

Dual consciousness in hughes' poetry

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Raymond Smith once wrote, “ Hughes attempted to integrate the two facets of double consciousness (the American and the Negro) into a single vision – that of a poet.” Langston Hughes, possibly the most prominent black American poet, incorporates these complementary aspects of consciousness into his poetry on a frequent basis. The concept of a multi-faceted consciousness is exhibited in his poems through the intertwining of the black perspective into the broader American one.

As demonstrated in his poem “ American Heartbreak”, Hughes describes an American issue using themes more common to African-American art. In this composition, the primary expression is that of the American ideal of freedom. The acknowledgement of the existence of a degree of freedom is significant in that it portrays the ability of blacks to express themselves, much as the author is doing in this poem. Contrary to the prevalent theory that America is the land of equality, the speaker recognizes a number of shortfalls of this proclaimed freedom when put into practice. He believes “ Freedom / stumps its toe” on the group of people it ignored throughout American history. Although the idea that an individual group is lacking in freedom is not unique to blacks, it is expressed throughout much of their artwork. Hughes also cites a historical event when he refers to “ The great mistake / That Jamestown / Made long ago.” This allusion is referring to the foundation of plantations and the implementation of a system that required the subservience of an entire race. This obviously inhibits the presence of freedom for the subjugated people who were deprived of their basic human rights. As such, Hughes is directing a message to America that declares the need for unhindered liberty and for the reconciliation of past grievances.

The poem “ Democracy” discusses the lack of freedom and the erroneous methods that were being used to achieve it. He criticizes the fear tactics used to attain democracy by stating, “ Democracy will not come... through compromise and fear”. Hughes seems to believe that the governmental system in the United States has been achieved at the cost of the needs and desires of blacks. They have had to sacrifice themselves and their families to build this nation through the subjugating travesty of slavery. The speaker also “ tire[s] so of hearing people say, / “ Let things take their course. / Tomorrow is another day.”” Essentially, he is condemning those who take a passive approach to the attainment of equality and freedom, both of which are guaranteed to all people by the documents upon which this country is based. He is also promoting the foundation of a true democracy through effort and cooperation between the races. Similar to many blacks, the speaker acknowledges that he does not enjoy the same freedom as other individuals. He makes the plea, “ I want freedom / Just as you.” At the time of the composition of this poem, blacks were still feeling the effects of discrimination and oppression. From this, it can be safely assumed that the speaker is a black individual who has experienced this and wishes for equality, as people of all races do. In this manner, he blends the American ideal of freedom with an analysis of it from the African-American perspective.

Offering another form of a dual consciousness, “ Refugee in America” combines an American perspective with that of an unidentified refugee, who is not necessarily black. This poem celebrates the principle of freedom as exhibited in America. The speaker states, “ on my heart-strings freedom sings / All day everyday.” This individual has such a positive disposition as a

result in a change in his circumstances. As a refugee, he has sought refuge from tyranny and oppression in America, where he has experienced liberty like never before. This is amplified by the speaker's proclamation, " If you had known what I knew / You would know why." This contrast portrays not only the refugee's joy at having escaped his past, but also a recognition that most people in America take their freedom for granted. Although the refugee is free from his former reigns, he still wishes to inform the population of the atrocities that occur in the rest of the world. This is analogous to the situation of the blacks through their escape from the yolk of slavery and the subsequent Civil Rights movement, which attempted to educate and persuade people to adopt equality in all aspects of life. By creating a parallel between the refugee and an African-American, both of whom have experienced a form of oppression, Hughes further develops his position.

Langston Hughes, a lyrical master, has managed to compose poetry that represents the complementary viewpoints of the Negro and the American. This assists in the portrayal of his stance that although there is some level of freedom in the United States, it is lacking for some. Whether by discrimination or a sheer lack of opportunities, liberty is not readily available to all those who dwell under the authority of the American government. Hughes acknowledges this and attempts to make a social commentary through his poetry, which also serves to exemplify the black experience in America.