Langston Hughes...Writing with a Purpose

“By the time of his death in 1967, Langston Hughes had distinguished himself as the most prolific and probably the best known African American writer. His prodigious literary achievements are documented in libraries and other institutions all over the world…In spite of his sound social educational background, wide travels, and prodigious talent, he became the first African-American poet to submerge himself totally in African-American folk speech and culture, writing for and about ordinary folks” (Abarry 396). It should come as no surprise that because of his achievements, Hughes was often referred to as “the Poet Laureate of Harlem”. Langston Hughes was an influential leader in the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement made up of African Americans in New York in the 1920s and 30s. As a writer, Hughes was strongly influenced by his background, the topics of his works attempted to invoke pride for African Americans in efforts to rise above racial discrimination, and his style and form are clearly linked to his cause.

Langston Hughes was born and raised in the United States during the early twentieth century. Hughes describes his background in his work “My America”, “My ancestry goes back at least four generations on American soil-and, through Indian blood, many centuries more. My background and training is purely American-the schools of Kansas, Ohio, and the East” (Hughes 334). Hughes was born in Missouri and spent most of his youth moving from place to place throughout the Midwest because of his parents’ constant separations. There was also a period of time during one of these separations when Hughes stayed with his grandmother. At the time Hughes began college at Columbia, he was already in the process of becoming a credited poet, having his poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” published in the Crisis. The Crisis was a magazine that spread concerns about African Americans and NAACP policies. It was around
this time that Hughes became committed to not only his writing, but also writing about African Americans. Mary Langston, the maternal grandmother of Hughes, is said to have been influential in encouraging dedication to a cause. Influence also came from his grandfather and great uncle, both of which were abolitionists. As already mentioned, Langston’s parents were constantly separating, and because of this Langston often felt alone, only finding comfort in books.

There was no doubt that the topics Hughes wrote about were influenced by his family and his racial background, but his style, form, rhetoric, and overall poetic technique were influenced by fellow poets. Walt Whitman was a huge influence on Hughes, and Peter Erickson recounts a story of Hughes and his attachment to Whitman, “One book only did Hughes save. He had flung overboard the symbols of his hurt. But he had kept the symbol of his best self, and of what he hoped to be. He saved his copy of Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*: ‘I had no intention of throwing that one away’” (Erickson 106). There are clear lines that can be drawn from Hughes’s poetry back to the “Father of Free Verse” Walt Whitman. For example, the poem “Let America Be America Again” was similar to Walt Whitman’s poem “I Hear America Singing” in that both use anaphora or repetition. Both poems also address the idea of America and varying democratic ideas. George Hutchison describes how Hughes was fond of Whitman and his writings,

“For example, in 1927 Langston Hughes would be invited to speak to the Walt Whitman Foundation, an occasion which he described as, “a great honor”…Hughes would stress, according to Arnold Rampersad, “Whitman’s humane depiction of blacks” as well as describe “modern free verse, and his own work, as descending from Whitman’s great example” (Hutchinson 49-50).

Carl Sandburg was also an influence on Hughes, and influenced the use of free verse in his poetry.

Hughes was also influenced by fellow African American poets Claude McKay and Paul
Laurence Dunbar. One critic argues that the dialect of these writers gives them authority,

“Many of them, including Dunbar, Hughes, Hayden, and Brooks, have made vernacular sermonic performance of their heritage a primary site of cultural authority and artistic creativity. The narratives, rhetorical strategies, and ritual performance of the vernacular sermon have helped shape the recurring aesthetic and ideological tendencies of African American poetry” (Blount 584).

It was mostly the African American dialect of Dunbar which was seen in Langston’s poetry.

Wayne Cooper argues that Claude McKay and Langston Hughes, along with other Negro writers of the twenties shared a feeling of alienation that similar to Gertrude Stein’s idea of a “lost generation” (Cooper 302). As Cooper continues he further associates McKay and Hughes, by claiming that Hughes, like McKay, stood up for the ordinary people, “In enthusiastic outburst, youthful Langston Hughes was also loudly proclaiming the worth of the common folk” (Cooper 303). David Chinitz mentions that both Claude McKay and Langston Hughes used primitivism, or the concept that life was better in early humankind, in their writings to appeal to white people (Chinitz 63). The similarities and influences of Hughes’s contemporaries can be clearly seen, but his differences from his other contemporaries, such as Countee Cullen, can be clearly seen as well.

