

The life and work of Langston Hughes essay sample

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



When Langston Hughes at age 21 sailed for Africa the first time, it was accidental: he greatly wanted to escape all the sad memories of his youth at the time. His mother and stepfather were caught in a vise of poverty and the irregular search for better jobs; his father, though he was himself Black, strongly resented Blacks for their social and economic circumstances and pursued wealth with a retribution that left no room for the sentimental predispositions of his son.

Langston, for his part, could no longer manage with the racist attitudes on the campus of Columbia University and in the United States generally; and he did not enjoy an academic program intended merely to please his father. As an act of revolt at the end of his disappointing first year at Columbia, Langston Hughes joined a ship that he later exposed went nowhere and jumped at another chance in one that went somewhere—of all places, Africa! The first thing he did once on board was to throw away all his books that had come to represent his despair.

Consequently, the fascination with Africa at this stage was not informed by any rehearsed, academic purpose or political consciousness. Hughes was steeped in the fashionable image of Africa that was conventional, naive, and romantic. Thus, the Africa perceived by the writer was “ wild and lovely,” that is, savage and exotic, with its Black and beautiful people, its palm trees, its shining sun and deep rivers.

However no sooner did he land on the soil of Africa than reality started to set in. Beyond the “ bare, pointed breasts of women in the market places” as well as the “ rippling muscles of men loading palm oil and cocoa beans and

mahogany on ships which brought machinery and tools, canned goods, and Hollywood films” and “ took away riches out of the earth, loaded by human hands,” Hughes had started a transformation that left a lasting and beneficial relationship with Africa.

Like the majority American intellectuals, he was not mainly charmed of the agenda of Marcus Garvey’s return to the motherland; though, he found to his dismay that Africans already knew about Garvey and regarded him very highly. Hughes’s initial hard works to identify with Africans were rebuffed: when he asserted he was not a White, he was informed he was not a Black man either. His early political education began when a Kru seaman from Liberia explained the political dynamics of color in Africa: the Africans call all colored colonial officers “ white men.”

Certainly, any persons who in any believable way operated in collusion with imperial powers were classified as White, irrespective of the color of their skin. This enlightenment permitted Hughes to reflect more understandingly on a tragic experience of a young man he met at an African port. This young man’s European father had returned to Europe on retirement and deserted him and his African mother to the exclusion of both the colonial and the local community.

Capturing this fascinating experience in a short story, “ African Morning” (Laughing to Keep Myself, 15), Hughes strengthens the tragedy of the boy. His mother is now dead, and he is in the indifferent care of his father, still the president of the merely bank in the area. The father now has a younger African woman as his mistress. As 12 years old boy, Murai is the unwitting

courier of his father's collusive transactions with all foreign companies shipping gold, which the Africans, under severe punishment, are not permitted to own.

He is abused on both sides, by White sailors and other Europeans on the one hand and by the Africans who disbelieve his nearness to their foreign overlords. At the end of the story, we discover him naked and alone in the pool waters of a lagoon on the outskirts of the town, bleeding from the attack of a bunch of resentful African boys and contemplating suicide. He has taken off his European clothes, a gesticulation that is symbolic of his desire to renounce his European parentage. Thus far he cannot reclaim an African identity either.

This predicament brought regarding painful memories of the experience of Langston Hughes's relationship with his father. Consequently, the initial encounter with Africa for Hughes was disturbing and ambivalent but at the same time deep and irrevocable. Africa brought to the center "the tragic mulatto" theme (Bullock, 78, and Davis, 195) in much of Hughes's writing and raised his awareness of the social, political, and economic conditions of Blacks on both sides of the Atlantic.

Besides the common lineage African Americans and Africans share, Africa had turn out to be for Hughes a symbol of those aspirations that African Americans cherished in the country of their birth where Jim Crow laws, human indignity, and political deprivations abound. The thought of the Negritude movement was already present in the work of Hughes and others of the Harlem Renaissance. Léopold Senghor, Léon Damas, and Aimé Césaire

took up the cry and developed more completely the concepts of the pioneers of the Renaissance.

Hughes was undoubtedly the dominant voice of Harlem Renaissance, and his writings of the 1920s and 1930s afterward became extensively available in anthologies and individual books. He was as well one of the first anthologizers of African writers, publishing *An African Treasury* in 1960.

