"Black As The Night Is Black": A Study Of Black American Life In Langston Hughes's Poetry

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ABSTRACT

Langston Hughes, contributed significantly to the Harlem Renaissance and wrote a variety of works, including plays, novels, poetry, and newspaper articles, all of which focused on the African American experience. American poet, activist, dramatist, writer, and journalist Hughes also wrote plays. He was among the first to invent jazz poetry, a brand-new literary and aesthetic style. One of the most significant authors and thinkers of the Harlem Renaissance, an African American aesthetic movement that celebrated black life and culture in the 1920s, was Langston Hughes. Hughes's upbringing in the mostly African American neighbourhood of Harlem had an effect on his artistic abilities. His words had an impact on American politics and literature. He shared the same sense of racial pride as other participants in the Harlem Renaissance. Through his poetry, novels, plays, essays, and children's books, he promoted equality, denounced racism and injustice, and celebrated African American culture, humour, and spirituality.

KEYWORDS: Jazz poetry, Black life, Harlem, Renaissance, Racial pride.

Introduction

Langston Hughes was the most prolific and successful of the important black authors who first came to prominence during the thrilling decade of the 1920s known as "the Harlem Renaissance." Hughes was resolved to maintain his career as a poet by making his poems accessible to the public as the Harlem Renaissance gave way to the Depression. He began his

career as a public speaker by going on a lengthy lecture tour of the South at Mary McLeod Bethune's advice. In his memoirs, he stated: "I had been drifting along peacefully on the delicious rewards of my poetry which appeared to suit the fancy of kind-hearted New York ladies with money to aid young authors. Propelled by the backwash of the “Harlem Renaissance” of the early “twenties”, he said. Another conundrum was how to make a career from the type of writing I wanted to do—write about the Negro people as seriously and expertly as I knew how, and make that style of writing pay the bills. Hughes was pushed by the Depression to evaluate the connection between his poetry and his community: "Hughes wanted to keep writing poetry. But occasionally he questioned whether he was going after the appropriate target. He made it my mission to find out by presenting my poems to my community. After all, he wrote mostly for and about Black people. Will they accept? Do they desire ? A careful examination of Hughes' early work will reveal, in germinal form, the fundamental themes that were to preoccupy him throughout his career, even though much of the poetry he would write in the thirties and after would differ markedly from the poetry he was producing in the twenties in terms of social content. These themes—concerning specific perceptions of Americans and his blackness—had been developing since he was a little boy. Hughes's development as a poet cannot be understood in isolation from the personal events that forced him into the position of poet. Indeed, Hughes's knowledge of what he considered to have been a pretty unusual background motivated him in his desire to use poetry to communicate the sentiments of the black masses. It is incorrect to assume that Hughes' choice to give lectures at Southern institutions in the 1930s was a rejection of his earlier work; rather, it was just a refocusing of his efforts to better reach his audience. The Harlem Renaissance was at its height when Hughes wrote his poetry, and he saw it as a legitimate commentary on black life in America. The Weary Blues, Fine Clothes to the Jew, and The Dream Keeper (published in 1932 but largely composed of selections from the two earlier volumes), which are now in the James Weldon Johnson Collection at Yale University and were used by Hughes for poetry readings during the thirties and forties, show that Hughes relied heavily on this early work and in no way rejected it as socially irrelevant. Hughes had to resolve problems centered on the identification issue to write poetry that genuinely captured the spirit of Black America. Because Hughes, like W.E.B. Du Bois, understood the plight of the black