Langston Hughes was also strongly swayed by the music of his time, mainly Jazz, and was extremely influential in spreading it through his works. Meta DuEwa Jones compiles a set of reviews that describe how Hughes used jazz to depict or explain his race and their home in Harlem, “Time and again Hughes’ verses are lauded for their “authentic negro rhythm,” their “jazzy” syncopation, and their “mirroring of Harlem’s night life” (Jones 1152). Jones continues explaining, “These critiques emphasize his ability to depict African Americans’ speech patterns, musical forms, and social milieu-especially those occupying society’s lower socioeconomic strata” (1152). Basically, he was writing in a form that his peers could easily
understand and that represented where he came from. In his book *The First Book of Jazz*, Hughes demonstrates that jazz and blues were native to America, “It was not until ragtime, blues, and particularly jazz came along, that America had a music that we could call our very own to play and sing” (1153). Hughes was arguing that jazz was unique to America, it was homegrown here. One poet, Michael Harper argues Hughes’ importance to understanding Jazz,

> “Langston Hughes is essential to the development of jazz poetry and jazz prosody, that “you have to really be informed about” his poems and performances if you want to be informed about the thematic concerns and formal traditions that exist and are revisited and revised within a jazz poetry idiom” (1153).

When looking at the works of Hughes there are clear methods and unique word placement that resemble blues singing. Steven C. Tracy explains, “Not only does Hughes draw upon song formulas for his lyrics, but he also presents his blues-influenced poems on the page in a manner approximating the blues singer’s methods of singing his lines. Blues singers most often sing relatively short burst of text, the pause sometimes located in offbeat places” (Tracy 83). Hughes’s use of eight and twelve bar stanzas also made it clear that he was inspired by blues and jazz.

Langston Hughes’s early books *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* both represent black music, jazz and blues. They also stress what lower class African American life was like. Hughes was often highly criticized for this. The concept of primitivism, previously mentioned above, was tied to jazz and both can be clearly seen in the poems “Jazzonia” and “Negro Dancers” along with others presented in *The Weary Blues*. Later on in his life, Hughes tried to move away from the idea of primitivism, but not the complete idea of Jazz.

It is also important to understand that more emphasis on jazz and blues was given when Hughes read his poems aloud. Like others of his time and those that came before, Hughes had
a powerful speaking voice and it gave new light to both his poems and his children’s stories. Hughes’s Montage of a Dream Deferred was one long poem describing the Harlem that Hughes saw day in and day out or more likely each night. Arthur P. Davis argues that though Hughes uses a “jam session technique and it,” is highly effective because, tying together as it does fragmentary and otherwise unrelated segments in the work, it allows the poet, without being monotonous, to return again and again to his overall theme, that of Harlem’s frustration” (Davis 282). This just further proves that the people, music, and places Hughes was exposed to were greatly influential on his works. This strong acceptance and appreciation of not only jazz and blues, but Harlem as a whole, that Hughes had is what made him a chief force in propelling the thoughts and ideas of the Harlem Renaissance.

Politics played a major role in impacting and inspiring some of the writings of Hughes. After a failing relationship with Charlotte Mason, also known as “Godmother”, one of his biggest supporters ended, Hughes fell into a depression. With this depression came new political views, ones that were skewed to the far left. In the 1930s Hughes spent sometime in the Soviet Union. Hughes did a great deal of traveling in Central Asia, and overall a great deal of traveling for an African American of his lowly class. Hughes made comparisons between Central Asia and the American South. Hughes wrote a great deal about what he observed while in Asia, a group of his articles comparing Central Asia and the American South were published in Moscow, being named A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia.

Upon his return to the United States, he continued writing about his travels over the span of the next two decades. It was because of these writings and the leftist views that Hughes had that later brought him before McCarthy’s Senate Subcommittee on Investigation in the 1950s. Hughes denied being a communist. However, this would only be the beginning of an ongoing
tension between the two of them. At the time of World War II, Hughes published three major works, including: *The Big Sea*, *Shakespeare in Harlem*, and *Jim Crow’s Last Stand*. *The Big Sea* was the first part of his autobiography and *Shakespeare in Harlem* was a grouping of more writings blues and jazz. *Jim Crow’s Last Stand* was a work that’s primary goal was to attack racial segregation that was promoted by the Jim Crow Laws.

