also states that his dance company of primarily black people is itself a social and political statement. By creating such a company, Ailey aimed to showcase the talent, beauty, and art of the African American heritage. Among this, Ailey also conveys concepts of religion and social order that are inherent to Southern culture, particularly among those of African American descent. In a program note Alvin Ailey once wrote:

“This suite explores motivations and emotions of Negro religious music which, like its heir, the Blues, takes many forms — “true spirituals” with their sustained melodies, ring-shouts, song-sermons, gospel songs, and holy blues — songs of trouble, of love, of deliverance.

— Ailey program note, Kaufmann Concert Hall YM-YWHA,
 31 January 1960 (DeFrantz 2)

The individual songs convey a deep sense of meaning independent of one another that correlate to such motifs of trouble, love and deliverance in the beginning, middle and end of the performance. These issues are all profoundly interconnected with the broad themes

of religion and social order since an individual can be inspired to experience such feelings during religion and thus be motivated to help create and be part of a social order. Alvin Ailey divides the performance into three distinct sections in which he displays such themes: Pilgrim of Sorrow, Take Me to the Water, and Move, Members, Move.

Part I: Pilgrim of Sorrow

The first dance of the performance, "I Been 'Buked," starts with the dancers arranged in the middle of the stage in the form of a pyramid. This arrangement resembles a ship that native Africans traveled by when they were forced to migrate west. The movements of the hands and torso while in this pyramid are spread and elongated, yet swift, as if to resemble the oars of the ship. Such movements might have been drawn from the Graham Technique (a dance technique created by Martha Graham), which is based on the principle of contraction and release in a movement that is similar to the act of breathing so as to create a current of energy through the body. The backs of the dancers are rounded during contraction and the chest is lifted in the release, making the movement dramatic and expressive (Abrams 12). The pyramid structure also serves to express the social organization of people during the slave trade. At the front of the ship were the few white slaveholders who controlled everyone else in the line of command, all the way down to the slaves themselves who constituted the majority of the ship. The repeated phrase "I've been scorned" in the lyrics of the music serve to more directly convey the suffering of thousands of Africans during the slave trade. Towards the end of this first piece, the dancers come back to form the ship-resembling pyramid structure after briefly diverging, so as to extend one hand and slowly lift up the other to equal its height, only to abruptly bring it back down after it almost reaches equality. This subtlety

alludes to the civil rights movement that has slowly progressed in America, especially during the time that Alvin Ailey created this performance. However, such a striking hand gesture also represents the hardships that generations of African Americans have had to endure socially. These characteristics create a powerful impression in the audience of the troubled past of African Americans, especially of those in the South. Ailey also suggests that social order today has been affected by such a past in black history. Sociologically, the diverging of the black bodies from the rigid pyramid structure may also represent the dispersion of African Americans across North America where members from different tribes and cultures in Africa were split to form new groups and a common culture while being enslaved.

In the next piece, titled “Fix Me Jesus,” a man and woman show dependence on one another both physically and emotionally. This dance as well as two other couples performances in the show highlights classic ballet movements such as extensions of limbs and protrusion of the torso during dance. The arms of the woman are lifted high and curled inward while her leg is extended outward, horizontal to the ground and supported by the man who holds her at her extended thigh as well as around the waist. The man will also occasionally pick up the woman as she graciously displays her upper body and while her legs shape in a half moon. This suggests that Ailey could have drawn inspiration from both his ballet background as well as from the Dunham technique (created by Katherine Dunham) which employs the styles of ballet, modern dance, jazz and basic folk patterns (Abrams 12). Incorporated into these movements, are intricate balance poses such as the man holding the woman by the underarms, then waist, and finally solely by the neck. This illustration of balance and support might represent the intensely personal

relationship with Jesus. These poses also reflect the trust that such people hold in their Savior and His power to save those in need. In this depiction, the people waiting to be saved were the slaves who were being mistreated by slaveholders and were regarded as below the bottom of the social ladder with almost no hope of upward mobility. This is most clearly exemplified when the woman falls backward and the man (most likely representing Jesus) is there to catch and bring her full body back to an upright position where she can continue to dance. The dance ends with the woman standing on the man's knee, reaching up to the sky – the most direct way of showing a call upon Jesus for salvation. Once again, this performance shows how people within the African American culture treasure hope and have faith in the idea of salvation by Jesus, even in times of desperation.

