

Langston Hughes and the Predicament of the African American

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Langston Hughes (1902 – 1967) was the most influential and innovative of the writers associated with the Harlem Renaissance, and his prolific output included volumes of poetry, as well as novels, short stories, plays, children's books, biographies, two autobiographies, histories, opera librettos, essays, articles, radio scripts, and songs for musicals. He also translated works from Spanish and French, and edited several anthologies. Hughes was the first black writer to make a living entirely from his writing, and a vital inspiration and mentor for many young black writers of the 1960s. (MacGowan, p. 78) "Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know," Hughes wrote in his 1926 essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain." In this essay Hughes describes the cultural pressures that he felt black writers faced to conform to white norms, and to see writing about black customs and black artistic expression as inferior subject matter to the white equivalents: "And so the word white comes to be unconsciously a symbol of all virtues. It holds for the children beauty, morality, and money." He goes on to defend the characteristic use in his own poems of language and forms derived from jazz, blues, and other musical forms – an interest that he was to develop in innovative ways in his writing over the next 40 years. (MacGowan, pp. 78-9) In "To Negro Writers" (1935), Hughes wrote: "Negro writers can seek to unite blacks and whites in our country, not on the nebulous basis of an inter-racial meeting, or the shifting sands of religious brotherhood, but on the solid ground of the daily working-class struggle to wipe out, now and forever, all the old inequalities of the past." Hughes visited Russia and was impressed by what he thought of as equality. He concludes his essay with a call for the proletariat and intellectuals: "We want an America that will be ours, a world that will be ours—we Negro workers and white workers! Black writers and white! We'll make that world!" Out of this consciousness and awareness of the predicament of the African American in America, sprang the need for change, albeit, a radical change. One of his earliest poems is "The Negro Speaks of Rivers". It is suffused with the image of death and, simultaneously, the idea of deathlessness. As in Whitman's philosophy, only the knowledge of death can bring the primal spark of poetry and life. Here Langston Hughes became "the outsetting bard," in Whitman's phrase, the poet who sings of life because at last he has known death. Balanced between the knowledge of love and of death, the poetic will gathers force. From the depths of grief the poet sweeps back to life by clinging to his greatest faith, which is in his people and his sense of kinship with them. His frail, intimidated self, as well as the image of his father, are liquidated. A man-child is born, soft-spoken, almost casual, yet noble and proud, and black as Africa. The muddy river is his race, the primal source out of which he is born anew; on that "muddy bosom" of the race as black mother, or grandmother, he rests secure forever. The angle of the sun on the muddy water is like the angle of a poet's vision, which turns mud into gold. The diction of the

poem is simple and unaffected either by dialect or rhetorical excess; its eloquence is like that of the best of the black spirituals. (Rampersad) It is a sonorous evocation of transcendent essences so ancient as to appear timeless, predating human existence, longer than human memory. The rivers are part of God's body, and participate in his immortality. They are the earthly analogues of eternity: deep, continuous, mysterious. They are named in the order of their association with black history. The black man has drunk of their life-giving essences, and thereby borrowed their immortality. He and the rivers have become one. The magical transformation of the Mississippi from mud to gold by the sun's radiance is mirrored in the transformation of slaves into free men by Lincoln's Proclamation (and, in Hughes's poems, the transformation of shabby cabarets into gorgeous palaces, dancing girls into queens and priestesses by the spell of black music). As the rivers deepen with time, so does the black man's soul; as their waters ceaselessly flow, so will the black soul endure. The black man has seen the rise and fall of civilizations from the earliest times, seen the beauty and death-changes of the world over the thousands of years, and will survive even this America. The poem's meaning is related to Zora Neale Hurston's judgment of the mythic High John de Conquer, whom she held as a symbol of the triumphant spirit of black America: that John was of the "Be" class. "Be here when the ruthless man comes, and be here when he is gone." In a time and place where black life is held cheap and the days of black men appear to be numbered, the poem is a majestic reminder of the strength and fullness of history, of the source of that life which transcends even ceaseless labor and burning crosses. (Jemie) "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" heralded the existence of a mystic union of Negroes in every country and every age. It pushed their history back to the creation of the world, and credited them with possessing a wisdom no less profound than that of the greatest rivers of civilization that humanity had ever known, from the Euphrates to the Nile and from the Congo to the Mississippi. (Wagner) The "I" of the poem is not that of "a" Negro but "the" Negro, suggesting the whole of the people and their history. Most of the consonants--d's, n's, l's, s's—are soft, and of the vowels, long o's reoccur, contributing by sound the effect of an ancient voice. The tone of the repeated declarative sentences is muted, lulling. Every element of the poem combines to suggest that when the Negro speaks of rivers it is with the accumulated wisdom of a sage. The function of a sage is to impart the sometimes secret but long accumulated history of a people to its younger members so that they might make the lessons of the past active in the future. (Oktenberg) This impartation occurs in the central stanza of the poem