man in America as a dual consciousness issue. "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity," said Du Bois in his book Souls of Black Folk (1903). One is always aware of his dual identity as an American and a Black person, with two souls, two ideas, and two conflicting aspirations residing within one body, whose tenacious fortitude alone prevents it from rupturing. In his well-known article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which he wrote in 1927 on the issues facing black writers in America, Hughes would discuss this similar conundrum: However, this want for whiteness within the race, the desire to fit racial uniqueness into the mold of American standardization, and the desire to be as little Negro and as much American as possible, are the obstacles that prevent any authentic Negro art from flourishing in America. Hughes tackled the issue of dual consciousness in The Weary Blues (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1926) in a very smart way by using two parenthetical declarations of identification as the opening and closing poems with the titles "Proem" and "Epilogue." I Am a Negro and I; Too, Sing America's opening words allude to the poles of awareness in which the poet found his character. Hughes makes hints about the connections between the two identities in each of these poems. For example, the final poem's line "I am the darker brother" is a repetition of the phrase "I am a Negro." There is a third identity proposed between the American and the Black person: the poet or "singer." To overcome the problem of split awareness, Hughes adopted the latter identity for himself. Hughes is thus offering his poetry as a form of redemption within the constraints of these two identity-centered poems. If one takes a closer look at how Hughes arranged the poems in the book, they reveal that the genuine beginning and closing poems are not about identity but rather about cyclical temporal patterns. The first poem, "The Weary Blues," is about a black piano player who stays up late playing until he finally passes out "like a rock or a man that's dead." In contrast, the final poem portrays a waking following a long night of the blues. "We have tomorrow/ Bright before us/ Like a flame." The opening and closing verses of Fine Clothes to the Jew follow this cyclical temporal pattern, starting at dusk and ending at dawn. Sun's a risin', / This is gonna be my song' is once again recited by the blues singer (or poet). Therefore, Hughes's answer to the issue of having a dual identity as a black American and poet is found in the poet's

song. According to Hughes, the poet has a responsibility to express passionately through the medium he has chosen while attempting to retain his impartiality and aesthetic distance. Hughes challenged his fellow black authors to develop objectivity when discussing their blackness in a 1960 address to the American Society of African Culture. He said, "Advice to Negro writers: Step beyond yourself, then look back—and you will realize how human, but how lovely and black you are. Even when you're integrated, how incredibly black. In another section of his speech, Hughes emphasized the importance of art above race, saying that "in the great sense, excellent art transcends territory, race, or nationality, and color slips away. In the end, readers don't care whether a writer is black or white provided they write well. The argument Hughes made in his far earlier article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which served as a rallying cry for young black authors of the 1920s concerned with balancing creative freedom with racial expression, was fundamentally based on this concept of artistic distance: "The younger Negro artist has a responsibility, if any, to transform the old murmuring 'I want to be white' concealed in his people's hopes to 'Why should I want to be white?' by the force of his work. Hughes exhorted fellow black authors to speak openly, without consideration for the disapproval of whites or blacks, their "individual dark-skinned selves." "We're happy if white folks are happy. It doesn't matter if they aren't. We are aware of our beauty. And ugly as well. If people of color are happy, we are happy. Their annoyance is also irrelevant if they are not. We construct temples for the future with all the might we have, and we stand on the mountain, liberated inside ourselves. Hughes made an effort to combine the two aspects of the double consciousness (the American and the Negro) into a single vision—that of the poet—in this well-considered declaration. Since the first time he published "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" at the age of nineteen, his poetry has mirrored this theme. When Ama Bontemps said: "And almost the first utterance of the revival struck a note that disturbed poetic tradition," he was speaking of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which was published during the Harlem Renaissance tradition."' Affirming one's blackness is the most important aspect of Hughes' poetry. This crucial assertion served as the focal point of Hughes' poetry, which stood apart from the white avant-garde writers of the 1920s in every way. The emphasis on black selfhood affected musical idioms, jazz rhythms, Hughes' brand of "black-white" humor, and dialect:

I am a Negro

Black as the night is black

Black like the depths of my Africa (1-3)

Like Walt Whitman, Hughes started as a poet who was self-assured of his talent.But unlike Whitman ("Walt Whitman, The Cosmos"), who emphasized the individual self, Hughes emphasized the racial self. Hughes preferred to minimize the personal aspect in his poetry, adopting the first person singular as the ideal representation of the radicalized expression of universal human traits. Whitman's physicality contrasts with the almost supernatural quality of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the river (9-11)

