

## Symbolism of Time in the Work of Langston Hughes

Wafaa M. El-Defdar<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

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Of the many books, essays, and articles written on Langston Hughes, none has embarked upon an investigation of his use of the "power of time" in his writings, whether verse or prose. For Hughes, resorting to time stems from many sources foremost among which is his desire for a distinct ethnic history that buttresses the Black sense of belonging and, thereby, eliminates all feelings of alienation and solitude. Hughes's insistence on a distinct black art utilizing black themes and styles is an affirmation of black existence, but his unremitting usage of time is even a greater insistence on planting roots for such "existence," on tracing antiquity and, hence, historicity for his people. To transcend the continuity of such an existence, Hughes also resorts to the future dimension of time—usually in the form of a dream which is, sometimes, intertwined with the past dimension to foster the power of such a dream. However, Hughes, whose mastery of language allows him to shape time as his substance, also uses time as a device for creating irony to expose the absurdity of the fallacious notion of a "superior" white culture in a way that is never bitter or extreme.

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### 1. Introduction

Flourishing in Harlem between the mid-1910s and the mid-1930s, the Harlem Renaissance was the first cultural movement to attain widespread recognition both within and beyond black communities and occupied a central position in African American cultural history.

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Prof. at Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Benha University, Benha, EGYPT., 25 Hassan Radwan St. from El-Helw St.- Tanta, Gharbeia, Egypt. Tel Office: 002-0133224718, Mobile: 002-01224923336, E-mail: [wafaa.aldefdar@fart.bu.edu.eg](mailto:wafaa.aldefdar@fart.bu.edu.eg), [wafaaldefdar@gmail.com](mailto:wafaaldefdar@gmail.com)

This movement attracted poets, dramatists, novelists, short-story writers, musicians, painters, and intellectuals with its promise of a setting in which black artists could interrelate with one another and with their white contemporaries. The Harlem Renaissance was led by black poets like Countee Cullen, Claud McKay, and Langston Hughes (Blumberg, 1991).

Langston Hughes (1902-67), one of the most original and versatile twentieth century black writers, is a poet, a novelist, a playwright, an essayist, an autobiographer, and a writer of children's books. He is almost recognized as one of the most representative writers in the history of African American literature. Hughes, "Poet Laureate of the Negro" and "Dean of American Negro writers," began his literary career with a commitment to black folk and cultural resources. Throughout his career, Hughes was well aware of injustice and oppression and used his creative efforts to resist or mitigate them (Gibson, 1973). His writings, despite their apparent pessimism, adhere to a tenacious thread of an unshakable hope for the fulfillment of the American dream—not only for black people, but for all the oppressed people of the land. To fulfill this dream, Hughes, a gifted writer, is able to use time as his substance and to play upon almost every possibility of it out of his inveterate conviction in the human capacity to manipulate the contours of time. In his literary works, one usually witnesses present happenings along with memories and flashbacks; in his poetry, on the other hand, one is often taken into a journey, either to the past or to the future, and then, spontaneously and smoothly, brought back to the present with all its bitterness and happiness.

## 2.

In retrospect, the position of African Americans in the United States had labyrinthine permutations. After dwelling more than two hundred years in that country—a period sufficient to give any resident, and his/ her descendants, the rights of citizenship—Negroes could not enjoy the rights that were due to any normal citizen on the pretext of their inferiority. This claimed inferiority, in turn, caused a great deal of confusion of identity among blacks. Some blacks, internalizing the subordinate image, rejected the legacies of Africa and eagerly bound their identities with that of the nation, claiming themselves "the most American of all Americans;" (Williamson, 1965, P. 300) other blacks, basing their reaction on a "rejection of the rejecters," rejected the legacies of America and enthusiastically asserted their African heritage (Blumberg, 1991, P.24); while very few, believing that they are a mixture of

African and American origin, accepted themselves for who they really are or, at least, endeavored to resolve their true identities. Of the latter, Langston Hughes stands as a spokesman and a representative. Like most black Americans, Hughes was confronted with the dilemma of dual-consciousness. Yet, unlike many of them, he was well aware of this dilemma and used his poetry as an outlet and a means of salvation.

Hughes's other strategy was to stick to his race and take pride in his cultural heritage. In his works, poetry as well as prose, Hughes, whose love of his people is equaled only by the sweetness with which he serenades it, strives to plant roots for his people and to fix these roots deeply in the earth. In one of his earlier poems, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (Hughes, 1959), he associates black life with the great rivers of Africa and North America—the Euphrates, the Congo, the Nile, and the Mississippi (Hemton, 1993)—rivers that are not only ancient, dusky, and older than the flow of human blood in human veins, but also rivers that express the origin of the "Negro"—a hybrid of African and American descent.