.I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young
 .I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep
 .I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it
 I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went
 down to New Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom
 .turn all golden in the sunset

Moving by suggestion, by naming particular rivers and particular activities performed nearby, the poem implicates the whole history of African and

American slavery without ever articulating the word. "I bathed in the Euphrates" and "I built my hut near the Congo" are the normal activities of natural man performed in his natural habitat. That may be an unnecessarily anthropological way of putting it, but the lines are the equivalent of the speaker having said, "I made my life undisturbed in the place where I lived." The shift--and the lesson--occurs in the next two lines. Raising the pyramids above the Nile was the act of slaves, and if ever "Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans," it would have been in the context of American slavery and the Civil War. Implicit in the history of a people who had first been free and then enslaved is the vision of freedom regained, and therein lies the program. The final line of the poem, "My soul has grown deep like the rivers," suggests wisdom in the word "deep." The wisdom imparted by the poem, beyond the memory of the suffering of slavery, includes a more deeply embedded memory of freedom. This is perhaps the more powerful memory, or the more sustaining one, and even if deferred, will reemerge in one form or another. (Oktenberg) In Hughes's poetry, the central element of importance is the affirmation of blackness. Everything that distinguished Hughes's poetry from the white avant-garde poets of the twenties revolved around this important affirmation. Musical idioms, jazz rhythms, Hughes's special brand of "black-white" irony, and dialect were all dependent on the priority of (black selfhood: (Smith

I am a Negro
Black as the night is black
.Black like the depths of my Africa

The poem continues to retell the history of the "negro" from Caesar, to Egypt, Washington, modern Georgia and the lynching by the Mississippi. However, the repetition of the first stanza changes from mere reporting to an assertion of identity despite all the tragedies the "negro" faced and will face. "Christ is a nigger" in two senses: in the historical sense as a brown-skinned Jew like other Jews of his day, with a brown-skinned mother--both later adopted into the white West and given a lily-white heavenly father; and in the symbolic sense of Jesus as an alien presence, preaching an exacting spirituality, a foreign religion as it were, much as the black man, with his different color and culture, is an alien presence in the South. Each is a scapegoat sacrificed for the society's sins. In particular, the white sin of lust has created a mongrel mulatto race ("most holy bastard") with black slave mothers ("Mammy of the South") and white slavemaster fathers ("White Master above"). And, once created, this race is cast out, disinherited, crucified. (Jemie) The cryptic simplicity of "Christ in Alabama" exhibits Hughes at his best. Profound insight is carelessly draped in the most facile diction and form, the most commonplace images. There is no decoration or pedantry. The poem is so stark it could almost have been written by a child. It reminds one of classic African sculpture, with its bold lines and geometric precision. The poem evokes the feeling that great art so often evokes: that it could not have been done any other way. It commands both accessibility and depth. Hughes is a master at clothing the complex and profound in simple garb; and perhaps it is this more than any other quality that marks him as a great poet. (Jemie) Two hundred years