With the increasing civil rights movements in the United States, many blacks were being accused of being communists. This was the case with Langston Hughes and that is why he was forced to come before Senator McCarthy. When explaining himself to the committee, and how he came to view the Soviets in such a positive light, Hughes went into great detail explaining the ongoing changes in America he faced throughout his lifetime. This issue of segregation was the main topic discussed. *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* has a copy of Hughes’s fairly short statement. It begins, “I was born a Negro. From my earliest childhood memories, I have encountered very serious and very hurtful problems” (Hughes 38). Throughout the rest of his explanation, Hughes went on to explain various moments in his life up until his time at Columbia University that were affected by segregation. Hughes’s writings are also considered to share a common vision and theme with black Hispanic writers. One critic argues how some of Hughes’s works can be related to those with the same background, “Langston Hughes shares a common heritage of slavery, racism, and oppression. His work has both influenced and been shaped by others who share the same heritage” (Jackson 89). In both Hughes’s writings and the writings of black Hispanic writers the themes of racial and cultural struggles, along with appealing to the common folk audience.

Langston Hughes’s background was clearly an evident factor in influencing his works, especially his poetry. The topics Hughes addressed were undoubtedly attached to his past and the
place where he found himself currently. One of his most famous poems “The Negro speaks of Rivers” clearly shows his influences from his background and his other sources of inspiration. A critic, Jemie, argues that, ““The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is perhaps the most profound of these poems of heritage and strength” (Modern American Poetry). The rivers are said to represent different moments and places in black history and that the author has become one with the rivers, fully accepting all that his people and culture are and have become as time progresses. Other critics argue that this poem is closely linked to the idea of death. More so that it channels Whitman in that the poet sings of life because he knows death. Arnold Rampersad argues, “With its allusions to deep, dusky rivers, the setting sun, sleep, and the soul, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is suffused with the image of death, and simultaneously, the idea of deathlessness” (Modern American Poetry). Another critic, Jean Wagner, argues that the poem is a uniting piece for Africans across the globe,

““The Negro Speaks of Rivers” heralded the existence of a mystical union of Negroes in every country and every age. It pushed their history back to the creation of the world, and credited them with possessing a wisdom no less profound than that of the greatest rivers of civilization that humanity had ever known, from the Euphrates to the Nile and from the Congo to the Mississippi. . . .” (Modern American Poetry).

Continuing with associations as to the things that influenced his writings, as already mentioned Hughes was affected by racism and even slavery; both of these are alluded to in the poem. One critic argues,

“He places the lines "My soul has grown deep like the rivers" at the end of the poem, this time suggesting that he is no longer the same man who "bathed in the Euphrates" and "built [his] hut near the Congo." He is now a black man who has experienced the pain of slavery and racism, and his soul now bears the imprint of these experiences” (Modern American Poetry).

The poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” has been analyzed over and over again, but the reoccurring theme of African American people and their journey through history is the most
prominent aspect of it. As one critic argues, “‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers,’” then, is only the beginning of a long chain of poems by Hughes which confront, distill, extend, and transform the historical experience of black people into an art both limpid and programmatic” (Modern American Poetry). The poems of Langston Hughes were attempting to create awareness of African Americans and the issues they faced and continued to face during his time.

Langston Hughes had a style and form that was clearly linked to his cause of creating African American awareness. One critic argues, “Hughes’ movement from speaking of his race to speaking for his race- a slight but significant nuance-occurs swiftly…Hughes is the ‘interpreter of the soul of the Negro race’ and as such ‘has portrayed a deep understanding of the Negro heart’” (Jones1152). Poem after poem the reader is engaged in some sort of phase of what it was like to be an African American. In the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” the reader is drawn back to African Americans’ journey across the globe, or in “Theme for English B” the reader finds themselves amidst the schools with segregation mindsets. As Jones continues, he points out that one of the largest aspects to Hughes’ style and form was his ability to “racially represent African-American people and to capture in his poetry the rhythms of everyday speech and black musical tradition” (Jones 1155). This everyday speech can be clearly seen in the poem “The Weary Blues” especially when the Negro is singing:

“Ain’t got nobody in all this world,
Ain’t got nobody but ma self.
I’s gwine to quit ma frownin’
And put ma troubles on the shelf.” (19-22).

