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Hughes Hue

Jean-Luc Schieferstein

Langston Hughes was a peculiar man. He had strong, ideological regards for African-Americans and very little for much else. He rarely wrote of, or at least focused on, love, hope, and other ideals. Instead, his bent was politics for equality combined with African-American representation and portrayals. As one critic put it, Hughes' work was "spaces worldwide in which we find avant-garde literary practices typically excluded from modernist studies for being too 'transparent,' too 'realistic,' too 'ethnic,' or too 'political'—or simply for using languages other than English" (qtd. in Whalan). Hughes' was a man born and refined in fire; shaped irrevocably by the times and key points in his life. Despite these, we see an individual who never lost sight of who he was, or aspired to be, even if he ultimately was short-sighted. To encounter Hughes first as an epoch invites us then to understand what fundamentally drove him and, finally, to evaluate what he has written alongside critics and Christian perspectives. In proposition of this personage of peculiarity, perhaps his short-sighted, crusader attitude was in effect a result of the one thing he lacked—love.

Hughes' life plays out much like Moses of the biblical epic. Raised in an elevated stature of cushioned wealth, status, and education, he was not destined the same fate as many African-Americans of the time where segregation was rampant. One critic put it, "By birth he belonged to what Du Bois famously extolled as 'the Talented Tenth' the minuscule portion of Afro-America he expected to lead, and represent, the race" (Anderson). He, in effect, was raised as a "prince" with potential for privileged living. Yet, Hughes' was not immune to the oppression as especially "in college he [Hughes] had felt the sting of racial inequality" (Rampersad, Rossel, and Fratantoro xix). Hughes decided not to turn a blind-eye. Interestingly though, Hughes took up neither the cause nor the mantle of those in whom he called, "my people" right away. By extent, he couldn't relating "in a 1929 letter he admitted that almost

three years passed at Lincoln University, with its virtually all-black student body, before he felt comfortable facing black strangers” (xiv). Realizing that his affiliation with the culture left his own heritage lacking, he immersed himself—opting out of an otherwise Ivy League education. He even accomplished to set sail and travel to Africa, no doubt thinking he would be able to experience the authenticity of his ancestry and connect with what was essentially alien to him. Hughes, unlike Moses, did not experience this “exile” for quite the sum of forty years, but it evidentially shaped his writings of the late 1920s .

Enter in the rest of Langston Hughes’ life and career—an emboldened, youthful figure with the audacity as a waiter to drop “of f a few sheets of his poetry” upon seeing prominent poet Vachel Lindsay “dining in the restaurant one night” (Zieger). Resultantly, this launched a career that permeated the next four decades as one of the forefront representatives of the Harlem Renaissance and arguably one of the most proliferate African-American writers of the century. Like the biblical figure Moses, he transformed himself from a “prince” raised amongst the oppressors and embraced his heritage to become the liberator, prophet, and law-giver through his prose, playwrights, and poetry.

If this then was the blaze of his life, then the kindling came from the quieter, more tragic moments of his younger years. Nothing gives better testimony to this than a chapter from his first autobiography titled “Salvation,” demonstrating that much of who Hughes was began when he was fairly young—notably, his antagonism toward Christianity, his love toward people, and his dysfunctional home-life.

First, “Salvation,” in its essence, is a recounting of child-Hughes and his rejection of Christianity. “And I hadn’t seen Jesus, and that now I didn’t believe there was a Jesus any more, since he didn’t come to help me” (Diyanni 264). Just as Jesus seemingly spurned Hughes, Hughes would spurn Christianity. Sadly, Hughes’ disinterest and sometimes outright antagonistic view of Christianity persisted throughout his career, and he remained ever secular with his written works.

Second, “Salvation” reveals an aspect of Hughes’ character that continued to remain a prominent, guiding force in his life. In the narrative, it was clear young Hughes cared for people with his concern of “holding everything up so long” and his tears “that I had deceived everybody in the church” (Diyanni 263-64). Hughes’ never ceased to invest in others, and his earnest passion for black equality was as real and hot as any—born from that same compassionate attitude presented in his twelve year-old self. Arnold Rampersad noted readily Hughes “love of people” throughout his life (Rampersad, Roessel, and Fratantoro xi). Maragaret Walker would fondly recall, “Everybody seemed to know Langston, and he was laughing, smiling, cracking jokes as usual, and he was slapping the shoulder, shaking hands, and being greeted in turn.”

A final, third, particularly important element then that can be drawn from this narrative is that of Hughes’ home life—although it is merely a cliff-note. Notably, in recounting he lived with his aunt and uncle. Hughes did not have a stable living. Neither of his parents made themselves available throughout his childhood. He, instead, often went to live with relatives, in particular his grandmother who did not have the mental faculties or intellectual acuity to attend to young-Hughes psychological development (Rampersad, Roessel, and Fratantoro xi). What she did have was books, and this is considered one of the key instances that set Hughes on his path to literacy. However, it is to be wondered what books Hughes read, and whether they could ever offer that same love, if any kind of love, as would have two parents singularly, persistently invested in his life. It is not surprising then that he very likely resented both of his parents—without question his father, but possibly his mother as well. Rampersad very poignantly speculates to this reality, “[Hughes] perhaps hated her [his mother], just as he hated his father” (xxiv).