Of course, drawing too many conclusions from this comparison. Whitman referred to himself as a poet of both the body and the soul. Few would contest his mystical leanings. Hughes, though, shows no sign of the egotism that Whitman exhibited so regularly. Hughes was cautious to include a personal aspect in his poems. According to Hughes, his "earliest poems were social poems in that they were about people's problems—whole groups of people's problems—rather than my difficulties," as he noted in a 1947 essay on his "adventures" as a social poet in the magazine Phylon. This is supported by Hughes' autobiographical narrative of the writing of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," which also explains how he turned his own experiences into archetypal racial recollections. The poem came about as a result of Hughes' struggles with his father, who had moved to Mexico when Langston was a child and had not seen him for more than ten years. In the summer of 1919, Hughes' father unexpectedly invited him to join him to convince the son to pursue a business career. The older Hughes had nothing but hatred for the nation and race he had left behind. The following exchange between the two, which is captured in Hughes' autobiography The Big Sea, demonstrates their stark differences:

"What do you want to be?"

"I don't know. But I think a writer,"

"A writer?" my father said, "A writer? Do you think they make money?"(58)

"...Learn something you can make a living from anywhere in the world, in Europe or South America, and don't stay in the States, where you have to live like a nigger with niggers," "But I like Negroes," I said The following summer while traveling to Mexico by train, Hughes wrote the poem, "All day on the train I had been thinking about my father and his strange dislike of his people, I didn't understand it, because I was Negro, and I liked Negroes very much." Hughes feared the inevitable argument with his father about his intended career. Despite Hughes's intense emotional condition, the poem itself barely hints at the underlying concern that inspired it. In his poem "As I Grew Older," which was first published in 1925 and subsequently included in The Weary Blues, Hughes may have come the closest to expressing his uneasiness. The poem is almost exclusively composed of abstract images; it is a landscape of nightmare and a depressing and existential study of darkness. In his opening, the poet recalls his "dream," which was once "bright like a sun," but is now only a memory. The poet is quite anxious as a wall that divides him from his dream suddenly arises. The poet is now obliged to reflect on himself and look for an explanation for his predicament.

Shadow,

I am black (17-18)

His desperation and rescue are revealed in these two lines that are found in the poem's middle. He comes to understand that his blackness is what separates him from his dream, and at the same time, he understands that blackness is the foundation of his ontology. It is both a metaphysical state of mind and a physical reality. The physical and spiritual darkness must be reintegrated for the dream to be recovered. The poet notices the cause of his rebirth as a whole human as he studies his black hands:

My hands!

My dark hands!

Break through the wall!

Find my dream!

Help me to shatter this darkness.

To smash this night.

To break this shadow

Into a thousand lights of the sun.

Into a thousand whirling dreams

Of sun! (23 -32)

The poet must fully and unambiguously recognize his status of being black to transcend his temporal sorrow. Thus, the poem closes in a desire for self-liberation based on the declaration, "I am black!" rather than in despondency. Another poet, W.E.B. Du Bois, who is more renowned for being the creator of the NAACP, the editor of The Crisis, and a steadfast supporter of black pride, had used the lines far earlier. His poem "The Song of the Smoke," which appeared in the 1899 issue of Horizon, began with these lines:

I am the smoke king,

I am black (1-2)

Eventually in the poem. Du Bois penned these powerful phrases:

I will be black as blackness can.

The blacker the mantle the mightier the man.

My purpling midnights no day may ban.

I am carving God in night,

I am painting hell in white.

I am the smoke king.

I am black (27-33)

The poem, which Hughes wrote when he was five years old, foreshadows the moment when Du Bois and Hughes's careers would eventually converge fifteen years later, with the publication of Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in Du Bois's journal The Crisis. The poem is dedicated to Du Bois as well. This early association between Hughes and Du Bois is significant because, in an essay titled "The Negro in Literature and Art" published in 1913, Du Bois advocated for a revival of black culture. He wrote, "Never in the history of the world has a richer mass of material accumulated by a people than that which the Negroes possess today and are becoming conscious of slowly but surely they are developing artists of technical who will be able to use this material."A renaissance of Negro