of racial trauma are driven full force into this thirteen-line, forty-seven word poem. It combines this astonishing historical compression with a remarkable level of rhetorical confidence and urgency. Each of the first three stanzas opens and closes in the same way: a concise, riveting definition ("Christ is a Nigger," "Mary is His Mother," "God's His Father") is balanced by an italicized plea or declaration—"O, bare your back," "Silence your mouth," "Grant us your love." (Nelson) Written in 1931 in response to a request for a poem about the Scottsboro case, circumstances which have been most ably analyzed by Michael Thurston, the poem turns the false accusation of rape lodged against nine young black men back on the South's dominant culture of white privilege and power. The South's real sexual violence, Hughes insists, is the historical violence white men have carried out against black women. (Nelson) Cast out, vilified, and crucified, the historical Christ returns to earth in serial fashion—in the person of every black man "beaten and black," every slave, every lynching victim, every post-Civil war black denied the full rights of citizenship. But Hughes's bold gesture—linking Christ with America's most notorious racial epithet—makes a more powerful claim. It asks a contemporary American reader to understand the black man as the Christ of our time. Those who crucified Christ are thus linked with every racist white in the modern South. Contemporary Christians do not honor Christ, we may conclude; they gather like Pontius Pilate's Romans to murder him over and over again. The black man in the South serves the same social function as Christ did nearly 2,000 years ago. (Nelson) It is that historical family, sanctified only by violence, who enter in stanzas two and three. The South's omnipresent and universally denied trinity—white father, black mother, and ostracized black son—form the background for the South's repeated crucifixion scene: "Nigger Christ / On the cross of the South." There is a Calvary in every southern hamlet, the bleeding, ritualized product of denial and repression. (Nelson) As the poem proceeds, its referents become, if anything, increasingly less stable. For by the third stanza "Christ in Alabama" is still more powerfully dual—at once hieratical and secular. Its powerful critique cuts two ways, unmasking the faux divinity of white masters, politicians, and fathers and exposing the vulnerable logic of Christian symbolism. For the racialized logic of our secular hierarchies have corrupted Christian images of divine authority. "White Master above / Grant us your love." The lines are directed simultaneously to a human and a divine father; the two destinations are mutually corrupting. No wonder the editors of *Contempo*, where the poem was first published, instinctively realized the poem was explosive. Its equations depict Christianity as a form of tyranny. (Nelson) Yet the poem also makes a claim for the spiritual power of black suffering. If Alabama blacks are modern Christs, their mothers modern Marys, then each cast out child is a "holy bastard," sacramental offspring of a brutal social ritual. And every utterance of a racial epithet is a worldly sacrament as well. "Nigger" is always "Nigger Christ," whether or not the sacred name is spoken, or so the poem insists in its fourth and final stanza. (Nelson) With Hughes's disgust at the generally bleak state of life in America came a profound mistrust of religion, particularly directed at those people who used Christianity as a cloak behind which to hide their oppressive

actions. "Goodbye, Christ" most explicitly conveys Hughes's attitude at the time. Where the call for revolution was softened by imagery in "Tired," here Hughes unleashes words of anger and bitterness which make clear his political posture:
(DeSantis

,Listen, Christ
—You did alright in your day, I reckon
 .But that day's gone now
,They ghosted you up a swell story, too
 --Called it Bible
 .But it's dead now
The popes and the preachers've
 .Made too much money from it
 .They've sold you to too many

In the poem Hughes examines, or rather obliterates, the tenets set forth in a supposedly Christian country. If a majority of Americans do indeed call themselves Christians, why then do we witness so much suffering, so much oppression? During the time in which the poem was written Hughes made a journey to the Soviet Union and saw Socialism working, whereas in America, Christianity had failed. Though resources in the Soviet Union were meager, Hughes notes the fact that "white and black, Asiatic and European, Jew and Gentile stood alike as citizens on an equal footing protected from racial inequalities by the law" (Good Morning Revolution). Hughes thus called for a rethinking of dominant American beliefs and an acceptance of the tenets of
(Marxism: (DeSantis