As such, both of these major portions in the first third of the performance express the deep suffering and sorrowful past of African Americans starting from their ancestors' pilgrimage west. However, Ailey also makes it a point to demonstrate how people have called upon Jesus and their Christian roots in order to sustain faith in the idea of salvation and the ending of suffering. These concepts of religion based on social order also offer a nice transition into the middle third of the performance that elucidates how religion has become such an intricate part of the African American social culture.

Part II: Take Me To the Water

The second part of the performance centers on the social culture of Black communities in the South during the time that Ailey was growing up. Such communities were often tightly connected to, and very much rooted, in Christian values. This section

of the performance most vividly incorporates the spirituals into the dance and movements onstage. Spirituals are folk songs that are sung both in church and informally outside of the church to describe events in the bible or personal religious experiences (Abrams 10). These spirituals have largely become part of America's common social and musical language and can trace their origins to Africa (Abrams 10). When the Africans were brought to the United States beginning in the 1700s, the enslaved people left a record of their lives through their music which traveled with them across the continent where it was passed down from generation to generation and deeply influenced the growth of American music (Abrams 10).

The first dance of this section, "Processional/Honor, Honor", most directly illustrates the social and religious practice of baptizing in a river while dressed in all white. The color white in this context is the symbol for the purity that one attains once he or she is baptized. The most direct allusion to this aspect of Christianity is when the vocalist sings "hand me down to the river," the physical act of bathing in the water for cleansing and purification. An interesting component of this dance is also the contrast in movements before the woman steps into the artificial body of water created on stage, and after she starts wading in the water. Before stepping in, the woman had graceful yet somewhat sharp movements, especially in the arms and hands. Her torso would remain firm while her arms extended outward only to be quickly retracted towards her body again; yet the path her arms would follow would be curved so as to maintain the notion of grace and femininity. However, upon stepping into the water, the movements of the dancer became more fluid and resembled the properties of water itself. Her torso visibly moved in a curved fashion while her arms and even her legs extended outward and were

not contracted quickly as they would have before she stepped into the water. This shows Ailey's conception of oneness with water and how deeply it can affect the individual both religiously and intuitively. Religiously, the individual can attain spiritual attributes while in the water (especially during baptism) which translates into intuitive movements as shown by the woman in the performance.

The following dance, "Wade in the Water," keeps the water theme but uses it in an entirely different context. Instead of a duet, many other dancers enter the stage, and join the original man and woman who bend on the floor and move their upper body up and down in a symbol of water running through their body so as to spiritually enlighten them. In the background there are dancers that run across the stage as if they are running away (from a slaveholder perhaps). This song alludes to the history of how slaves learned to give double meaning to the religious songs they sang. Negro spirituals contain messages that white slave masters did not know about in "sorrow songs" which expressed the deep suffering the slaves endured and their yearning for redemption and peace in heaven (Abrams 10). This can be seen through the movements of the background dancers as they first lift their hands to the sky after briefly touching the floor and then move one step to the right and repeat the process until all are offstage. This particular song was used as a medium of communication between slaves. When a slave ran away and the master discovered his absence, the other slaves on the plantation would sing "Wade in the Water" so that slaves on the neighboring plantations would hear the song and sing along so that the slave would know that he should go to the river so that the bloodhounds would not be able to follow his scent (Abrams 13). As all the performers exit the stage, each dancer conveys this method of communication by responding to the

movements of the preceding dancer: as the first dancer lifts his hand and briefly touches the ground, the next performer does the same which initiates a similar signal that moves down the line. This deeply rooted aspect of black history and culture reflects the social order and norms that African Americans adhered by in order to protect a member of their society, exemplifying the cohesiveness of such a culture despite its sorrows and pain.

In the next piece, “I Wanna be Ready” a sole man dressed in white starts on the floor of the stage. The repetition of the phrase “I want to be ready when I put on my long white robe” is a metaphor for the man’s desire to have his sins absolved before he dies. The man starts on the floor because the sins and guilt of his past is weighing him down; the upward movements made by not only his hands but also by his whole body symbolize the man’s aspiration towards the heavens. This religious value is clearly shown to be evident in Alvin Ailey’s culture while he was growing up. The requirement of remorse and regret in order to fully achieve salvation is a very prominent ideal in the Christian belief system.