The branding of disregard did not end though with the escape of adulthood. After Hughes had the audacity and boldness to present some of his poetry to Vachel Lindsay, it effectively kicked off his career, and earned him what would be his one and only patron. The lady’s name was Mrs. Charlotte Mason, known as “Godmother,” and she treated him abundantly well, “lavish[ing] money, praise, and what seemed like love on Langston” (xxiv). Then, for reasons still unknown, she broke off ties with Hughes. Hughes reaction to this was nothing short of depression as “he became violently ill”

with many dark writings preserved and addressed to his patroness (xxiv). Accordingly, there exists past this point no further record, letter, or recounting of any singular individual to ever effect Langston Hughes so deeply. It is curious to mention, and perhaps important to note, he is never known to take a lover, marry, or court any woman (Anderson). While speculation may abound concerning the implications of his previous fraught paternal relationships, and otherwise non-existent ones, it is no doubt they took their toll.

What has blossomed then is a man who knows rejection, and so cares for the dejected; those seemingly despised he takes up their cause and becomes their advocate. This advocacy for African-Americans became the parliament of his life. Where before he extolled the virtue of the African-American, now he demanded their recognition. Yet, bound to this only cause, he often failed to consider the bigger implications in his sole effort to establish and legitimize African-Americans.

This demonstrates itself during the middling part of his writing career. Hughes, who now was an established writer, became a large, vocal proponent of communism. This involvement fluctuated going from the spokesperson for Communist Party affiliates to eventually bowing out as it negatively impacted his readership; then coming to a head again when he was investigated by the Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, in effect, meant to persecute communist sympathizers in the U.S. All that was known initially concerning the outcome of this trial on Hughes' part was public denunciation of communism, years later records revealed that in a private recess with government officials he passionately defended communism, "lecturing the subcommittee" before being reprimanded (Whalan). What made Hughes recant was a trumped-up threatening charge of perjury for advocating communism while stating under oath he was not a communist.

This is an excellent case of Hughes desire for African-Americans blinding him from thinking critically. This isn't to say that purely because Hughes supported communism that he was short-sighted, rather that it was only a means to an end for him, stating, "I never read the theoretical books of socialism or communism . . . [but my views were] largely emotional and born out of my own need." Fundamentally, he saw it from only one angle: It ensured that everyone, whites and blacks, were on equal terms of

influence and position.

Aside then from his political bent, other areas that drew criticism in Hughes' works and life were primarily his style of writing and the way it reflected his view of African-Americans. In a very telling way, Langston Hughes recounts African-Americans development of prominence in poetry by subtly hinting at his own views in "200 Years of Negro Poetry," pointing out the Black Muslims and African Nationalists being "exceptions" and inserting his own patriotic poem "I Too Am American" (94, 95). This is furthered by his analysis that it is almost inescapable to be black and not write racially, of which he suggests as only proper (95). What can be gleaned here is that he values the unique culture that has developed and wishes to assimilate neither an entirely white culture nor native African culture. Hughes believed entirely in an authentic one-hundred percent African and one-hundred percent American persona.

Hughes also made himself clear in another way, and that was with his poem "Crowns and Garlands." In this poem Hughes was critical of fellow African-Americans that relied too heavily on black celebrities rather than taking arms up themselves. He himself elevated the individual African-American in much of his works through his characters and "simple and easy" language, which "surely no poet has ever appealed to any wider spectrum of readers" (Dace). Altogether these were the areas that drew the biggest ire from his contemporaneous critics, as well as the praise.

It has been observed in retrospect as well, Hughes often balanced as if on a tightrope a mediating position between extreme views on how African-Americans should produce works of art, either as protest or pure expression [McLaren xi]. Fundamentally, it displayed Hughes' dogma, those personally developed views for African-Americans, which were his greatest charm and perhaps his singularly greatest weakness. As already pointed out, this tunnel-vision view came to head with his advocacy for communism. Conversely, one has to wonder what Hughes' skipped out on entirely because he didn't feel it met his idealized view of African-Americans. In one respect, this solidifying of a distinct African-American personage has greatly enriched and shaped a multitude of African-Americans. Yet, at the same time, it has made the racial identity more than skin-deep and can be observed in its own evolution as part of the reason why such discrimination and stigmatism still exists.

By encouraging and indicating a necessitating of racially inspired works and way of life, he inhibited integration and promoted a culturally-based segregation.

Looking then on Hughes' life and works, we see a reality—a worldview—that is fraught with inconsistencies and obstinacies. In rejecting the Biblical model that provides the framework for an upstanding individual, he substitutes it with his own. In effect, he promotes a black supremacy, curiously portrayed through his famous character “Simple,” who professes if “colored people” had been in the Garden where Adam and Eve were tempted, they wouldn't have been tempted (Hughes 25).

Langston Hughes was a man motivated to love those same people he felt, like himself, went so unloved. The tragedy of it all then is that Hughes never really had or could love, because “God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn. 4:16 ESV). In rejecting God, he had rejected love, and all he could offer was a counterfeit. Yet, Hughes' has no way of truly harmonizing—and thus realizing and appreciating—diversity; however, for the Christian we know, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function” (Rom. 12:4). He has no way of promoting equality, yet for the Christian, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). He, instead, is floundering and drowning, drawing on only what little experience of life he has to go on with nothing so much as empirical or authoritative to show. Langston Hughes was an amazing writer, a compassionate individual, and remarkable figure, but perhaps in more than one way that great criticism is true, “Every time I read Langston Hughes I am amazed by his genuine gifts—and depressed that he has done so little with them” (qtd. in Whalan).

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