literature is due; the material about us in the strange, heartbreaking race tangle is rich beyond dream and only we can tell the tale and sing the song from the heart," wrote Du Bois in 1920, using the word "renaissance" to describe the new awakening of black creativity in the arts. Hughes almost likely saw this editorial in The Crisis, which must have inspired him to submit the poem for publication. Hughes credits Du Bois and The Crisis in his memoirs for publishing his first poems and launching his literary career: "For the following few years, my poetry often (and exclusively) appeared in The Crisis. Insofar as publishing is concerned, I owe my literary beginnings to that journal. Hughes owes Du Bois a debt of gratitude for helping him break into the literary world, but it appears that his unique sensitivity as a blossoming young poet came naturally from his experiences as a youngster. Though he acknowledged Dunbar and Sandburg as literary mentors, Hughes' description of his writing process is more insightful: "Generally, the first two or three lines come to me from something I'm thinking about, looking at, or doing, and the rest of the poem (if there is to be a poem) flows from those first few lines, usually right away." This spontaneity of approach served Hughes well and poorly. Many of his poems have become out of date since they were hastily written in response to an occurrence that was covered in yesterday's newspaper, for example. Even if these personal experiences were frequently disguised as archetypal ones, the spontaneity that gave rise to his finest poetry came from the depths of his own experiences as a black man in America. His poems reflected the interplay between his consciousness of growing up as a black man and his embrace of the "dream" of America, however loosely defined. Hughes learned early on the difference between the social and the physical ramifications of black identity in America: "Well, as you can see, I am not black. In our family, there are many distinct types of blood. However, in the United States, the term "Negro" refers to everyone who has even a trace of African descent. The term is purer in Africa. All Negro is a synonym for black. He learned that the Africans who "looked at me... would not believe I was a Negro" on a journey to Africa as a merchant sailor in 1922. When Africans "looked at me... would not believe I was a Negro," he learned (11). The semantic ambiguity originated in America. Whatever the semantic differences, Hughes was frustrated by the Africans' rejection of him because he wanted them to embrace him as a Negro. Because of his upbringing in Lawrence, Kansas, and his middle-class upbringing, Hughes was shielded from some of the more overt racial discrimination that existed

toward Black people in other parts of the nation. He went to a white school while he lived in Topeka because his mother successfully sued the school board to have him accepted. Most of his instructors were friendly, but one occasionally made remarks about my race. And occasionally the youngsters would take stones and tin cans out of the alley after such statements and chase me home" (14). During the time he spent with his maternal grandmother, he was told, "beautiful stories about people who wanted to make the Negros free, and how her father had apprenticed to him many slaves... so that they could work out their freedom." Always, life progressed courageously toward a conclusion in my grandmother's stories. "Something about my grandmother's stories taught me the futility of crying about anything," the author writes (17). In July 1921, The Crisis published Hughes' poem "Aunt Sue's Stories," which serves as an illustration of how Hughes turned such recollections into poetry. According to his memoirs, he did not have a pleasant upbringing in Lawrence and sought comfort in literature (16). There are many similarities between his early life and his subsequent poetry. His poetry frequently dealt with sad or unfairly treated kids, for whom the American ideal was irrelevant. The source of Hughes's empathy for harmed children was his childhood sorrow. He wrote several poems on black laborers as a result of his struggles to obtain employment when he was in school. While still in the seventh grade, he worked cleaning toilets and spittoons at a hotel, which led to the inclusion of "Brass Spitoons," one of his best-known poems, in his second collection of poetry. The Jew in Fine Clothes (1927). In ASK YOUR MAMA, Hughes recalled the incident that occurred in Lawrence, Kansas; forty years after a local theatre owner posted a sign reading

> "NO COLOURED ADMITTED."
>
> THE QUARTER OF THE NEGRO
>
> WHERE THE RAILROAD AND THE RIVER
>
> HAVE DOORS THAT FACE EACH WAY AND THE ENTRANCE TO THE MOVIE'S
>
> UP AN ALLEY UP THE SIDE (121)

Seven years after being subjected to a beating by a group of white toughs in Chicago the summer before the Chicago riots, they became known as "The White Ones":

> I do not hate you.

