

HUGHES' POETRY: A PICTORIAL PRESENTATION OF BLACK BEAUTY

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ABSTRACT

During the twenties when most American poets were turning inward, writing obscure and esoteric poetry to an ever decreasing audience of readers, Hughes turns outward, using language and themes, attitudes and ideas familiar to anyone who has the ability simply to read. Hughes wants to celebrate, but not sanitize, the African American heritage that he cherishes. As Blacks have very few rights and privileges in society due to the color of their skin for that Hughes suggests that until black people think of themselves as not inferior to anyone, no one else will. He always tries to encourage his own people to feel proud of their individuality, of their own heritage, to appreciate their own diversity and culture. He just want African Americans to patronize their own business, see beauty in their own race and learn African history.

Keywords: African Americans, diversity, patronize, Beauty.

Introduction:

Hughes has perhaps the greatest reputation (worldwide) that any black writer has ever had. Hughes differs from most of his predecessors among black poets, and (until recently) from those who followed him as well, in that he addressed his poetry to the people, specifically to black people. During the twenties when most American poets were turning inward, writing obscure and esoteric poetry to an ever decreasing audience of readers, Hughes turns outward, using language and themes, attitudes and ideas familiar to anyone who has the ability simply to read. Hughes wants to celebrate, but not sanitize, the African American heritage that he cherishes. In his poetry he aims to speak in a voice that is both personal and authentic, that expresses his own feelings but is spoken as people really talks and is thus accessible to a wide audience. He wants to portray black people's lives in a way that is both realistic and dignified. Basking in the high regard of his primary audience, which was black, Hughes always looked to them, especially black musicians, for direction and inspiration.

His attempt, nevertheless, remains to seek and redefine his people's continual struggle to assert them against a background of social and political oppression. Jemie has also quoted in his preface that Hughes rebuked those writers who thought they had to run away from themselves in order to be "universal," those who said they wanted to be "a writer, not a Negro (or black or African) writer"; those writers who saw no beauty in black life and who therefore avoided black themes and styles or deprecated the black heritage or apologized for it in their writings.¹ For his faithful representation of his people's plight, Hughes is celebrated as the poet-laureate of his ethnicity. Leopold Senghor, the noted Senegalese poet and exponent of African negritude, finds Hughes "the most spontaneous as a poet and the blackest in expression."² His 'blackness,' an informed reader knows, is deeply rooted in his atavistic Africa—its blues and jazz, gospels, beauty and racial features. Hughes in his Spingarn Speech issues a definitive answer:

There is so much richness in Negro humor, so much beauty in black dream, so much dignity in our struggle, and so much universality in our problems, in us-in each living human being of color—that I don't understand the tendency today that some American Negro artists have of seeking to running away from us, of being afraid to sing our own songs, paint our own pictures, write about ourselves-when it is our music that has given America its greatest music, our humor that has enriched its entertainment media... could you possibly be afraid that the rest of the world will not accept it? So I would say to young writers, don't be afraid of yourselves, you are the world.³

The poetic persona in a poem titled "Lament For Dark People" feels uprooted as he has been driven out of his atavistic Africa and, now, feels engaged in the land of dreams:

I was a red man one time,
But the white man came.
I was a black man, too,
But the white man came.

They drove me out of the forest.
They took me away from the jungle.
I lost my trees.
I lost my silver moons.

Now they've caged me
In the circus of civilization.
Now I herd with the many—
Caged in the circus of civilization.⁴

He is deeply pained to be driven out of his fascinating forest and made unable to witness his “silver moons.” The comparison between America and Africa that Hughes makes, persists in the poetry of this phase. Onwuchekwa Jemie states in this connection:

Africa is for him a distant ideal, foil and backdrop for his portrait of the present reality that is America. America to him is a cold, joyless wilderness, Africa a carefree tropical paradise.⁵

Hughes was a man with a mission for change and he never forgot his roots or the importance of preserving pride in his people. “While Hughes remained optimistic, he saw that other black writers were slipping into pessimism, focusing on the pain and suffering of racism, not the triumphs, the heroes, or the possibility of change.”⁶

But He was determined to inspire his people to look at their own beauty. As Blacks have very few rights and privileges in society due to the color of their skin for that Hughes suggests that until black people think of themselves as not inferior to anyone, no one else will because they are:

...strong in will.

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.⁷

Therefore, in his work he confronts racial stereotypes, protests social conditions, and expands African America’s image of itself; a “people’s poet” who wants to reeducate both audience and artist by lifting the theory of the black aesthetic into reality. He wants his people to regain their confidence. As a revolutionary poet, he gets them powerfully inspired. An expression of this is the poem “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. (“My People”, CP, 36.)

He is of the belief that the African identity is fundamental to the Afro-Americans; that the pride of ancestry, dreams to rebuild a powerful African image is necessary for the survival of the community in America. According to Langston Hughes, for the permanence of black identity, racial pride is essential. He always prefers:

“For this is better than living breath:

Free! To be free!” (“Call to Creation”, CP, 135)

After all this is known to Langston Hughes that “The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav’n of Hell, a Hell of Heav’n.”⁸ His entire body of work is a call to action, a drive toward increasing momentum, and an impulsion to take up the banner of pride in one’s race, one’s cultural and ethnic heritage. The latter became a familiar refrain with many prominent African-Americans of the time, including W.E.B. Du Bois who stated, “We black folk may help for we have within us as a race new stirrings; stirrings of the beginning of a new appreciation of joy, of a new desire to create, of a new will to be; as though in this morning of group life we had awakened from some sleep that at once dimly mourns the past and dreams a splendid future....”⁹

Hughes wants whites to view blacks as both black and American, not just black. He just wants blacks not to be afraid to express themselves as they really are. He never puts down the white race for being prejudiced. He always tries to encourage his own people to feel proud of their individuality, of their own heritage, to appreciate their own diversity and culture. He just want African Americans to patronize their own business, see beauty in their own race and learn African history. According to Langston Hughes, for the permanence of black identity, racial pride is essential. He always prefers:

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Free! To be free!”¹⁰ (“Call to Creation”, CP, 135)

References:

- [1] Quoted in Raymond Smith, "Langston Hughes: Evolution of the Poetic Persona," *American Poetry: 1915 to 1945*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publication, 1987), p. 357.
- [2] Onwuchekwa Jemie, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia Uni. Press, 1976), p.xv.
- [3] Hughes' Spingarn Medal Acceptance speech, NAACP Convention, St Paul, Minnesota, June 26, 1960. *Hughes Archive, schomburg Collection*.
- [4] Langston Hughes, "Lament For the Dark People," *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, ed. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Classics, 1994), p. 39. All subsequent references from the book, abbreviated as CP, are included in the text.
- [5] Onwuchekwa Jemie, *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry* (New York: Columbia Uni. Press, 1976), p. 98.
- [6] Harold Bloom, *Bloom's BioCritiques: Langston Hughes*. (Philadelphia: Yale University, Chelsea House Publishers, 2001), 46.
- [7] "Ulysses" in *Fifteen Poets*, 1941; rpt. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 410.
- [8] John Milton, *Paradise Lost: Books 1 and 11*, ed., F.T.Prince (Delhi:Oxford University Press,1962), p. 38.
- [9] Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," in Richter, *The Critical Tradition*, 570.