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. (1-10)

For Hughes, the "Negro," whose "soul has grown deep like the rivers," is himself an incarnation of the river: the bottom of the river is "muddy," like their color; however, this mud does not mean that the river is "inferior," as the Negro is claimed to be. On the contrary, it is this mud that gives fertility and prosperity to the land, just like the early Negroes: they worked the land, tilled the fields, and upon their labor and sweat the economy of the whole country was built. In "Let America Be America Again" (Hughes, 1959), Hughes asserted:

Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream  
 In that Old World while still a serf of kings,  
 Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true,  
 That even yet its mighty daring sings  
 In every brick and stone, in every furrow turned  
 That's made America the land it has become.

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 .....  
 O, let America be America again—  
 The land that never has been yet—  
 And yet must be—  
 The land where *every* man is free.  
 The land that is mine—  
 The poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, Me—  
 Who made America,  
 Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,  
 Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,  
 Must bring back our mighty dream again. (37-42, 52-61)

Conspicuously, Hughes does not confine himself to one dimension of time—the past—but also makes key references to the future. Yet, Hughes's vision of the future, like that of most blacks, is often blurred and it usually assumes the form of a dream. In his *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*, Onwuchekwa Jemie (1976) stated:

Taking the American Dream as his cue, Hughes had developed his poetic metaphor of the dream, a concept which was to become a strategic theme, a major artery running through the body of his work. The dream is transmitted along two channels: first, as an assortment of romantic fantasies and desires including the desire for a life rich in love and adventure; secondly, as the dream of political freedom and economic well-being. The latter is an extension of the former, and it is this latter that is the “dream deferred” of the black man and black race.

(Pps. 15-16)

This “dream deferred,” as Jemie (1976) said, can best be seen in Hughes's previous poem in lines like “(America never was America to me)” or “(There's never been equality for me,/ Nor freedom in this 'homeland of the free').” Hughes concludes:

And torn from Black Africa's strand I came  
 To build a "homeland of the free."  
 The free?  
 A dream—  
 Still beckoning to me! (47-51)

However, all too often, the future dimension of time—here, in the form of a dream—is intertwined with the past dimension, thus giving more force, strength, and magnitude to the "power" of that dream.

For instance, in his play *Emperor of Haiti* (1936), Hughes reflects this double-dimensioned aspect of time. This play portrays the black Haitian rebellion under the banner of Jean Jacques Dessalines and examines the reasons leading to the fall of the Haitian empire. *Emperor of Haiti* depicts the Haiti from which all whites have been expelled. The state of black-white relations in Haiti is a very peculiar one. Literally, there is not just a separation of the races; there is a complete isolation of them—there are only black people. This actually disturbs the natural order of things—no race can live forever on its own; it must cooperate with the other races as well. Besides, no individual, and no community limited in place and time is capable of doing what mankind as a whole is called upon to do (Fischer, 1968). Martel, the wisest, but most idealistic, character in the play, knows this fact and comments on Dessalines's remark that he has driven the whites away saying, "But there are still whites in the world, Jean Jacques. And we have need of them, as they once needed us" (36; Act 2, Scene 1). Martel upholds this message of nonviolence, peace, and tolerance. He tells Dessalines:

MARTEL. You've often heard me say, it's time to stop turning our guns against them now...We're free. Let's act like free men, ready to meet others as equals—and no longer speak of *all* white men as enemies...now free men can dream a bigger dream than mere revenge... A dream of an island where not only the blacks are free, but every man who comes to Haitian shores. Jean Jacques, I'm an old man. But in my old age, I dream of a world where no man hurts another. Where *all* know freedom, and black and white men alike will share this earth in peace. (36; Act 2, Scene 1)

Martel's reference to his old age while expressing his dream might seem quite inappropriate at first sight. After all, what have dreams to do with age: young men and old men alike can dream of whatever they want.

However, by mentioning his old age, Martel seems to use the 'power of time' to enforce the power of his belief in that dream—one's age, no matter how old, should not deter one's vision of tolerance and love of humanity. Martel is not so young as to make us say he has not seen enough to hate enough. On the contrary, he is very old, perhaps the oldest character in the play. He has been a slave for too long a time. Assuredly, the scars of slavery and its harsh codes are stamped deeper on his body and soul than on most of the characters in the play. Still, this does not hinder his conviction in the equality, love, and liberty for all men regardless of color and creed differences.

