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A Sense of Racial Pride in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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Abstract

Called the poet laureate of Harlem, Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) is the most powerful spokesman of his race. As an African American poet, he has published seven books of poetry, four pamphlets of poetry and numerous miscellaneous poems. He is proud of being a black poet whose inspiration comes from the black folk, that is, the working class and poor with whom he identifies. He proudly proclaims that his poetry is “racial” in theme and treatment. Much of his poetry celebrates his African and African American heritage. His poems give expression to the glorious dreams of the blacks and their nostalgic memories of their land. His poems not only glorify his race but also identify the Negro as important in the history of civilization. As his 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 color is not a stigma but something of which they must be proud, as black is “beauty” and “strength”. No other poet has evidenced such a deeper concern for the dignity of masses, freedom, justice and the equality of the sons of man. In spite of his struggle, Hughes loves being black and prides himself as being a black poet.

Key words: Racism, Pride, Black people, Optimism, Negro music, Harlem.

INTRODUCTION

James Mercer Langston Hughes is one of the best known African American writers of the twentieth century. Original, insightful and musical in his verse, he became the “poet laureate of Harlem.” A poet of the city, he writes of racial injustices, social struggles and interracial relations in poetry which has its roots in jazz and the blues. Through his works, he has enriched the lives of African Americans. More than any other American writer, Hughes brings African American culture and

traditions into American literature. His incorporation of African American music, particularly blues and jazz, into his early poetry is radical and groundbreaking. As a prolific writer, he wrote sixteen books of poems, two novels, three collections of short stories, four volumes of editorial and documentary fiction, twenty plays, children’s poetry, musicals and operas, three autobiographies, a dozen radio and television scripts and dozens of magazine articles. In addition, he edited seven anthologies.

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Langston Hughes is the most powerful spokesman 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. A number of Hughes's early poems describe the historic role of the Negro and his unending struggle against hate and oppression. One of his most famous poems "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" tells the proud story of his race:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and
Older than the flow of human blood in human veins.
(2-3)

Hughes expresses his pride about his race, from the earliest times to the present, identifying the Negro as important in the history of civilization. The Negro, like the majestic rivers, has a deep and significant place in world culture.

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 despite their obstacles. This is beautifully expressed in the poem "Mother to son":

Don't you fall now-
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin'. (17-19)

Hughes speaks from a sincere conviction that being a black is a matter of pride. Life is not easy, but with determination and hard work, progress can be made. This optimistic philosophy is expressed in the poem "Youth":

We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame
Yesterday, a night-gone thing
A sun-down name.
And dawn today (1-6)

"Hey! Hey!" is a short verse with a happier view of the world presenting Hughes's ever present hope for the future:

Sun's a risin'.
This is gonna be ma song. (1-2)

Reflecting a traditional political theme of the time, Hughes suggests in "Union" that black and white workers band together to get their share of the world's goods:

White and Black
Must put their hands with mine
To shake the pillars of those temples
Wherein the false gods dwell. (5-8)

Hughes has great faith in people and in their ability to solve abiding problems. The solutions may come slowly and be accompanied by violence, but they will come. The best solution would be to work together. This encouraging philosophy is stated in "Daybreak in Alabama": "Touching everybody with kind fingers/And touching each other natural as dew" (18-19).

One of the most outstanding features of Hughes's poetry is the use of Negro music. The blues and jazz, the distinctive music of Negro life, provide the form for many of his poems. In his blues poetry, Hughes captures the mood, the feel and the spirit of the blues. His poems have the rhythm and the impact of the musical form they incorporate. The blues reflects the trials and tribulations of the Negro in America on a secular level, much as the spirituals do on the religious level. Both the blues and jazz forms as developed by Hughes carry hope for the future. This optimistic philosophy is well-expressed in the short poem, "Life is Fine":

You may hear me holler,
You may see me cry -
But I'll be dogged, sweet baby,
If you gonna see me die.
Life is fine!
Fine as wine!
Life is fine! (1-7)

The most interesting feature of Hughes's poetry is his innovative style. Throughout his literary career, he experiments with adapting black musical forms to his work. As a result, he emerges as one of the innovative writers to come out of the Harlem Renaissance, and in the process, he uncovers a poetic style that is adaptable to a variety of circumstances.

This stylistic experimentation is one of the major elements in his works. In his first volume, the young poet introduces the two major themes that would characterize his poetry throughout his career: First he expresses a deep commitment to the Negro masses; his verses reflect a keen insight into the life of the Negro masses, including a vivid picture of the poverty and deprivation of their life.

The second theme that Hughes introduces in his first volume of poetry is Harlem. Although he depicts Negro life in the rural south, and occasionally in his native Mid-west, Hughes is essentially an urban poet and life in the Negro metropolis is a basic element in his work throughout his career.

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 in a vision a glorious time for his people not in the far too distant a future.

CONCLUSION

Hughes's poems, hence, drive home the point that their color 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 Whites that the Blacks before long may hit back with redoubled vigor 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.

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