

Langston Hughes and His Poems

"My soul has grown deep like the rivers" – Langston Hughes

Perhaps if Americans look up to Langston Hughes as an American symbol of freedom, it could mean that America is consist of many race. Biologically, Langston Hughes is of complex race in his ancestral line. His father and mother were both mixed race, making Langston to be African American, European American and Native American. This could be the reason of his effectiveness when he talks of freedom as subtle message in his collection of poems. Hughes is a famous poet, playwright, and novelist. His works are at its peak during the Harlem Renaissance – a decade long of African-American cultural movement in 1920's.

Hughes' Background. In his complex ancestral root, he was very effective to represent ample of minorities in America with his works (Berry 1992). His most prevalent are his poems. An example is that history cited him as representative of many writers and artist when he wrote "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" in 1926. It could also be accounted in his life and experiences that made him an important figure in the area of his expertise. In Grammar School in Illinois, he was elected as the class poet. It was later then he realized that he became class poet because of stereotyping. He stated,

"I was a victim of a stereotype. There were only two of us Negro kids in the whole class and our English teacher was always stressing the importance of rhythm in poetry. Well, everyone knows, except us, that all Negroes have rhythm, so they elected me as class poet."

He may put it that way but certainly it was for his advantage as that's where his poetic prowess promoted. In high school in Ohio he wrote for school newspaper. He was also became an editor of their yearbook. Informally, he had also written plays, short stories, and poems - "When Sue

"Wears Red" was his first poem. He cited Paul Laurence Dunbar and Carl Sandburg as his influence in his early works.

When he reached adulthood, he met Vachel Lindsay, a poet, when he worked as a busboy in a hotel. Vachel helped him published his early works in magazines, and then collected as his first book of poetry. Langston earned his B.A degree in Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, where he was also a member of an all black fraternity, Omega Psi Phi. Some scholars who have studied his works were claiming that Langston is a homosexual. His biographer, Arnold Rampersad, had determined that Langston's works were projecting subtle desire towards other African-American men. There was also some evidenced issued by other scholars of his affair with a black male. They were also citing his unhealthy relationship with his father as sign of lack of masculine reference to look up into, therefore most likely he might have developed homosexuality. With such case, he might not only represent the racial minorities in America but of homosexual crowd as well.

Category. Langston Hughes poems are filled with entertaining imagery that sometimes audience might be misled with his poems as art in canvass and might totally at lost with the message of the poem. These powerful artistry creations of Langston fall into social movement and had been very much effective and influential in giving voice to the emerging black art that time. During the Harlem Renaissance, he made the mark among contemporaries by putting into a poetic verse the traditional rhythm of African jazz music – making his work the first of its kind. Major theme of the period was the slavery experience of African in America as well as the racism of the black identity, and reminiscent of African tradition (Ferguson 2008).

During the Harlem Renaissance, three of the works of Langston surfaced as the significant pieces for the movement – these are his poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, “A Dream Deferred”, and “My People.”

The Negro Speaks of Rivers. This poem was published in June 1921 in the magazine publication, *The Crisis*. It is said that Langston wrote the poem during his ride in the train going to Mexico (Academy of American Poets 2011). The poem is this:

I've known rivers:

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the
flow of human blood in human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

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.*

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

The poem contains a strong message of pride by an African man with his African heritage as his way to reaffirms and reconnects to his motherland. Although it may appear as cultural movement, it is actually more of social movement as it is Langston way to deny an African-American man of his American citizenship by priding himself with his African heritage. Undeniably, discrimination against black was still prevalent during that time. (Berry 1992)

A Dream Deferred. This poem is one of Langston's jazz poetry in its style. This was published in 1951 in his first major book publication. This is the poem:

What happens to a dream deferred?

*Does it dry up
 like a raisin in the sun?
 Or fester like a sore—
 And then run?
 Does it stink like rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over—
 like a syrupy sweet?
 Maybe it just sags like a heavy load.
 Or does it explode?*

Although scholars regarded this poem as somewhat more relatively apparent with his participation in Harlem Renaissance (Tetsuo 2005), the message of black freedom desire was also determined within. It is clearly another evidence of Langston's social movement belonging with. The poem appears to be a mock of suspended liberty of blacks against stigma of racism and discrimination (Shelby 1999).

My People. Langston had stressed much the subject of racial consciousness in his poem, *My People*. The poem was published in 1932, and one of his shortest yet equally powerful poems. This is the piece:

*The night is beautiful,
 So the faces of my people
 The stars are beautiful,
 So the eyes of my people
 Beautiful, also, is the sun.
 Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.*

Scholars said that the poem talks about the African-American working class in America. It is also his campaign of "black is beautiful," a call to regulate the treatment of black to white people in America in aesthetic aspect. Much like *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, this poem encourages black to be proud of their African heritage. This piece was also his channel to

confront the prevalent racial stereotyping, he addressed the issue through the piece with his statement, "My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind." (Rampersad & Roessel 2002)

Social Movement. In general, the three cited poems of Langston fall into Social Movement as its form of school of thought. Elements such as resistant to be identified as discriminating citizen, black freedom, and racial consciousness can easily be identified as social movement. While, elements such as African heritage, jazz poetry, and black recognition are most likely be identified as cultural movement. Nonetheless, it is certain that the poetic genius of Langston had able to highlight the social movement with these entire element combined as he knows that such movement is more significant to call for than the other.

Works Cited

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