This anthology came about after Hughes was invited to be a judge in a writing contest for Africans sponsored by *Drum*, a South African magazine targeted at an African readership. His point in this anthology was to present a balanced picture of Africa to counter the negative images portrayed in European writings. In 1963, Hughes anthologized another collection, *Poems from Black Africa, Ethiopia and Other Countries*, in an attempt to stress the growing cultural unity of Black societies in Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

Hughes's tedious work experiences as well assisted to endorse his interest in the welfare of African nations. His sea adventures as a mess boy, his work as a dishwasher in the night clubs of France, and the range of low-skilled jobs he held in the United States made him more sensitive to the exploitation of Blacks everywhere and intensely appreciative of the life lived by the poor.

Not astonishingly, he was first labeled an amateur poet when *Fine Clothes to the Jew* came out in 1927. A number of his main works return to the appealing theme of the "blues"—the plight, the joys, and the pathos of the oppressed of the diaspora and of Africa. His annoyance is often directed

against those who are the agents or beneficiaries of this oppression. Not without Laughter and the “ Simple” series of short stories repeat with humor, passion, and understanding of the life of folk characters in Jim Crow America.

This state of mind in Hughes coincided with the resurgence of Black consciousness throughout the period of the 1920s and 1930s now regarded as the Harlem Renaissance, when, as he put it, “ the Negro was in vogue.” several Harlem Renaissance writers embraced Africa romantically, and a host of White patrons encouraged Black writers to pander to creative exercises that suggested an African environment or celebrated a psyche or a mentality that explored motifs of the noble savage.

Socially determined and educated Blacks were outraged by this primordial indulgence, the use of Black dialect and the perceived exposé of Black misery in all its stark reality in Hughes’s work. His second book of poems was assailed: “ Langston Hughes’ Book of Poems Trash; Langston Hughes–The Sewer Dweller; The Poet Lowrate of Harlem” (Big Sea, 266). Charles Glicksberg titled his attack on this obsession with Africa in the Antioch Review, “ The Negro Cult of the Primitive” (47), and went on to disparage this embarrassing evocation of Africa and the poor academic and creative quality of the poetic discourse.

However Hughes was aware of this misguided fascination of White America for the exotic and the Negro whose affinity to the African is taken as an axiom. For example, “ Slave on the Block” and “ Rejuvenation through Joy” (Ways of White Folks, 19-31, 66-95) is luminous satires on the White

American belief that Negroes were the closest link to the prehistoric, uncorrupted state of innocence that Africans still enjoy.

This belief was held by the woman patron who put Hughes on an allowance thus he could complete his first novel, *Not without Laughter*, and to write in the same vein afterward, believing as she did, that there was mystery and mysticism and impulsive harmony in Black writers' souls, however that many of them had let the White world pollute and contaminate that mystery and turn it into something cheap, ugly, commercial and, as she said, "white" (*Big Sea*, 316).

Disconcerted, Hughes disowned "the rhythms of the primitive"; he stated his love for Africa "but [he] was not Africa" (*Big Sea*, 325). In Hughes's sarcastic presentation, "Slave on the Block" (*The Ways of White Folks*), the Carraways, collectors of Negro art and music, see no use in helping "a race that was already charming and naive and lovely for words" (19). They discover Luther, who is "so utterly Negro" (22) that Mrs. Carraway makes a decision to paint a picture of him standing on a block. To her, this scene must recapture the image of the slave on his arrival in the United States and just about to be auctioned off to a potential buyer.

Gushing over their Negro servant, who by now is almost a collector's item for them, the Carraways are merrily insensitive to his human needs. They even take slight offense that Luther permitted himself a liaison with their maid. The husband's more measure and racist mother takes matters in hand to protest the familiarity they have permitted a servant and insist they fire him immediately—much to Luther's own relief. In "Rejuvenation Through Joy"

(*The Ways of White Folks*), Hughes likewise lampoons a coterie of rich, vacuous, bored White women who are duped by two rogues who promise them rejuvenated joy on the example of Negroes, “ the happiest people on earth” (70).

