

Black Music in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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ABSTRACT. *The paper attempts to interpret the styles and meanings in the poetry of Hughes and reveals his constant references to black music both in forms and themes to record the black lives. Based on diachronic analysis, the author discovers the most powerful voice Hughes adopts in his portrayals of the blacks exists in poetry drawing on spiritual, blues and jazz.*

KEYWORDS: *Spiritual, Blues, Jazz, Racial ideals, Humanity*

1. Introduction

Langston Hughes, a central figure in Harlem Renaissance, is particularly remembered for his insightful and colorful portrayals of black lives in America from 1920s through 1960s. He is especially known for the influence of the black musical forms on his writing. Hughes, more than any other black poet or writer, recorded faithfully the nuances of black life and its frustrations. "His art was firmly rooted in race pride and race feeling even as he cherished his freedom as an artist. He was both nationalist and cosmopolitan." [1] His literary pursuit demonstrates both the democratic ideal of racial freedom and equality, and moral ideal of human fraternity and harmony. It is believed "Hughes is the first poet who introduced blues and folk materials into written poetry". [2] The influence of black music on his poetry lies in two aspects: the borrowing of black musical forms, such as the explicit structure, rhythm and meter; and the absorption of implicit characters as the basic strategies and styles that black music adopts in expressing thoughts. Hughes can always represent his grand aim of racial freedom and equality in the description of trivialities of life. The paper attempts to reveal the influences of black music on the poetry of Hughes both in forms and themes. Although Hughes uses various voices in his poetry, the most powerful voice he adopts in his portrayals of black lives exists in poetry drawing on spiritual, blues and jazz. His novel fusions of black music with traditional verse is attributable to his devotion to black music tradition and his affinity to the black people.

2. The Absorption of Spirituals into Poetry

Spiritual, as a musical term, had been written in Ephesians 5 in The New Testament of King James version in 1611: "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord, giving thanks always for all things to God." [3] Black spiritual had originated in the southern plantations in the long period from 17th to 19th century. Due to poverty, grudge, resentment, unrequited love, loneliness and helplessness, the depressed black slaves uttered the words from their heart spontaneously in sentimental songs to express their mentality of aspiration for the pursuit of self-esteem and freedom. Spirituals are most often associated with the image of slaves toiling in the fields, singing to alleviate the hopelessness of their social position with powerful affirmations in their faith, religious and otherwise. The general theme of the spiritual is that present life may be difficult but eventually things will get better. Many of Hughes's poems, drawing on spirituals, express the same sentiments. They denounce the current condition of the negroes while showing subtly optimism for what the future holds. Negro spirituals had created the unique style of call-and-response-one leads the singing and the masses respond to his call.

The poem "Mother to Son" (CP30) is based on negro spiritual theme. In conversation with her son, a mother laments the difficult times in her life with a metaphor of climbing stairs. "Tacks, splinters, boards torn up, and no carpet on the floor" is her bleak evaluation of the beginning of her life. But, as in spiritual form, she struggles through hardships, "a-climbin'on", and despite the adversities, "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair", she remains tenacious to her life. The mother sets a mode for her son to persevere in the fight for survival. Much like a spiritual, the mother may stop her climbing at the "crystal stair" of Heaven. In the endless painful life, black people count on their will power and strategies coping with reality to connect their dreams and hopes. In Spirituals (CP102), Hughes writes: "Sing, O Lord Jesus! Song is a strong thing. I heard my mother singing when life hurt

her.”, which reveals the blacks created in spirituals an extended interior universe of status, harmony, value, and order that they needed for survival.

3. The Integration of Blues and Poetry

“The Spirituals are group songs, but the Blues are songs you sing alone. The Spirituals are escape songs, looking toward heaven, tomorrow, and God. But the Blues are today songs, here and now, broke and broken-hearted, when you’re troubled in mind and don’t know what to do, and nobody cares.” (CW 213) Blues, is believed to emerge in the Mississippi Delta from 1865 to 1890. The materials of blues derived from the work songs of the black slaves toiling in fields, spirituals and hymns when praying to God. The melancholy song is imagined the spiritual antidote to the temporary sorrow of the negroes and consolation to their grief. “The twelve-bar blues stanza became customary to sing the first line twice and add a conclusion or response, in the form A A B for statement, repeat, response.” [4] Hughes’s blues stanzas are written in the forms of AABC or ABABCD, which substantially enlarge the capacity of each stanza.