,Goodbye
 ,Christ Jesus Lord God Jehovah
 .Beat it on away from here now
—Make way for a new guy with no religion at all
 A real guy named
 .Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin worker ME

Hughes defense of the tough-guy poem as not anti-Christ but as "an ironic protest against racketeering in the churches" and as "anti-misuse of religion" implies that the gist of the poem is in these lines about the New Testament:
(Emanuel

.But it's dead now
The popes and the preachers've
 .Made too much money from it
They've sold you [Christ] to too many
--Kings, generals, robbers, and killers
 .Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks

Redemption was not needed in the eyes of other readers, such as the Reverend Charles C. Hill, Chairman of the Citizens Committee of Detroit, who answered a letter from Gerald L. K. Smith by saying that Hughes "was expressing

the feeling of most Negroes toward white Christianity as displayed every day." Emphasizing that a distortion of Christianity was the poet's point of attack, he added: "I can join Langston Hughes with teeming others in saying 'Goodbye Christ'--the Christ as held up by the white supremacists. (Emanuel) The narrator of "Ku Klux" is signifying and clowning around, sassing the white folks. He knows that anything he says will be used against him, and his knowledge gives him a certain freedom. He mocks his attackers' beliefs by saying he would believe in anything if they would just turn him loose; that is, he would accept their reading of reality only under duress. They are desperate to persuade him, but they also know it's useless. And the fact that he knows and says as much makes them even more frantic. The poem holds five hundred years of history in capsule, spotlighting the physical violence by which the West established and enforced the myth of its superiority over the rest of the world. "Ku Klux" is a leisurely account after the event; the victim has lived to tell his story, and can afford to mellow its memory with humor and sass. (Jemie) Langston Hughes's poem "Ku Klux," like "Christ in Alabama" or "Park Bench" performs in a short lyric poem an incredible act of historical compression. In presenting a scene where a black man is accosted by members of the Ku Klux Klan, the five ballad stanzas of the poem revisit the whole history of race relations in America that has been structured on a master/slave dialectic. Although white and black no longer legally participate in a master-slave relationship, the white man is still "mister" and the black man is still a "boy." There is a race-based hierarchical relationship in place that is emphasized and essentialized by the white coats of the KKK and the "Nigger"-ness of the black man. To them, he is not an individual person, but only a pejorative example of his race. However, even as the white men deny the black man's identity—which is necessary to sustain the oppressive white/black dialectic—they are dependent on him. They ask him, "Do you believe/ In the great white race?" They depend on his belief in and fear of whiteness in order to sustain the construction of whiteness itself. (Brinkman) As Hegel suggests in Phenomenology of Spirit, the master/slave dialectic allows for an independent consciousness of the slave, but the being-for-self of the master is not certain because it is dependent on recognition of the slave who is not in a position to freely acknowledge the other. In "Ku Klux," the black man's belief is contingent on his freedom, so that while he is tied up his acknowledgment of whiteness can't be trusted. (Brinkman) But the white men fail to understand this contingency. One of them demands of the "boy," "Can it be/ You're standing' there/ A-sassin' me?" They take anything other than unqualified agreement as insubordinate and worthy of violence. In response to the black man, the Klan members "hit me in the head/ And knocked me down/ And then they kicked me/ On the ground." This stanza characterizes a history of race-based violence—on a personal, national and international level—that plagued much of the twentieth century. Hugh's ironic use of "A-sassin," however, suggests that it is this very back-talk, this verbal confrontation (as exhibited by the poem itself) that threatens to dismantle the construction of whiteness and kill the notion of the white man. Against such violence, the victim still has the power to call into question the system of their oppression and the identity of those who are dependent on such a system.