Certainly, much of Africa, as Pat Ryan phrases it, was “ exotically synthesized, but seldom actualized” (235). However, inasmuch as many writers produced works whose merits resided only in their evocation of things African to satisfy an unbridled and unintelligent fascination with Africa—and rather a few of Hughes’s poems did not quite rise above this inanity—it would be right to state that Hughes’s espousal of Africa was more convincing than that of others; it was representative, functional, and integrated to the purposes of Hughes’s poetic statement.

Of all the Black writers during the period of the Harlem Renaissance, merely Hughes had in fact visited Africa. He was completely aware that his connections were not as recognizable as he would have wished, however his references to Africa remain authentic efforts and sincere expressions of a reality he experienced. Some of his poems, for instance “ *Sun Song*” and “ *Natcha*”, bear merely slanting, evocative references to Africa, or they strengthen recurring symbols that Hughes associates with Africa. The sun, the drum, the dance, the stormy weather or dark night—all optimistic images of a mysterious, virile, and imposing continent on the threshold of a great reawakening.

In “ *Afro-American Fragment*,” considerably the first poem of his choice of “ selected poems” first published in 1959, we distinguish the mournful cry of

one longing for an identity that can merely be indistinctly or instinctively realized; thus far the poem is scented of hope that a closer and more meaningful union awaits a persistent effort to reestablish the old residual ties that are still submerged just below the surface. This profound, desperate view of something essential however not obviously understood is found in numerous other Hughesean poems too. Africa is thus far away that the poet has no memories of it except those portrayed in history books, which, one is completely aware, are largely a pack of lies.

He as well has memories of strange songs subdued and lost in time. So far all hope is not lost; for, Hughes hears another, particular song through the inexplicable, but inextricable, matrix of racial bond. It is this persistent sound, pounding at his ears and his whole being, that makes probable a future understanding and oneness with Africa. The African American, according to Hughes, refused human space in America, has no option but to fight for it through an establishment of his African heritage and humanity. The bitter yearnings for Africa will carry on as long as the dilemma of rejection and refusal of place in America continues.

“ The Negro Speaks of Rivers” was composed even before Hughes dreamed of ever visiting Africa, although it remains one of his most appealing poems, attesting to pride in his African ancestry. “ Rivers” is a sign of great civilizations of the past, and the character in the poem is the African who has been a part of the earliest civilization and continues, despite a checkered history, to be centrally involved in other prominent civilizations of the world—along the Euphrates, the Nile, the Congo, and the Mississippi.

Hughes draws a likeness between the river flowing relentlessly and the Black's blood, and between the river's depth and the depth of the Black soul. He as well skillfully compares the long history of those ancient and ever present rivers with African civilization, indicating that its superior qualities have been denied while continuously being borrowed from by those very people condemning African " savagery." Hughes reminds us that it is Blacks who built the Egyptian pyramids; at present, the Afrocentric ideology footed on this assertion has become widespread.

In one more poem, " Africa," Hughes revels in the strident nationalistic struggles of African nations and at the prospects of their becoming independent of colonial rule. The images of thunder and lightning strengthen the thought of triumph, power, and strength of a youthful nation keen to meet the challenges of independence. Africa is explained as a sleeping giant that is now awake; she is " young," " new," ready to deal with the realities of the so-called modern world.

The sexual symbol of " In your thighs" in the final stanza suitably proposes the status of a continent at birth (or rebirth), eager and ready to seize control of its own destiny. Nonetheless, Hughes was more concerned with the plight of his fellow African Americans under the yoke of racial injustices; and his perseverance in writing poems expressing this view lost him the support of his benefactor, who evidently saw him as a dangerous, ungrateful rabble rouser. Instances of such poems comprise " Advertisement for the Waldorf-Astoria," which betrays the blatant quality of Blacks living in Harlem and the abundant lifestyles of many Whites even at the height of the

Great Depression; “ Park Avenue”; “ Harlem”; “ A Dream Deferred”; and a host of others published in Panther and the Lash which hold the oblique threat that the comfortable world of Whites will soon be invaded by poor, inconsiderate Blacks.

