

CELEBRATION OF RACE IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S POETRY

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This paper deals with Langston Hughes's poems that glorify his race, from the earliest times to the present, identifying the Negro as important in the history of civilisation. As he is a people's poet, he writes with a missionary zeal to make their spine stiff and to make them realize their own strength. As a sturdy optimist, he drives home the point that their colour is not a stigma but something of which they must be proud, as black is beauty and strength.

Langston Hughes is one of the most powerful Spokesmen of his race. His poems give expression to the glorious dream of the Blacks and their nostalgic memories of their land. He does this by making use of their own forms of expression, their language, their music and folk verse. Referring to Hughes's sustained interest in his people, Onwuchekwa remarks that " Hughes has always stressed the social responsibility of the black artist, and no doubt saw his own career as fulfilling that socially responsible role" (198).

As one of the young and articulate spokesmen of the Negro race, a number of Hughes's early poems describe the historic role of Negro and his unending struggle against hate and oppression. Langston Hughes masterfully instilled a growing sense of pride for his race by claiming that Negroes had been instrumental in civilization all through the history, and therefore could transcend those inequalities that ruled the times they lived in. Hughes penned his famous poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" at a time when segregation ruled the land, a time when racism prevailed, and Negroes were assigned to back seats and treated like second class citizens.

Hughes was attempting to show the black man as human during a time when

others saw them as less than human. Without ever speaking the words, Hughes sends a message that speaks volumes about the treatment of Negroes in his country. His style of writing evokes strong images that trace the longevity and significant history of Negroes from Africa to America. The poem, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” tells the proud story of his race:

I’ve known rivers
I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and
Older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
My soul has grown deep like the rivers. (1-4)

Hughes uses four major rivers as a metaphor that refers to his race and the collective souls of all Negroes. The lyrical poem containing thirteen lines and five stanzas is a small masterpiece of rhythm and relies on alliteration. The world’s earliest civilization were found among the fertile soil of the Euphrates, the Congo, and the Nile rivers. Together these rivers symbolize the ancient history of the Negro race at a time when they were free. Hughes’s expresses his pride about his race, from earliest times to the present, identifying the Negro as important in the history of civilization. Hughes mentions the mighty Mississippi River and he writes, “When Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans (9).”

Referring to the fact that it was in New Orleans that Lincoln first witnessed the slave auctions. The transformation of the river from “its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset “ (10) is a metaphor for the freedom and the hope that Lincoln delivered to the black slaves. The Negro, like the majestic rivers, has a deep and significant place in world culture; and the poem is a hymn to the beauty and endurance of his race.

Identifying the race with its proud African heritage, Hughes presents a deep feeling of racial pride in “My People”:

The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.
The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.
Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people. (1-6)

Throughout his career, Hughes often praises the strength and dignity of Negro women who struggle on despite life’s obstacles. Nowhere is this belief better expressed than in “Mother to Son”, published in The Crisis in December 1922:

.....boy, don’t you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps
' Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now-
For I'se still goin', honey,
I 'se still climbin'
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.(14-20)

Here, as in much of his writing, Hughes speaks from a sincere conviction that being black is a matter of pride. Life is not easy but with determination and hard work, progress can be made. It is this kind of uplifting theme that has appealed to the editors and readers of The Crisis.

His poetry is not about the blooming flowers, blue sky and the beautiful rivers. There is on the other hand, a great deal of protest demanding social change. It is a response to the painful experience of the black people in America which transforms their bitterness into a powerful mechanism of anger and revolution.

As a black writer facing racism every day, he had an exotic knowledge of the words and words of speech that would best convey his message to both the blacks and whites. Exploring racial problems from a class struggle perspective, Hughes celebrates the revolution of masses against the forces of oppression.

Good morning Revolution:
You are the best friend
I ever had.
We gonna pal around together from now on.
Say, listen, Revolution: (5)

In several of his poems, Hughes has expressed with ardent voice socio-political protests. He portrays people whose lives are affected by racism and sexual conflicts. Hewrites about southern violence, Harlem street life, poverty, prejudice, hunger and hopelessness. But basically he is a conscientious artist, keeps his middle –of – the road stance and works hard to chronicle the black American experience, contrasting the beauty of the soul with the oppressive circumstance. In “Color,” Hughes expresses beautifully the pride of being black:

Wear it
Like a banner
For the proud –
Not like a shroud. (1-4)

