

The blues of langston hughes and his importance in modern poetry

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Langston Hughes is a respected and esteemed African American Icon. His poetry and writing created a platform for black artists during the Harlem Renaissance, yet today he is one of the few underappreciated names in modern American poetry. Despite his pivotal role in the Harlem Renaissance, his poetry never receives the respect it deserves among other poets because many feel it dwells too deeply in the specifics of black culture. In addition to race and racism playing a key role as to why he isn't read as often as he should, powerful critics and scholars often show little interest in black America, and as a result his work is not celebrated in the way it should be. His less political and more obscure blues poetry explores his hidden personal life, a side of Hughes that is often overlooked. These works are excellent examples of how Hughes helped shape the modernist poetry movement.

Hughes is a rather invisible figure in modern poetry, and is talked about very little in the dialogue of modern fiction and poetry. He is usually lumped together with other black writers and linked exclusively to the Harlem Renaissance. A large part of this reason is because scholars feel his work is simple and unlearned. Hughes himself even described his poetry technique as being simple, claiming it should be the " epitome of simplicity". Part of this can be understood as Hughes wanting his work to be understood by a specific audience: the black America of his time. It wouldn't make sense for him to create work relating to the struggles of African Americans if they couldn't identify or relate to his work. He used common language and drew inspiration from the everyday lives of black Americans in addition to the hardships they faced in their daily lives. Despite his work seeming simple, his material is complex and layered.

In contrast to his more socio-political works, his love blues poems intimately explore the world of his hidden sexuality. The poems written in between the years 1924-1930 are interesting because they are written using the voices and perspectives of both men and women. A blues poem stems from the African American oral and musical tradition of the blues, usually exploring the themes of struggle, despair, and sex. It often follows the form in which a statement is made in the first line, a variation of that same statement is given in the second line, and a satirical alternative is declared in the third line.

One of his more famous poems “ Subway Face” follows this form unequivocally. The first line states “ That I have been looking”, the second line follows “ For you all my life”. Both these statements are related to one another. The third line declares an ironic and shocking statement with “ Does not matter to you” and the fourth line “ You do not know” follows. The next stanza follows the same pattern with lines one and two being “ You never knew / Nor did I” and the third and fourth line paradoxically stating “ Now you take the Harlem train uptown / I take a local down.” To the naked eye this short poem is deceptively simple, yet underneath there is real emotional despair and desolation buried within the combination of these simple words in simple form. The voice or perspective is ambiguous, and its content is relatable to anyone reader experiencing aloneness.

“ Poem (2)” is a glimpse into the world of his undisclosed homosexuality. It reads I loved my friend / He went away from me / There’s nothing more to say / The poem ends / Soft as it began / I loved my friend”. The reason why

scholars feel this specific poem gives insight on his sexuality is because it reads from the perspective of a man loving another man and not being loved in return. Again this poem explicitly follows the form of blues poetry, but is more compact and delivers more of an emotional impact on the reader due to its harshness and austerity. Both “ Subway Face” and “ Poem (2)” explore the hardships of unrequited love. The fact Hughes was a closet homosexual during this time also meant his feelings could never come forward, and in addition to solitude and heartbreak, he struggled with never being able to openly express himself romantically in the way he wanted.

His blues poems not only gave insight on his hidden personal life, but also explored themes of negritude and black beauty. “ Poem (4)” dedicated “ To the Black Beloved” follows the form of blues poetry loosely, but is nonetheless a celebration of black exquisiteness and identity. The first stanza reads, “ Ah / My black one / Though art not beautiful / Yet thou hast / A Loveliness / Surpassing beauty”. He is saying that even though the color of their skin is seen as not being beautiful, they contain a “ loveliness” that surpasses and transcends the physical appearance of their skin. The second stanza reads, “ Oh / My black one / Though art not good / Yet Thou hast / A purity / Surpassing goodness”. Similarly, he is saying that although black people are not seen as “ good” by society, there is a purity and virtue within them. Lastly, in the final stanza he writes. “ Ah / My black one / Thou art not luminous / Yet an alter of jewels / An alter of shimmering jewels / Would pale in the light / Of thy nightness”. Here he breaks the pattern of the two previous stanzas to accentuate and reiterate the symbolism of a jewel to an

African American. The line “ Though art not shining” can be alluded to the constant weight of society oppressing the African American, not allowing them not to “ shine” and reach their full potential. He reminds his reader they are jewels that evoke light and brilliance despite the darkness of the skin and the oppression it brings in the line “ of thy nightness”.

Langston Hughes openly admitted how much he admired and was influenced by music in his own work. When he was eleven years old, he first heard the blues being played by a blind orchestra in Kansas City. He described the music having “ the pulse beat of people who keep on going”. From then he wanted to write poetry in that style. Historically, the lyrics of most blues music is weak on its own because the music is generally given artistic priority. Wanting to write specifically “ blues” is difficult as well because there is a balance between not making the written content too poeticized and less like lyrics. Hughes was really the first to combine the two, and allowed this style to convey the African American experience in people’s own vernacular language.

This style is just a scratch of the undeniable and incredible diversity in Hughes’s poetry. His work was embraced by working class black Americans that could finally recognize and relate to a voice in the literature world. He was a unique writer during the Harlem Renaissance because he wrote in ways that deferred from always depicting black Americans optimistically. He wrote of everyday life and everyday people. He often had black characters in his writings that were drunk, lazy, sexual, and violent. He wrote of working class people, and without diminishing his extraordinary work in uplifting

black culture in his more political writing, there are countless other themes and topics relatable to all readers of his poetry. Despite writing of everyday working class people, he encouraged black Americans to partake in the artistic activities that separated blacks and whites during the Harlem Renaissance. There was no reason that blacks shouldn't be painting sunsets or writing sonnets in addition to expressing themselves in historically black traditions like blues and jazz. He is quoted saying: " We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves".

Hughes's actively advocating for black civil rights shouldn't be something that separates him from the literary world from discussion of great contemporary white poets and writers like Robert Frost or E. E Cummings. Hughes's subject matter is far more relatable than some of the topics depicted by white writers of the time, who often separated themselves so far from the everyday person their writing seems like it belongs from a different era. Hughes's usage of music and jazz meters in his poetry are far more approachable to a wider audience than the complicated pentameters used by other poets. Lastly, the issues Hughes's so passionately wrote about regarding civil rights issues are sadly still seen today. Racism and police

brutality is still prevalent in everyday life, and if there is any poetry to be studied and celebrated during these times, it is his.