(Brinkman)The final stanza repeats the previous demand more emphatically, "Nigger/ Look me in the face-/and tell me you believe in/ The great white race." The black man, who has physically been placed in a subordinate position, is asked to affirm the identity of his torturers. He must do this through an articulation of his gaze (it is instructive to consider here bell hooks's notion of the "oppositional gaze" although it is specifically gendered). But in order for the black man to look in the white man's face, the latter must remove his KKK hood-his sustaining marker of whiteness-and reveal himself as an individual. The white man's demand becomes a desperate plea: he is begging for the black man to acknowledge some essential whiteness that is not dependent on an oppressive dialectic, but is biologically inherent and assured. We do not get the black man's response to this last question (unless we consider it to be the poem itself) and we do not know his fate. But we are left with an impression of "whiteness" as fragile and poorly constructed, to be questioned even by a man under torture. Hugh's poem interrogates the history of oppression based on race and calls into question the very category of race itself. (Brinkman)In a superficial reading of Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem" (later titled "Dream Deferred") one sees only its obvious simplicity. It asks, and provides a series of disturbing answers to, the question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" (line 1). A closer reading reveals the essential disunity of the poem. It is a ground of unresolved conflict. Various elements of its outer body, its form, contend with each other as well as with various elements of its inner body, its structure: that "sequence of IMAGES and ideas which unite to convey the meaning of the poem". (Hansen)Five of the six answers to the opening question are interrogative rather than declarative sentences. However, due to its tentative "Maybe," the sole declarative sentence is far less potent--less truly declarative, one might say--than the final line, that final, forceful, emphatically italicized interrogative, which, in spite of the fact that it is merely one more in a series of questions, is the conclusive, though not the sole and exclusive, answer to the question posed in line 1. The result of all this is a poem so out of joint that its five questions strongly assert and its single assertion tentatively suggests. (Hansen)In contrast, the poem's typography seems more logical--up to a point. The first and last lines, original question and final answer, begin at the left margin. The five intervening answers are indented, forming a longer stanza of four questions and a much shorter stanza of one declarative sentence. The former are so dramatic that the latter hardly seems to merit the emphasis it receives by being set off as a stanza by itself. (Hansen)The imagery of its oppositions progresses from the visual ("dry up" and "fester"), to the olfactory ("stink") and, in part, gustatory ("syrupy sweet"), to the kinesthetic ("sag") and organic ("explode"). This outward-to-inward progression of imagery subtly draws the reader into the poem--or the poem into the reader, who begins by seeing "out there" the drying up and the festering and who ends by feeling "in here" the slump and the explosion. (Hansen)Questions that are answers; a penultimate answer so tentative that it more resembles a question; stanza divisions which partially obscure our perception of the poem as a trio of paired oppositions progressing from outer to inner; a rhyme scheme which--at odds with the typography--reinforces the division into paired oppositions, all result in a poem

in conflict with itself, pulled in different directions by some of its most basic constituent elements. Yet this surely calculated failure is the measure of the poem's success. Its dis-integration mirrors the continuing failure of American society to achieve harmonious integration of blacks and whites. Few poems so well illustrate Charles Olson's sometimes puzzling dictum, "Form is never more than an extension of content". (Hansen) In "The Backlash Blues", Hughes raises questions about the identity that white society has imposed on the black man and the method by which the system attempts to guarantee the failure of the black man in that society. A literal white backlash is, of course, something with which slaves would be very familiar, but that is now to be countered by a backlash of global proportions as people of color unite. The final stanza is similar in set-up to stanza 1, but the final response line changes from portraying the passive receiver of action to portraying the speaker's action. The final coda completes the turnaround: the next "backlash blues" will be the white man's. The white man's control over identity, economics, education, the family, and politics would then be
(at an end. (Tracy

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