Hughes lives basically in terms of the external world and in unison with it, making himself one with his people and refusing to stand apart as an individual. His poetry reflects collective states of mind as if they were his own, merging the poet's personality with his racial group. He assumes various personae; sometimes his is the spirit of his race; at other times he is a spittoon polisher, but there is a commonality among which give them a kind of consistent persona. In the only poem "Personal" in which Hughes speaks of religion in his voice and not that of a persona of his people, he states:

In an envelope marked:
Personal
God addressed me a letter.
In an envelope marked:
Personal
I have given my answer. (1-6)

Hughes's interest in the history of the race continues in many of his poems written between 1920 and 1960, dealing with such important figures as John Brown and Frederick Douglass. Hughes's interest in black music and theatre is also reflected in the publication of two popular and well-illustrated volumes "Famous Negro Music Makers and Black Magic" and "A Pictorial History of the Negro in American Entertainment".

In the 1940's and 1950's Hughes's ability to see the racial picture with humour was amply demonstrated by the creation of two wonderfully appealing characters, Madam Alberta K. Johnson and Jesse B. Semple. The charm of Madam Johnson is imbedded in her determination to be herself despite the powerful social forces working against her, and her ability to puncture humbug with earthy candor. When Madam Johnson is faced with awesome protocol of the United States census, she refuses to surrender even an inch of her precious individuality:

The census man,
The day he came round,
Wanted my name
To put it down
I said JOHNSON,
ALBERTA K.
But he hated to write
The K that way (1-8)

Hughes assures the hope of sunshine and freedom of the black world in many of his poems. In “Walkers with the Dawn” the poet holds out the point of the dawn in the life of black people:

Being walkers with the dawn and morning,
Walkers with the sun and morning,
We are not afraid of night,
Nor days of gloom’
Nor darkness. (1-5)

As a spokesman for the low class, Hughes writes in a number of genres and moods, but the message of optimism is always strong and clear. In “Freedom’s Plow,” he believes that America is a dream and the product of the seed of freedom is not only for all Americans but for all the world. The American dream of brotherhood, freedom and democracy must come to all peoples and all races of the world:

Into that furrow the freedom seed was dropped
From that seed a tree grew, is growing, will ever grow.
That tree is foe everybody,
For all America, for all the world. (5-8)

Hughes is unashamedly black and he does not go much beyond one of his earliest themes, black is beautiful. He has the wit and intelligence to explore the black human condition in a variety of depth. He brings a varied and colorful background to his writing. Before he was twelve years old, he had lived in six different American cities. When his first book was published, he had already been a truck farmer, cook, waiter, college graduate, sailor, and doorman at a nightclub in Paris, and had visited Mexico, West Africa, the Azores, the Canary Island, Holland, France and Italy. As David Littlejohn observes: “On the whole, Hughes’s creative life was as Full, as varied, and as original as, Picasso’s, a joyful, honest monument of a career” (147).

More than any other black poet or writer, Hughes records faithfully the nuances of black life and its frustrations. Although Hughes has some trouble with both black and white critics, he is the first black American to earn his living solely from his writing and public lectures. He uses his poetry and prose to illustrate that “there is lack no lack within the Negro people of beauty, strength and power.”

Hughes, hence, resolves upon writing poems dealing exclusively with the predicament of the blacks in America, all the time laying stress on their potentialities and beauty. Most of his poems, racial in theme and treatment, derive from the like he knows.

In many of them, he tries to grasp and hold some of the meaning and rhythms of jazz. His “theme” is black people and their concerns; and for his “treatment” (manner, style, technique, and point of view), he adopts the technical resources of the culture: black idiom and dialect; black folk humour, including the tragicomic irony of the blues; the form and spirit of jazz. The meaning of black life in America, Hughes implies, is to be found in black music.

Hughes is thus his people’s poet and writes with a missionary zeal to make their spine stiff and to make them realize their own strength so that they would go the whole hog to better their position socially and economically. Hughes is a sturdy optimist: he sees a land of bright sunshine and is as free as the wind. He sees in a vision a glorious time for his people not in the far too distant a future.

Hughes’s poems, hence, drive home the point that their colour is not a stigma but something of which they must be proud, as black is “beauty” and “strength”. Thus Hughes reminds his people of their resplendent past, gives them an awareness of their potentialities and exhorts them not to meekly brook social injustice done to them. He urges them to resist the white tyranny and fight for equality, and hit back with redoubled vigour if they do not mend their ways. This he does, as no other black poet has ever done, making effective use of native idioms, folklore ballad forms and music as a medium to convey the varying moods of his people. He, by training and experience, is diametrically opposite to Cullen; elaborating on this point, Saundres Redding remarks: “He is a Negro capable of realizing and giving expression to the dark perturbation of the soul”(115).

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