As Faith Berry has argued, Langston Hughes was not just a folk poet of Negro life, a poet of the blues and jazz; a main corpus of his work is militant in nature, particularly his later poems that associated to Africa. Section 5 of Panther and the Lash is titled “ African Question Mark.” In this series of poems, Hughes articulated his revolutionary views on the iniquitous involvement of European nations in the affairs of Africa. “ Oppression” empathizes with the conditions of Blacks under apartheid rule in South Africa. In “ Angola Question Mark”, Hughes preaches the requirement of armed struggle for freedom in one’s own land, even though the consequences may be doleful.

“ Lumumba’s Grave” comments on the unmarked grave of the assassinated first President of the Congo (now Zaire) and states that as he died in defense of freedom and truth, his grave is marked for posterity in our hearts. “ Final Call” is as well a devotion to Lumumba written when rumors first came of his death. Hughes hopes that his memory will assist keep alive the fight for freedom; for, in the poet’s opinion, Lumumba represents “ Freedom now.” He calls for the piper to get rid of the rats in our midst. In “ Color” Hughes recommends independent nations to wear their national colors with pride, not like a shroud, although the future might seem grim.

In Berry Langston Hughes: Before and Beyond Harlem, “ Negro” is a confrontational statement that catalogs the abuses the African has suffered in history while it romantically records some of his accomplishments despite this oppression. The African built the pyramids. He has sung his songs of sorrow all over the world, mainly in America, where his music has become essential to the whole civilization. He has been a victim of slavery and colonialism demonstrated by the maimings carried out by the Belgian masters in the Congo and the lynchings in Texas.

All those items comprise a history that can never be forgotten, most prominently since such practices have not stopped; they have merely been “ modernized.” Hughes’s poem very delicately asserts that history is not only the past however the present: the simple word, now, calls one’s attention to the fact. When Hughes cries out his negroness, his blackness, black as the night, black like his Africa, he is combining a complex set of emotions that conclude in the pliability and disobedience and determination to survive that have made for the African continuum in the diaspora.

One more poem with a similar historical context is “ Lament for Dark People” (Berry, Before and Beyond Harlem) in which Hughes repines the loss that Africa has had to accommodate because of that fateful contact with Europeans, who offered a touted superior civilization that has proved a hoax. Hughes sees an similarity between Black and Native American because of their shared history of victimization at the hands of the White man, who did everything in his power to debase and destroy African American and Native American civilizations, to cage both “ in the circus of [white] civilization”, to

drive the latter away from the land at the same time as enslaving the former and using him to exploit the stolen land.

In “ Broadcast on Ethiopia” (Good Morning Revolution), Hughes’s monitoring of political events in Africa focuses on the unwarranted attack of Ethiopia by Italy in a desperate bid to obtain a colony in Africa. Again, the civilization that Europe pretends to introduce through colonization is a delusion for those who dare to place their faith in such promises.

In the foreword to Faith Berry edition of Good Morning Revolution, Saunders Redding discloses that Langston Hughes was subjected to the harassments of McCarthyism for the reason that he had spent some time in the Soviet Union and produced some works in praise of communism. This witch-hunt was overwhelming for one of the most celebrated Black poets of this time; several of his speaking engagements were abruptly canceled, and some of his books were removed from libraries and school texts. Therefore, Hughes did not permit many of his revolutionary writings, which had been published in incomprehensible magazines, to be anthologized in any of his popular collections.

In 1962, consequently, when he participated in an “ All-African Writers Conference” in Kampala, Uganda, he shocked his African audience by not reading any revolutionary pieces. They had access to these works, particularly those related to African nationalism, and had expected to hear them. When confronted on this matter, Hughes asserted that the occasion was unsuitable for those poems! Numerous of these revolutionary poems have been collected by Faith Berry in Good Morning Revolution. In this

collection, which criticizes the exploitation of Blacks in the “ Third World” (Africa and the Caribbean) and in the United States, the tone adopted by Hughes is fairly often caustic, angry, and almost hysterical.

“ The Same” jabs at the atrocities committed by Europeans against Africans, all for the sake of accumulating excessive wealth that did not belong to them. The poem concludes that the time has come for the oppressed to reclaim their destiny. In Sierra Leone, in Alabama, in South Africa, in Haiti, in Central America, in Morocco, in Harlem, the common denominator is oppression and utilization.