For your faces are beautiful, too,

I do not hate you.

Your faces are whirling lights of loveliness

And splendour, too.

Yet why do you torture me, O, white strong ones.

Why do you torture me? (1-7)

These similarities between Hughes's early experiences and his later poems suggest that before he even thought about becoming a poet, he had already formed certain ideas regarding his race and white America. He simply started writing poetry by chance. He jokingly remembered how he was chosen to be the class poet at Cleveland's Central High School because he was a Negro and Negroes were thought to have "rhythm." In America, the majority of white people naturally believe that all Black people can sing, dance, and have a sense of rhythm. My students unanimously chose me as the winner because they understood that poetry needed rhythm and assumed that, as a Negro, I possessed some. I had never considered myself to be a poet or writer of any type previously. Hughes was therefore forced into the role of poet by accident—or possibly on purpose—because he was a Negro living in a white culture. However, it was his black' societal repercussions that made him suitable for the position. Langston Hughes' early experiences shaped who he was as a black man, and his poetry would confirm that he accepted the responsibility of speaking up for the black community. At the same time, Hughes was unable to reject his dual awareness and dual existence as a black American. Because of his race, his classmates had picked him as the class poet, which served to emphasize his differences from them. On the other hand, he had never experienced growing up the full force of American-style discrimination.

His familiarity with Southern mores had only been passing till the time of his Southern-speaking trip in 1931. He very frequently started his shows by describing how genuinely "American" his background had been: "I began my programs by telling where I was born in Missouri, that I grew up in Kansas in the geographical heart of the country, and was, therefore, very American." His predominantly Southern Negro listeners must have found his inaugural statement of Americanism a little confusing. According to Hughes' own words in his

autobiography, "I found a great social and cultural gulf between the races in the South, astonishing to one who, like myself, from the North, had never known such uncompromising prejudices." This first-hand experience with racial prejudice in the South introduced him to an important aspect of his racial heritage to which he had never been fully exposed. Hughes expressed his ambivalence regarding the area in a poem that was included in The Crisis in 1922, using some ominous imagery:

The child-minded South

Scratching in the dead fire's ashes

For a Negro's bones (6-8)

He acknowledged in the poem's epilogue that the South had a tremendous pull, but that he felt better at ease ignoring it.

And I, who am black, would love her

But she spits in my face

And I, who am black.

Would give her many rare gifts

But she turns her back upon me. (18-22)

In the same year that Hughes released "The South," Jean Toomer also put out Cane. A similar vision was produced in "Georgia Dusk," one of Cane's poems:

A feast of moon and men and barking hounds.

An orgy for some genius of the South

With blood-hot eyes and cane-lipped scented mouth.

Surprised in making folk-songs from soul sounds (lines 5-8)

Whereas Hughes's South was a vividly imagined nightmare, Toomer's Cane was based on experience (a six-month stint as a rural schoolteacher in Georgia). The last lines of Hughes' poem imply that he had not yet reached the same level of acceptance of the Southern way of life that Toomer had; Hughes' Gothic South was far different from Toomer's enticing lines in "Carma":

wind is in the cane. Come along.

Cane leaves swaying, rusty with talk.

Scratching choruses above the guinea's squawk.

wind is in the cane. Come along (l1-4)

Hughes had much to admire in those Southern blacks who came to dwell in the bustling cities of the North and received inspiration for his poems from them, even if he feared the direct Southern clash during the 1920s. Hughes overemphasized the unusual in his search for collective identity via them, as this line from The Big Sea demonstrates: "1 never tired of hearing them talk, listening to the thunderclaps of their laughter, to their troubles, to their discussions of the war and the men who had gone to Europe from the Jim Crow South... They seemed to me like the gayest and the bravest people possible—these Negroes from the Southern ghettoes—facing tremendous odds, working and laughing and trying to get somewhere in the world" (54-55). Instead of conveying the attitude of an active participant, the sentence indicates that of a compassionate spectator. Hughes' view of Southern Negroes was, in some respects, the exact opposite of his father's. The older Hughes, according to Langston, "hated Negroes, I think he hated himself, too, for being a Negro, He disliked all of his family because they were Negroes and remained in the United States" (40). Hughes, on the other hand, openly acknowledged his ethnicity. Hughes was unable to reject either race or nation like his father could.

