

Rhetorical techniques and the critique of religion in "the big sea"



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Langston Hughes provides several types of rhetorical strategies in *Salvation* in order to achieve his purpose. Hughes was an African American writer living during the Harlem Renaissance, a period of emphasis on African American art, literature, and music. In addition to being an author, Hughes was also a poet and a playwright. In *Salvation*, Hughes describes how society pressures him with certain expectations. He expresses several rhetorical devices, such as imagery, diction, and irony, in order to demonstrate that it is impossible to force someone else to behave or think a certain way. Ultimately, everyone will have to make their own choices.

Throughout the anecdote, Hughes utilizes imagery to engage the reader. For example, he states, "A great many old people came and knelt around us and prayed, old women with jet-black faces and braided hair, old men with work-gnarled hands... And the whole building rocked with prayer and song." The author includes this quote near the beginning of the passage to allow the reader to visualize a typical church meeting. The reader also feels as if he or she is personally acquainted with the congregation due to the vivid details. In addition, the author portrays the church revival as dramatic, overwhelming, and uncomfortable. Furthermore, Hughes describes how the preacher "sang a song about the ninety nine safe in the fold, but one little lamb was left in the cold." In this statement, Hughes makes a biblical allusion to the Parable of the Lost Sheep, in which a shepherd leaves ninety nine lambs in the wilderness just to find the missing one. Hughes compares himself to the missing lamb that was left in the cold. He is isolated from the rest of the congregation because he could not actually see Jesus nor does he understand the point of religion.

Moreover, the use of diction and syntax allows Hughes to achieve his purpose. For instance, the text states, " My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say the same thing and it seemed to me they ought to know." Hughes displays polysyndeton here. By using polysyndeton and exclamation marks in quick succession, Hughes strives to create an exciting and upbeat feeling, which reflects the natural innocence and happiness of young children. His reference to the elderly also serve to contrast with the youth. It reinforces the fact that children are generally naive and tend to believe everything they are told. He uses this part to criticize those who take advantage of the cluelessness of children to trick them into believing in a certain faith. In addition, Hughes describes how he felt when he was at the revival. He says, " And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting - but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened." The varying sentence lengths and the repetition convey a strong feeling of anguish and tension, which can be felt by the reader. Hughes makes it clear that he took his aunt's explanation literally.

Lastly, Hughes asserts that there is no purpose in religion by satirizing the irony of the situation. Hughes chose to title his piece " Salvation." The title itself is ironic. From a religious perspective, salvation means to be saved. Christians attain salvation by believing and having faith in Jesus. Yet, Hughes loses his faith in God instead of believing. In addition, in the first paragraph,

Hughes questions the validity of the church. He explains, " Every night for weeks there had been much preaching, singing, praying, and shouting, and some hardened sinners had been brought to Christ, and the membership of the church had grown by leaps and bounds." The author implies that the church is hosting this spiritual revival to boost its membership. The church does not seem to care about whether its members actually achieve salvation. This is significant because Hughes is trying to reveal how meaningless religion is. Furthermore, sin is being committed even during the revival by another young boy named Westley. The text states, " It was very hot in the church, and getting late now. Finally Westley said to me in a whisper: ' God damn! I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved.' So he got up and was saved." Westley sins because he uses God's name in vain and he lies to the congregation about seeing Jesus. It is ironic that Westley sins in a church. Although Westley disobeys the Third and Ninth Commandments, he is not punished for his actions. Instead, he is warmly accepted by the congregation. By describing Westley's encounter, the author is mocking and satirizing religion. Hughes depicts religion as silly and unnecessary. The author was pressured to fake his salvation in order to please the church. Hughes also notes the extreme reactions of the congregation to the faked salvations of young children. It is clear that Hughes believes that religion is excessive. Hughes ends his anecdote by saying, " But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me." This statement is perhaps the most ironic statement in the entire narrative. Hughes was brought to the church so that he could

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come closer to God. However, the revival actually achieved the opposite effect and caused him to lose all his faith in Jesus.

In final analysis, Hughes effectively manipulates several types of rhetorical features, such as imagery, diction, and irony, in order to ridicule the concept of religion. He verifies that society cannot compel anyone to act or think a certain way. Everyone has the right to make his or her own decision in life. In doing so, he demonstrates that religion is excessive, silly, and overdramatic. Hughes urges his audience to question everything in life in order to gain knowledge.