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Sara Martini? Professor Lovorka Grui? Grmuša American Literature 11th of January 2017 Langston Hughes: African American man in the USA Considered one of the most important figures of the Harlem Renaissance in New York, James Mercer Langston Hughes was an American poet, social activist, and novelist whose work is a beautiful representative of jazz poetry. He was born in 1902 and died in 1967. His work, in general, creates a colorful portrayal of the life of a black man in America during the period between the 1920s and 1960s, especially during the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro Movement.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the position of an African American man in the US society based on Hughes' poetry, taking into consideration artistic movements of the period, like Harlem Renaissance and/or the New Negro Movement. My goal is to provide a wholesome portrayal of an African American man during these movements and to, based on the selected poems of Langston Hughes, describe how a black man in America sees himself, his society and his fellow African Americans. I have organized my essay into several paragraphs. I will begin with some general information about the author's poetry and the cultural movements I have previously mentioned. Secondly, I will analyze each of the poems I have selected, in order to describe the African American man and his surroundings as they are portrayed in each of Hughes' poems. I will finish up with a conclusion.

Harlem Renaissance (New Negro Movement) was a cultural and artistic movement that took place in Harlem, New York during the 1920s and 1930s, specifically between 1918 and 1937.

As Hutchinson said in his article Harlem Renaissance: “ Embracing literary, musical, theatrical, and visual arts, participants sought to reconceptualize “ the Negro” apart from the white stereotypes that had influenced black peoples’ relationship to their heritage and to each other “ 1 The New Negro, although often used as a synonym for Harlem Renaissance, as a concept actually implies an outspoken refusal to submit to the segregationist laws of Jim Crow, and a new identity of a Negro that is proud and will no longer dwell on the margins of society. One thing that all participants of the New Negro movement and the Harlem Renaissance share in some way is their propagation of the concept of Pan-Africanism, which is a movement whose goal is to strengthen the bonds between the peoples of Africa and all people of African descent. At his core, the New Negro is a new breed of the African-American man, one who actively fights for his civil liberties, one who actively expresses himself through art, music, poetry, and literature and one who has renewed hope for a brighter future for his compatriots. Langston Hughes, one of the most prominent figures of the period, incorporated rhythm and repetitive phrases of blues and jazz into his poetry.

2 Since jazz was a great part of African-American culture during the 20s and 30s, incorporating such elements into poetry created literary voices that could be distinguished from white poets and that expressed racial pride. For this essay, I have chosen 5 poems, and I will analyze each of them in order to describe the African American man as he is portrayed in Hughes’ poems. The first poem is Negro. I am a Negro: Black as the night is black, Black like the depths of my Africa. I’ve been a slave: Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean. I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker: Under my hand the pyramids arose. I made mortar for the Woolworth Building. I've been a singer: All the way from Africa to Georgia I carried my sorrow songs. I made ragtime. I've been a victim: The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.

They lynch me still in Mississippi. I am a Negro: Black as the night is black, Black like the depths of my Africa. 3At the beginning of each stanza, Hughes identifies himself as a Negro, a slave, a worker, a singer, and a victim. Each of the stanzas represents an aspect of the identity of an African American man, and Hughes identifies himself with each, thus expressing a universal bond between every African American. Repetition of lines is a typical representative of jazz poetry while evoking Africa as a homeland is a Pan-African element, and they are both highly incorporated into this poem. The poem is in its form a simple but a beautiful representative of Hughes' poetry and the Harlem Renaissance in general. The poem follows an African American man through history, and Hughes does an amazing job in intertwining this history with the present, thus emphasizing its role in African American identity. Although the lines are written in 1st person, their application is universal.

As we look at the lines (them) more closely we get a brief but direct description of the position African Americans have been placed in throughout history. The poem mentions great men and great deeds, and African Americans were always in their background. They are the slaves of heroes and great men, they keep their shoes clean, they build their houses, they were and are still used and treated like animals, and that will forever linger

in the identity of the African American man. Although this poem points to the worst aspects of their history, it does not mean it is not expressing pride.

The final stanza expresses not only the author's pride to be Black, but it also conveys a powerful desire that all should be proud of their color and heritage. The second poem I chose is *As I Grew Older*. It was a long time ago. I have almost forgotten my dream.

But it was there then, In front of me, Bright like a sun—My dream. And then the wall rose, Rose slowly, Slowly, Between me and my dream. Rose until it touched the sky—The wall.