In the South, Hughes would conclude his lectures with a reading of his poem "I, Too, Sing America." He would be reinforcing his belief in the American dream each time he cited this poem. Hughes's early poems, such as the opening lines of "America," which was originally published in 1925, show an almost innocent confidence in the American ideal.

America is seeking the stars,

America is seeking tomorrow.

You are America.

I am America

America—the dream,

America—the vision.

America—the star-seeking (5-11)

The oneness of Black and White America was emphasized in the same poem:

You of the blue eyes

And the blond hair,

I of the dark eyes

And the crinkly hair.

You and I

Offering hands... (18-24)

This declaration of racial harmony was directly related to Hughes's experience with racial integration at Cleveland's Central High, where he frequently received votes for significant class posts due to his popularity across various white ethnic factions: "Many of our students, including me, were then brought down to the principal's office and asked about our conviction in Americanism because it was during the war and Americanism was being pushed. After that, our school's administrator established an Americanism Club, and I was chosen as its president" (31). This event strangely increased his sense of segregation as a Negro while conversely serving to cement his belief in a perfect America. Although his ethnicity was undoubtedly a benefit in terms of popularity among his contemporaries, it was still his color that set him apart. At the same time, Hughes's racial integration experience distinguished him from those Southern Negroes whose way of life he so loved. Hughes must have understood that his experience was somewhat different from that of the majority of black Americans. Even though he occasionally said that he had a normal Negro childhood, as he noted in this paragraph from The Big Sea: "Mine was not a typical Negro family. My grandmother never took in washing worked in service or went to church. She had lived in Oberlin and spoke perfect English, without a trace of dialect. She looked like an Indian. My mother was a newspaperwoman and a stenographer then. My father lived in Mexico City. My grandfather had been a congressman" (303). Hughes also had no ill will towards the white community: "I learned early in life not to hate all white people. And ever since, it has seemed to me that most people are generally good, in every race and in every country where I have been" (14). Hughes frequently made clear claims about his nationality to erase the line between Americans and African Americans. This notion is best shown by the following anecdote from his memoirs. During the last summer, he spent in Mexico with his father, he had been instructing Mexicans in English. He was to be replaced with a white American woman who thought it was absurd that a black person could teach anything:

When she was introduced to me, her mouth fell open, and she said: "Why, Ah-Ah thought you were an American." I said:

> "I am American!"
>
> She said:
>
> "Oh, Ah mean a white American."
>
> Her voice had a Southern drawl.
>
> I grinned, (78)

He also mentions a time when he wouldn't admit to being of a certain race.After spending his first summer in Mexico, Hughes tried to buy an ice cream soda in St. Louis on his way back to the United States. The following conversation happened:The clerk said:

> "Are you a Mexican or a Negro?"
>
> I said: "Why?"
>
> "Because if you're a Mexican, I'll serve you," he said. "If you're colored, I won't."
>
> "I'm colored," I replied. The clerk turned to wait on someone else. I knew I was home in the U. S. A. (51)

These events were to be mirrored in his poetry, where he could proclaim his two tenets of identification with equal assurance: "I am a Negro" and "I, Too, Sing America." Hughes was estranged from both of these polar commitments despite expressing them. He understood that as a black guy, his people had never been fully permitted to participate in the American ideal. However, his exposure to the potential of that dream came from his involvement in racial integration, and his relative ignorance (this was to change, of course) of issues relating to Southern mores would set his situation apart from a lot of the black masses, with whom he sought to identify to the point of becoming their spokesperson. Hughes was able to adopt a level of understanding of racial issues that were rather uncommon among his contemporaries, whether they were white or black, because of this rare combination of circumstances. This sophistication gave the poet motivation for his work and gave him a feeling of purpose, along with his emphasis on preserving the required aesthetic distance of the artist. He had complete faith in the purpose he had set for himself as a poet for the black masses. His connection with

