

Harlem renaissance poetry essay examples

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Although the two poets Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes derived their inspiration and influence from the need to redeem the African Americans' consciences from the shackles of the white supremacist oppression, their approach to poetry contrasted with respect to form, style, and the use of illusions (Reid 48). The poems 'Harlem' and 'Yet Do I Marvel' as written by Hughes and Cullen demonstrate differences in form and style in ways that illustrate the manner in which the poets attempted to locate their subject matter from the multiple influences that determined the thematic and formal structures of the poems. Hughes approach appears revolutionary in devising new forms while Cullen retains her poetry in the traditional and conventional structures of the sonnet, which provides a continuity of form while enabling a change in theme and meaning.

Langston Hughes in his poem 'Harlem' uses variation of meter in a way that makes the poem unique and different from the traditional forms of poetry. The variation of meter contrasts the poem with the established poetic forms as understood within the English and American verse. Disrupted regularity of meter helps the poem to convey the bitterness, dejection, and anguish of the persona. As such, the form adopted in this poem addresses itself to particular themes that are consistent with the experiences of African Americans in the independent period (Reid 41). This poem captures a certain element of authenticity in terms of form. There seems to be an effort on the part of the poet to invent a new form that is totally different from the forms of poetry within the European and American tradition. Hughes developed a form that could be described as authentically African American.

Alliteration, repetition, and rhyme are used effectively throughout the poem

in a way that compensates for the irregularity of meter. The stressing of some syllables achieves the quality of rhythm that connects the structure and theme of the poem. A combination of these devices makes the poem to appear uniquely tailored to the tastes of the African American audience. Hughes poetry as understood together with the subject of Harlem renaissance have the African Americans as the primary audiences. This is achieved through allusions that convey the messages of African American self-identity and self-consciousness. The lyrical element of the poem contributes towards raising the kind of harmony and theme of the poem for the purposes of clarity, sensation, and appeal. In this manner, the form and style used by Hughes effectively serve the purpose of highlighting the hidden meanings of the poem within the African American experience.

The use of allusion in Countee Cullen's poem ' Yet Do I Marvel' reveals in the manner in which the author uses the names Sisyphus and Tantalus to expand on the futility of human effort and the unavoidable misery that often afflicts mankind. The allusion in this poem contributes significantly to the process of making meaning in the sense that it provides mental images to the reader. The mental images of the laboring Sisyphus and that of the suffering Tantalus have the force that attracts the critical element in a reader for the clarification of concepts and other matters that connect with the idea of change. On this score, it becomes important to consider the fact that the combination of allusion and form help in detaching the poem from the conventions of American and European poetic influences.

The similarities of the themes in political activism and cultural discontent are noticeable in the poems of Langston Hughes and County Cullen. Langston

Hughes' poem 'Harlem' and Countee Cullen's 'Yet Do I Marvel' illustrate the political discontent and an active search for the African American cultural identity in a white supremacist culture that systematically subjugates the liberated African American society (Hill 67). However, the two poems approach the element of style in uniquely different perspectives. For instance, Langston Hughes adopts a more innovative form that liberates him from the American literary tradition. He experiments with new forms such as the unrhymed poems and free verse

Regarding the matter of form, Cullen appears to have inherited the traditional form of the sonnet and twisted parts of its conventional structure to suit new requirements. The modification is noticeable in the poem 'Yet Do I Marvel' in which the third quatrain of the poem is replaced with two couplets. The invention is meant to serve some kind of a unique break from the conventional styles in order to give her increased room for liberties in ways that attend to the service of the African American literary expression (Patton and Maureen 111).

On the other hand, Hughes experimentation with new forms signals a decisive break and a desire to disconnect literary from the European and American forms and styles of literature. Hughes seeks to match the themes of activism and cultural renaissance with a new form of expression that aligns with the fresh requirements of the African American experience (Patton and Maureen 73). The literary strategy was uniquely experimental in ways that aligned with emergent African American literary culture.

Hughes felt the compelling need to create a new vehicle of poetic expression by liberating the experience of the African American poet from the forms and

style established by the old oppressive order. His invention of form formed part of his wider struggle for literary autonomy as understood from the perspective of the African experience. As such, it became important to connect the various aspects of form within Hughes' poems with the desire to invent a new form of poetic form that would overlap the established order. Furthermore, Hughes adoption of unrhymed poetry liberated him from the strict demands of word choice and patterns as required within the European and American poetic forms (Patton and Maureen 31). In essence, it became possible for the poet to choose from a wide range of vocabulary that effectively served his goals in the literary experience. As such, Hughes attempt achieved the purpose of finding a new form that would remain consistent with the new context and thematic of the expression of African American consciousness. Like Hughes and other poets of the Harlem Renaissance, these particular poets sought to establish unique forms of literature that would mark a break with tradition. The need to express difference and rebel against the established system was uniquely noticeable.

Many poets of the Harlem Renaissance felt that the English language as constituted at the time of their writing could not effectively articulate their unique cultural values (Reid 48). The language had unique in-built biases that privileged the white man's culture and affirmed the perceptions of negativity as established within the racist ideologies of the time. Although this feeling was not articulated overwhelmingly, it represented a new search that collectively addressed the needs of the liberated African American. Generally, the desire to change poetic forms of expression and the need to

establish a new poetic order in terms of theme and style marked the essence of Harlem Renaissance. The poets of the time acknowledged the deficiency in the works of earlier poets from the African American community and sought to amend theirs in line with the emerging realities. Works of art are largely shaped by the socio-economic and political realities of their respective epochs. Poets who wrote before the Harlem Renaissance largely adopted a victim's mentality and captured their language in complaints against the system. They expressed the kind of cultural and racial disadvantages at the heart of their problems. The language, form, and style used in such poetry was anchored within the European and American expression of literature.

The perceived insignificance in some of their works is largely connected to the fact that they worked within the established poetic systems that lacked the structural capacity to articulate their views (Reid 48). Their poetry was seen as part of the white man's literature, which denied it the uniqueness sought in theme and experience. They wrote at a time of activism, which was marked by the awakening of new possibilities in the cultural lives of the African Americans. However, the language forms denied them the audience of the depressed and disillusioned masses who could not see them as indeed separate from the other poets who represented the perspectives of the white man. The coming of the Harlem Renaissance poets reinvented the African American culture by establishing new ways of poetic expression. Language is an important aspect of culture. The Harlem poets viewed the old forms of poetry as reservoirs of the culture of white supremacy. They could not articulate their cultural identity effectively in the language of the oppressor.

Works Cited

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