Shadow. I am black. I lie down in the shadow. No longer the light of my dream before me, Above me. Only the thick wall. Only the shadow.

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 sun, Into a thousand whirling dreams of sun! ⁴This poem is also written in 1st person, but nevertheless, it is perfectly clear Hughes is speaking for every single one of his fellow brothers and sisters. The author once again creates an omnipresent feeling of unity amongst African Americans, while at the same time using a very simplistic language. The first part of the poem is reminiscing about a dream he had. A dream he has almost forgotten, a dream that was taken away. He says a wall rose between him and his dream and that he lies in its shadow. In the second part of the poem, Hughes calls for his hands to break down the wall and bring light back into his life.

This poem is very powerful and emotional. It is a call to all African Americans who have been lingering in the shadows to restore their pride and humanity and to fight for themselves. African Americans have been stripped of their rights for far too long, they were used and treated as if they were not human, and they do deserve better.

Hughes is sending a universal message, a black man is worth as much as any other, he is done with humiliation and oppression. He will fight for his dream and life because he is proud enough to know he deserves it. Hughes breaks down the barrier of oppression and fear and opens the door to light, compassion, unity, and freedom. The third poem is I, too. I, too, sing America. I am the darker brother. They send me to eat in the kitchen When company comes, But I laugh, And eat well, And grow strong.

Tomorrow I'll be at the table When company comes. Nobody'll dare Say to me, "Eat in the kitchen," Then. Besides, They'll see how beautiful I am And be ashamed—I, too, am America. 5 The beauty of this poem is the universal message it conveys although it may seem very specific in its content. The poem is concerned with a particular situation that becomes a beautiful metaphor for the position of an African American in his society.

The author speaks of himself as the one that is sent to eat in the kitchen, clearly evoking the times of slavery. Later on, he says tomorrow he will be at the table because everyone will know how beautiful he is and will never again be ashamed of him. He is too America, an equal of his white brother, he has nothing to be ashamed of and he will no longer be treated like a lesser man. He embraces his beauty and all aspects of his identity and he

realizes his worth is as great as everybody else's. He condemns the way the African American man was treated, but embraces change and believes in a better tomorrow where he will be an equal part of his society no one will be ashamed of.

Hughes is also expressing patriotism towards his country, forgiving it for its sins, and believing in its redemption. The fourth poem is Cross. My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black. If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back. If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell, I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well
My old man died in a fine big house.

My ma died in a shack. I wonder where I'm going to die, Being neither white nor black? 6 What makes this poem so powerful and beautiful is the illusion of simplicity that slowly unveils very complex ideas. It is a great piece of art that shows us how far one can go with just a few lines, exploiting the language to get as much from it, using as little of it as possible. Hughes is breaking all bonds with tradition and stereotypes. His skin no longer defines him, his destiny is not dictated by his color, he is complex and his skin is just an aspect of his persona, not what defines him. This poem describes a modern society where old barriers are being stripped down and possibilities for an African American are no longer restricted. He is an equal part of the society that is undergoing a crucial change in perspective, he is a proud Black man that values himself and realizes he is so much more than he was once allowed to be.

The fifth, and the final poem I chose is My People. The night is beautiful, So the faces of my people. The stars are beautiful, So the eyes of my people. Beautiful, also, is the sun. Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people. Through art, African Americans explored their culture and heritage, their bond grew stronger through mutual support and expressions of racial pride, and this poem represents just that. The African American found beauty in his color and found a diverse and rich culture that is a part of his identity.

The New Negro is bound to his heritage, culture, and ancestors, he loves himself and his fellow African Americans. He accepts his skin, and everything that comes with it, he no longer finds beauty on the outside, but has finally found it within himself. In conclusion, Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro represent a cultural explosion within the African American society. Langston Hughes and his poetry are a perfect representative of the Movement and what it has done for the Black man. A modern African American has finally accepted himself, he knows he deserves better and is no longer afraid to ask for it. He embraces his past, but he no longer succumbs to it.

He wants to be a part of his country, a part of his society, he is no longer just the color of his skin, he is complex, unique and knows his worth.

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American-literature-and-art)· The New Negro Renaissance

(<http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-rennaissance.html#intro>) 1

Hutchinson, 2017² The New Negro Renaissance (<http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-rennaissance.html#intro>)³

Hughes, 2011, page 84

Hughes, 2011, page 115 Hughes, 2011, page 2756 Hughes, 2011, page 1587

Hughes, 2011, page 13