Millions and billions of dollars, pounds, francs, pesetas, and lire are made from the blood and sweat of the unfortunate proletariat, working in the diamond mines; picking cotton, coffee and bananas; slaving at the docks; buying finished goods at exorbitant prices; making life an earthly heaven for the master, at the same time as they are living in hell. The majority of those victims are “ Black: Exploited, beaten, and robbed, shot and killed.” Hughes then calls for “ the red armies of the International proletariat” made up of all colors and nationalities, to rise and seize power. Here the poet reminds us of the works of other Black revolutionaries, such as Frantz Fanon and Jacques Roumain.

“ English” is very evocative of Hughes’s experiences on his first African trip. In “ English,” Hughes, with great satire, juxtaposes the contrast between the Englishman’s scrupulous attentions to his grooming, a semblance of his refined cultivation, and the unconscionable greed that divests other people of all their produce. Using the pun of the English “ combing” their hair for

dinner and combing the access routes to the resources of others, together with the repetition of “ load,” Hughes delicately captures the image of the voracious appetite and meticulousness that mark the exploitation of the unsuspecting colonized nations. The latter are enthralled by the invader’s “ civilized” manners, completely unaware that he is in fact a savage ready to eliminate them, to “ buy, sell, or rob” so as to achieve his great objectives.

This acrimonious vein typifies the poems pertaining to Africa in *Good Morning Revolution* and bespeaks the depth of Hughes’s passionate sympathy with the welfare of Africa. whereas “ *Johannesburg Mines*” laments the exploitation of African labor, “ *Merry Christmas*” calls attention to the incongruity of a Christian Europe that admits to convert others to Christianity yet ends up with the gross maltreatment of subjected nations.

“ *Cubes*” examines the dilemma of the Senegalese student who is invited to visit France for the amusement of the French government. The warmth he receives is tainted, and he returns to his motherland taking with him diseases he picked up in France. The title is an appropriate sign of the fragmented style of Picasso’s paintings; the encounter with French culture promises a fragmentation of the African’s home community. According to the poet, all that France has to present the African is a group of “ three sick, old prostitutes [named] Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,” and the vaunted “ *Civilization*” that does nothing more than corrupt and estrange Africans, spreading unnamable diseases among the youths.

Hughes’s sharp satire is brought into outstanding use in the imagery, mental configurations, and play on words. The fundamental concept is that of the

supposed superiority and supremacy of White (Europe) over Black (Africa). Ever laughing to keep from crying, Hughes turns round the relationship as he entails that the superior society is the very one passing down diseases, corruption, and beastliness to the inferior one. Thus, light comes to represent darkness, and darkness, light. Paris, supposedly the center of civilization, is described as the city of Picasso's cubes, and Hughes emphasizes the element of unwholesomeness, fragmentation, and " DISEASE."

As we carry on to witness and wonder at the civilized debate on the origin of AIDS and further devastating diseases, we cannot help recalling Langston Hughes's poetry: Africa, victim of all sorts of opprobrium; Africa, dumping ground for all forms of appalling products of Western genius, not excluding alarming diseases that the master in his wisdom has created however now finds impossible to control.

The support of Africa in the works of Langston Hughes goes beyond the fashionable statements that have marked numerous African-American artists and others who look for to connect with the motherland. Hughes met the African in Africa, shared his human aspirations, and observed the individuality and soundness of his way of life. Africa opened his eyes to the inextricable association between the fates of the African American and the African as common victims of discrimination and economic utilization in a Western-dominated world.

His contemporaries, for instance Jean Toomer and Wallace Thurman, full of hopefulness, were ecstatic regarding White American patronage of Black artistic expressions and the dreamy setting of northern metropolises such as

Harlem. Many, consequently, were miffed by Hughes's preoccupation with Africa and his chipping away at the obvious inequalities and the irresponsible uses of privilege at the expense of a Black underclass.

Ultimately, Hughes paid a heavy price for his expressions of solidarity with exploited Africa and with the Communist government of the Soviet Union. And though he tried to resolve some of the anger of the politically correct in the fifties by rejecting some of his earlier poems on religion and would not comprise his radical verses in anthologies or at poetry reading sessions, he was for a long time a sole, strong voice among Black leaders in the United States who stood up for Africa against the tyranny of a colonial hegemony.

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