Blues is a spontaneously improvised music with an emphasis on articulation and cathartic release of the laments of harshly treated African Americans, and often with a wry humor that lessened the sadness while increasing the poignancy of their tale of woe. Langston Hughes explores this idea of release in *The Weary Blues*. (CP50). His blues player who “made that poor piano moan with melody”, transferring his weariness with the world to the piano, clears his mind by “put (ting) ma troubles on the shelf.” In the end, the blues singer has exorcised his demons for another day and goes to sleep “like a rock or a man that’s dead.” *The Weary Blues* concludes enigmatically. The last line symbolizes the blues player may be relaxed emotionally or suggests that the blues player may commit suicide due to his intense sorrow. Some blues poems end in disenchantment rather in quiet resignation like “*Song for a Dark Girl*”. (CP 104) The lynching portrayed in the poem leaves Hughes little room for a sense of closure. The sight of his lover’s “bruised body” hung from a tree forces a cry of agony from him and disillusion him in saying “I asked the white Lord Jesus What was the use of prayer.”

4. The Fusion of Jazz and Poetry

“Hughes is the jazz poet, and the loyal blues disseminator. He is a singer, a philosopher, and a rural and urban lyricist.” [5] In his poetry, Jazz has a more optimistic voice than the ones adopted for spiritual and blues poems. Jazz emerged as a predominately African American musical style in New Orleans, Louisiana, in the early 20th century. Jazz is most commonly identified by musical characteristics such as improvisation, rhythmic swing, harmony and collaborative components. “Jazz grew from the many forms of music, such as the blues, spirituals, hymns, marches, ragtime, etc. that percolated at the end of the 19th century. The cultural mix, the infusion of styles, danceable rhythms, and the immediate accessibility for an audience quickly established jazz as a new form of music by 1915.” [6] It can simultaneously represent American democracy, civil rights, interracial and international collaboration, and artistic freedom. Jazz is a classic American music, and the early jazz musicians used to make a living by playing lullaby background music in the brothels, night clubs and pubs.

In “*Lenox Avenue: Midnight*” (CP 92) Hughes asserts that “the rhythm of life is a jazz rhythm,” and continues his poem by freely associating scenes from Lenox Avenue with his own weary thoughts. The twenties is called jazz age. The fact that black music had attracted lots of white audience didn’t mean the whites really recognized and appreciated black culture. The refrain “The gods are laughing at us.” suggests the whites laughing at jazz, deny the American identity of the blacks in culture, though the speaker hasn’t given up his pursuit in the poem. Hughes keenly applied the elements of bop jazz burgeoning during WWII to the writing of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* in 1951 and ushered in another creative peak. Hughes introduced the expression techniques of rock jazz into poetic creation in 1950s-60s. It was his conviction that jazz could best connect the history and reality of black race and express their interior and exterior conflicts. The structure of “*Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*” (1961) ostensibly imitates “the dozens”, a ritualized word game that consists of exchanging insults usually about the members (esp. mother) of the opponent’s family. Rather than the rival’s mother, the target of insults in the poem focuses on the whole history and reality, the racist culture and the black’s servility to the whites in America.

5. Conclusion

In modernist literature, when most American poets were turning inward, Hughes was turning outward, using language and themes, attitudes and ideas familiar to anyone who had the ability to read. Hughes is both nationalist and cosmopolitan. He is devoted to the essence of Negro folk art redistilled, particularly the black music and its flavor, the ancient basic beat out of Africa, revealing to the Negro people and the world the beauty within themselves. For Hughes, black music was figuratively related to the sea: "Like the waves of the sea coming one after another, always one after another, like the earth moving around the sun, night, day-night, day- night, day-forever, so is the undertow of black music with its rhythm that never betrays you, its strength like the beat of the human heart, its humor, and its rooted power." (CW, 167) Meanwhile the plain poems of his have never lacked the essence of beauty, depth of thought, and affection for humanity. By integrating the forms and themes of spirituals, blues, and jazz in his works, he had portrayed a vivid and panoramic picture of black lives in America from 1920s through 1960s. He recorded the blacks seeking hope in despair with spirituals, unfolded their depressed groping for freedom and democracy in the melancholy blues, and demonstrated the tenacious and protesting spirits of the blacks in the unconventional jazz. He had honestly utilized the vernacular language of black people to communicate with his race and the world. He could sometimes become bitter, but his art is generally suffused by a keen sense of the racial ideal and by a profound love of humanity. The affinity to the people running through the literary creation of Hughes, distinguishes his works from the avant garde literary works of the elite modernists.

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