It’s as though Hughes is writing as an observer and when the Negro is singing he is seeing an African American in his natural habitat, singing and swaying amongst those in his same boat. The use of “ma” instead of “my” is clearly that of African American dialogue and helps to
give “real” life to the main character of the poem, the Negro singer. Throughout this poem the reader is exposed to what some would call a series of definitions, “The speaker defines blues as a ‘drowsy syncopated tune,’ ‘a mellow croon,’ ‘a moan,’ ‘a sad raggedy tune,’ and ultimately, the expression of ‘a black man’s soul’” (Wall-iii). These specific words and phrases used in this poem at times represent what Cheryl Wall argues is the relationship between African Americans and Whites, “the alienation and despair offer a bitter critique of black life in white America” (Wall-iii). It is through his use of metaphors and his knowledge of jazz that Hughes could express what he saw as the relationship between African Americans and Whites in America during the period of the Harlem Renaissance. In a sense it is written for everyone because its main element is music and the age old assumption is that music is universal.

The use of African American speech can also be seen in the poem “Po’ Boy Blues” and here too it gives life to the narrator:

“I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong.
Yes, I was a good boy,
Never done no wrong,
But this world is weary
An’ de road is hard an’ long.” (7-12).

Throughout the poem “de” is used instead of “the” and that’s because of Hughes’ representation of African American dialect. The same is the case with the repeated “an”’. Shortened variants of words like that of “and” were common of African American speech. In this same poem the reader also gets exposed to the most common pattern of Blues poetry, which Hughes describes as, “The Blues, unlike the Spirituals, have a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted” (Waldron 141-142). In the case of “Po’ Boy
Blues” Waldron argues that Hughes breaks the first two lines into two lines and divides the third line, making a six line stanza like the one below:

“When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
When I was home de
Sunshine seemed like gold.
Since I come up North de whole damn world’s turned cold.” (1-6).

The strict poetic pattern and African American dialect is clearly evident in these poems, but so is the emphasis on one or a couple of words that are repeated, further striving to make a point in the poetry.

This use of repetition is popular when it comes to the form of Langston Hughes and can be seen in many of his poems. A prime example of this is in the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, and the use of “I”. The reader is introduced to the “I” form from the beginning line: “I’ve known rivers” and as the poem continues, a sense of explanation is evident through the “I” as seen below:

“I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.
I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.
I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.
I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I’ve seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.” (5-9).

The “I” in a broader sense represents the African American community as a whole, “the “I” that the poem projects is both an exuberant individual and an embodiment of the community whom he addresses” (Westover 1222). According to Westover, the presentation of the “I” also acts as a testimony. This testimony in turn allows for readers of the poems to get a first hand account of the events taking place from someone who was actually there or had taken part in a similar experience. The testimonial “I” is not only reoccurring in the poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, but also “Theme for English B”. In this poem the “I” represents Hughes and one of
the struggles he faced as an African American student in a school run by white people. The use of the “I” helps the poem to mirror the life of Hughes, and in turn give readers a sense of what African American students faced during the time of segregation.

Langston Hughes was an African American whose background was extremely influential, so much so that it was often a topic or theme in his works, which through unique techniques gave a voice to African Americans. Hughes was undoubtedly influenced by his African American background, and that is clear in all of his writings, but he was also exposed to the writings of those that came before him like Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg. Jazz and blues to Hughes were African American made and therefore a terrific expression of their culture and both depicted the African American race. Politics, especially those related to segregation affected the daily life of Hughes and he expressed this in poems such as “Theme for English B”. Some reoccurring themes in Hughes’ poetry like the use of African American dialect and the use of the “I”, give identity to the characters or narrators of his poems and make them credible sources for the realness of the events and experiences being expressed. Langston Hughes was a simply a man whose writings mirrored his life and did so in a way that gave the world insight into an entire culture or community of African Americans.

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