This dance most intensely incorporates the Horton technique (created by Lester Horton) where the movements explore how many different ways the body can move so as to give a feeling of strength and energy. During the midpoint of the dance, the man assumes a bird like pose with one of his legs stretched horizontally out, perpendicular to his extended hands that flap on either side of his body. This bird-like stance symbolizes the man’s yearning for freedom from his chains of bondage. This bondage could be interpreted in both a social and religious context. Socially, Ailey could be referring to the bondage of the rights of African Americans, set forth by American society. However, this bird pose seeking for freedom could also represent the freedom that will be attained after

his sins have been absolved through remorse. This not only makes the dance particularly powerful aesthetically, but also shows the determination of the man to attain his freedom both socially and religiously.

Part III: Move, Members, Move

The last portion in the performance starts with “Sinner Man” where three men dressed in black enter into a stage with an intensely red background. The lighting of the stage rapidly changes to specific portions of the stage, yet the stage as a whole remains relatively dark when compared to the other dances in the performance. The three men dance to a song that talks about the sins that men have made historically in the Bible. Two such stories are that of the story of Samson and the story of Adam. In the story of Samson, a Herculean figure, a woman named Delilah asks Samson where he gets all of his immense strength from and because of Samson’s attraction towards the beauty of Delilah; he reveals to her that his strength comes from his hair. With such knowledge, Delilah cuts off Samson’s hair so that he is “weak as any other man” (Abrams 7). The strength of Samson is illustrated by a solo where the dancer keeps his arms outstretched while balancing on one foot and then spinning around – a mark of power, might, and steadiness. Then, the dancer’s strength is quickly disintegrated as he falls to the ground backwards on one hand and then reverts to get back up and protect himself by extending an arm outwards, but to no avail. The dancer stretches back upwards in an attempt to seek help from God, but falls back to the floor frontwards with his hands stretched in front of him. This story attempts to illustrate the repercussions of going after pure lust and breaking an oath with God. The similar story of Adam and Eve is also recited within the

lyrics of this song where Adam disobeys the word of God when eating an apple from the Garden of Eden. These biblical accounts were common practice in black culture so as to teach children both about Christianity as well as the moral and social values instilled in such stories. A repeating theme in this dance is that of “God a mighty gonna cut him down” which is illustrated by the men reaching up but then suddenly releasing back down towards the ground, as if physically struck by God. The swift movements (hands and feet stretched outwards immediately before spinning around) by the men also portray the desperation and the underlying theme of running away from ones sins. The dancers move all around the stage to signify the instability of such sinners who, as the lyrics point out, will eventually be cut down by the Lord.

The last dance of the performance titled “Rocka My Soul in the Bosom of Abraham” is more informal and light-hearted but keeps with African American social culture. The dancers are all synchronized and placed in a strictly symmetrical pattern on stage illustrating the strong influence that cultural values had members of the society to adhere to the norms. The song starts with women coming on stage dressed in long yellow dresses, Sunday hats, and holding a fan in one hand and a stool in the other. This resembles the traditional dress that African American women might wear to Church. The music is gospel music where clapping and the “call-and-response” technique are incorporated so as to truly replicate the aura of a Southern Church. The women make use of their fans which they hold in their right hand as they circle their chairs and move their upper body back and forth in a way that make their lower body move so that their dress flows outwards. Such movements are both light-hearted and appear fun as they match the upbeat tempo of the music. The video of the performance shows a close-up of

a few dancers who appear to be smiling and even laughing in this piece that creates a cheery mode on which to leave the audience with. In an interview, Alvin Ailey himself said that although his performances were filled with political, social, and religious statements, the audience came to the show also to be entertained. Thus, this upbeat song is most likely to get the audience involved while still keeping with the theme of venerating Southern black culture in America.

In conclusion, through the performance “Revelations” by Alvin Ailey, concepts of religion and social order are interspersed through various mechanisms in each section of the dance. In the first portion, “Pilgrim of Sorrow,” Ailey shows the history of African American culture and how it has shaped the generations today that resulted from such a migration. The second portion, “Take Me to the Water” shows how spirituals that came from such a past have influenced the religious and social culture of the South through the pursuit of salvation. The last portion of the performance, “Move, Members, Move” connects all the previous pieces of the performance into a common message of hope and motivation that energizes the audience into taking home the deep aspects of the dances. The titles of each section support such an analysis: “Pilgrim of Sorrow” refers to the African American history that has influenced the religious and social culture put forth by “Take Me to the Water” and finally ends with an appeal to the audience to interact and get involved with the statements put forth by “Revelations” so as to better society through the mechanisms and values seen in Christianity.

Works Cited

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