

Politics and structure in harlem renaissance writing

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

This Land is Whose Land When the mass media shows images of American heritage and ancestry, the African-American images are predictable: Martin Luther King, Jr. will make an appearance; possibly Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois as well. However, many of the iconic images - the Pilgrim, the Minuteman, and Uncle Sam -- are emphatically white. And so the reconciliation of racial and social identities can be difficult for Americans who are not European-American. The writings of such African-Americans as Langston Hughes, DuBois, Gwendolyn B. Bennett, and Claude McKay all demonstrate how a sense of racial ancestry can influence one's sense of "American" identity.

Langston Hughes insists that being American transcends racial background in "Theme for English B." The speaker likes "Bessie, bop or Bach" (24) and notes that being "colored doesn't make [him] NOT like the same things other folks like who are other races"(25-26). Even though the speaker does not "often want to be a part of"(35) the same culture as the instructor, he also realizes that to do so is "American"(33).

Hughes, writing in 1951, lived in a far different time than that described by W. E. B. DuBois in *The Souls of Black Men*. He describes the "fire of African freedom" that still burned in the "veins of slaves" before 1750. After the American Revolution, however, those of African descent tended to identify themselves in one of two ways: those in the South attempted three major insurrections, climaxing in Nat Turner's 1831 uprising, while those in the North tended to segregate themselves in a "new and curious attempt at self-development", as typified by the African Church in Philadelphia and New York City.

McKay and Bennett both write of vestigial features in the contemporary African-American. Bennett's "To a Dark Girl" sees "something of old forgotten queens"(5) in the girl's "lithe"(6) walk, but "something of the shackled slave"(7) in the "rhythm" of her talk(8). This suggests that the majesty of the African-American spirit has not found full validation in its American identity. McKay spends some time in "Heritage" lamenting the "faun-like form, the fond elusive face"(4) of the ancestor that inspires him to greatness. Both authors here sense a loss between the potential and the actual in the status of the African-American in contemporary society - it would seem that the American identity is somehow muted in comparison with the glory of African ancestry.

Works Cited

Bennett, Gwendolyn B. "To a Dark Girl." 18 December 2005. <http://www.geocities.com/fsearles/bennett.html>

DuBois, W. E. B. The Souls of Black Men. 18 December 2005. <http://www.bartleby.com/114/3.html>.

Hughes, Langston. "Theme for English B." 18 December 2005. .

McKay, Claude. "Heritage." 18 December 2005. http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/mckay/additionalpoems.htm

Name

Instructor

Course

Date

Politics and Structure in Harlem Renaissance Writing

Christo's works of art are meant to make statements so large about the

<https://assignbuster.com/politics-and-structure-in-harlem-renaissance-writing/>

universal connections among humans that he makes them large enough (in some cases) to be seen from space. He has erected large yellow tapestries in California and Japan to urge harmony among humanity, and he put orange archways throughout all of Central Park to remind New Yorkers that there are other humans passing through the park, and that every chance to interact with other people should be celebrated. Similarly, writers of the Harlem Renaissance permitted their political messages to dictate formal aspects of their writing - structure, in the case of such novels as *Quicksand* and *Infants of the Spring*; and meter, rhyme, tone, and diction in such poems as "Jazzonia" and "Song for a Dark Girl." The writers of this time period had a great deal to get off their chests about racial and sexual politics - their works, it should be no surprise, pulsate with their ideas.

Quicksand and *Infants of the Spring* deal primarily with the question of what "black" and "white" sexuality entail, and how genuinely a sexual person of color might expect to find affirmation outside African-American society.

Helga, in *Quicksand*, escapes America and finds brief success as a "peacock" in Europe - a woman of color who intrigues those around her by her ostensible primitive, sensual nature that was supposed to possess none of the Puritanical inhibitions of the European culture. Her story is written as a novel-of-passing - here, a story that sees race as a social construct. Because Helga sees her problems as caused by the stereotypes of others, she cannot find happiness in her success, and so ends up in a "quicksand" of her own making. *Infants of the Spring* shows the perils of being black, gay, and interested in white men during the 1920's, as part of a larger satire of the Harlem Renaissance, which saw itself as a shining, intellectual tower far

above the world around it. This novel is written in short chapters, as a part of the author's desire to write a series of images - art for art's sake - rather than another expressly political novel about the black experience. Ironically, the desire to keep politics from affecting the form of the novel ends up dramatically shaping the structure.

"Jazzonia" and "Song for a Dark Girl" both throb with the jazz and blues rhythms of the music of their age. In the first poem, Hughes takes a black dancing girl with "bold" eyes, lifting up in the air her "dress of silken gold"(3-4) - putting herself on display as a sexual exotic, much as Helga does in Quicksand - and compares her audacity to that of Eve, and of Cleopatra: strong women who brought sorrow down on themselves. The use of allusion here shows the dark end that awaits the dancing girl - eventually, she will be too old to be of use for her exhibitors, and she will be cast aside. "Song for a Dark Girl" was motivated by a KKK lynching, and places the girl's "bruised body high in the air"(6) in parallel to the sacrifice of the "white Jesus Christ"(7) by leaving the "naked shadow on a gnarled and naked tree"(11-12). The tree could have been the cross, or it could have been the one where this young girl was murdered. The rhythm of the poem is that of the blues - a mode of music meant for those parts of the human animal that are so despicable, and so ingrained, that people of conscience will never be able to stop hating them. The messages of these two poems pass into the reader just as viscerally as the movement of the dancer, and the sad shock of the tree.

Works Cited.

Hughes, Langston. "Song for a Dark Girl. 18 December 2005. <http://www.>

<https://assignbuster.com/politics-and-structure-in-harlem-renaissance-writing/>

mc. maricopa. edu/bjordan/SongforaDarkGirl. html

Hughes, Langston. " Jazzonia." 18 December 2005. [http://www. poemhunter. com/p/m/poem. asp?poem= 31138](http://www.poemhunter.com/p/m/poem.asp?poem=31138)

Larsen, Nella. Quicksand. New York: Penguin Books, c2002.

Thurman, Wallace. Infants of the Spring. New York: Northeastern University Press, c1992.