white Bohemian intellectual circles in New York during the 1920s gave him the extra motivation to spread his ideas to people of different races. As a result, there were two types of poetry in the 1920s: Black "message" poetry, which focused on the place of the black man in white America, and "vernacular" poetry, which used dialect, jazz talk, and common subjects. Much of this message poetry was included in Hughes's debut book, The Weary Blues, along with some jazz poetry experiments (such as "The Cat and the Saxophone," "Blues Fantasy," and "Negro Dancers") and other non-racial lyrics. The following book. Fine Clothes to the Jew included much poetry written in blues dialect and focused almost completely on commonplace subject matter. ... other lyrics that are not racial. Fine Clothes to the Jew included much poetry written in blues dialect and focused almost completely on commonplace subject matter. These two patterns from Hughes's early work came to dominate his whole artistic life. Shakespeare in Harlem (1942), for instance, may be seen as a continuation of Fine Clothes, but Montage of a Dream Deferred (1951) combined the conceptual issues from The Weary Blues with the vernacular subject matter. Since his work from the 1920s, Montage and ASK YOUR MAMA (1961) are likely to stand as Hughes's two most significant poetic works. ASK YOUR MAMA has overtones of "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "As I Grew Older," and "The Cat and the Saxophone," and is filled with humor, sarcasm, and thrilling imagery. Hughes distills his own experiences and insights into portraits of the black experience in America, much as he did in his earlier poems. In his book, Hughes stated: "All of my finest poetry was written when I felt the worst. "Poems came to me now spontaneously, from somewhere inside... When I was happy, I didn't write anything" (p. 54). When he first started writing poetry, he thought his songs were too intimate to share with others. As soon as the poems occurred to me, I hurriedly wrote them down on anything I could find, and I subsequently copied them into a notebook. But as my poetry became more serious and a bigger part of me, I started to feel terrified to expose it to anybody. Additionally, I was concerned that other people would not appreciate or comprehend them (p. 34). These two observations about his poetry imply that the root of his inspiration came from intense emotional conflicts. However, the "Negro Poet Laureate" character nearly completely engulfs the personal aspect of Hughes' poems. If, as Hughes said, the foundation of his finest work was personal dissatisfaction, it follows that he would have to give up some emotional stability

to preserve his single-mindedness of purpose and commitment to his craft. Poetry thus evolved into a form of therapy, disguising deeper inner conflicts. In his memoirs, Hughes revealed that he had two very serious emotional breakdowns. The first one was a falling out with his father over his line of work, and the second came after a falling out with his affluent white patroness in his late 20s over the style of poetry he was penning. His choice to become a poet of his people was strongly influenced by both of these emotional ordeals. When Hughes played the Negro in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," his first poem to be published, he assumed the identity of the poet. He would stick with this identity for the duration of his protracted career. This article makes a case for the relationship between the poet's life experiences and his poetry. It is impossible to characterize since it is apparent that Hughes repressed the most terrifying forays into his inner vacuum. Both a release and redemption, poetry. Rarely, such as in the poem "As I Grow Older," does Hughes offer a window into his inner fears; even in this poem, the true source of these fears is concealed, and the work ends up becoming an allegory of the isolation of the black man in white America. Early attempts by Hughes in the 1920s to fulfil the position of Poet Laureate of the Negro led him to produce an organic body of work. The conventional literary inspiration sources were mostly disregarded. The rhythms, dialects, and lives of the unheard, faceless black masses served as the inspiration for his poems. To create a new sort of poetry, Hughes aimed to use this underutilized wellspring of black folk language. His autobiography's accounts of his own life experiences merged with this folkloric material to give his artwork a thematic depth. He constantly included in his poems the fundamental themes of the American dream and its potential for the black man. The dynamic was created by the conflict between the unfulfilled aspiration and the realities of the black experience in America. This conflict between the subject matter and topic served as the foundation for the irony that distinguished Hughes's finest work.

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