Here, Martel, apparently a spokesman for Hughes, transmits a message not to the black and white masses in Haiti only, but to the black and white masses everywhere. He argues that blacks and whites can maintain peace only if they forget their resentments and hostility, let the past bury its dead, realize their need of one another, and truly cooperate in social life.

Hughes, who believes that only through democratic process can Black people become fully accepted members of the society, combines in his writings—poetry and prose—the realistic admission of temporary and past defeat for his people along with the conviction that the United States will soon fulfill the Negro's hopes and dreams (Dekle, 1969)—something that is crystallized in his novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930). The novel unmask the bitterness of the disorder and chaos confronting Negroes in a white-dominated society, and is full of the hope arising from the folk sense of making something out of oneself. The novel covers the events controlling the life of every member in the family, but pays great attention to the development and fate of the boy Sandy Williams, specially the degree to which the lives of his elders supply him with resources (Bloom, 1989). Evidently, Sandy Williams in *Not Without Laughter* represents the younger black generation in whom the older blacks put hope and faith. Sandy's family thinks the best of him and believes that, slavery being abolished, his chance for better life is much better than theirs. However, nothing in Sandy's past points out that his learning or even his native intelligence will make any difference to his future (Bloom, 1989). Hughes skillfully implied that, although it had long been abolished, slavery still affected the lives of blacks and whites as well because its seeds were deeply embedded in society.

However, being moderate, Hughes does not tend to assert this bleak vision rather than express hope for the future, out of his unwavering belief that love and tolerance should be the response to the frustrations encountered by both races in their daily relationships. Despite the hardships that Sandy's grandmother, Aunt Hager, has faced, one gets an implicit message that her amiable behavior and her love, which stem not from submissiveness but out of the kindness of her heart, are the only things that can last—they are the most effective means of appealing to white people's hearts and conscience. Aunt Hager sees the importance of each race to the other because she believes that white folks and black folks cannot dispense with one another. This is why Aunt Hager pleads a message of love and tolerance. She tells Sandy:

white folks is white folks, an' colored folks is colored, an' neither one of 'em is as bad as t' other make out. For mighty nigh seventy years I been knowin' both of 'em, an' I ain't never had no room in ma heart to hate neither white nor colored. .. And I's kept a room in ma heart fo' 'em, 'cause white folks needs us, honey, even if they don't know it... I's been livin' along time in yesterday, Sandy chile, an' I knows there ain't no room in de world for nothin' mo'n love. (177,181-82; Ch. XVI)

Aunt Hager and Martel both share the view that white folks and black folks cannot do without each other and both believe that all that matters is love. To impose the power of their belief, both of them use the power of time when they mention their age as if to show that no matter what one has seen, this should not hamper one's vision of love and tolerance.

Obviously, Hughes does not confine himself to using time only as a reflection of black historicity, or as an expression of a dream whether "romantic" or "political," for he still has other means by which to exploit the element of time. In "The Blues I'm Playing" (1934), Hughes employs time as a device for conveying irony. The story, which appeared in Hughes's collection of short stories, *The Ways of the White Folks*, demonstrates the untruthfulness of whites and the hypocrisy and falseness of white patronage. The black-white conflict is maintained throughout the story and is stunningly apparent in the black heroine's revolt against her patroness at the end. This revolt can be seen as a means of revealing the "black's ethnic assertion, his pride in his race, and the rediscovery of his cultural heritage" (Bloom, 1989, 79).

Of the many comparisons drawn between Mrs. Ellsworth, the white patroness, and Ocela Jones, the black heroine, age is by far the greatest. Mrs. Ellsworth's old age is in contrast to Ocela's young age. Hughes usually describes Mrs. Dora Ellsworth as a "gray-haired lady," "some elderly lady," "the middle-aged white woman," "the rich and aging white woman," whilst Ocela is usually described as a strong and vigorous girl. However, what is worth noting here is that while Hughes usually describes Mrs. Ellsworth himself, he tends to give Ocela's description through the white patroness, the white critic, and the white teacher. It is as if he wants to explore that there is neither favoritism nor bias—this is how the black girl is viewed by the white lady and other white characters in the story.

Mrs. Ellsworth "was aware all the time of the electric strength of that brown-black body beside her," and Ocela "looked like nothing Mrs. Ellsworth had ever been near before. Such a rich velvet black, and such a hard young body! The teacher of the piano raved about her strength" (1277; Ch. IV). This contrast can be seen at the end of the story:

As the rich and aging white woman listened to the great roll of Beethoven sonatas... as she watched the swaying dark strong shoulders of Ocela Jones, she began to reproach the girl aloud for running away from art and music, for burying herself in Atlanta and love.

(1281; Ch. V)

Definitely, such difference in appearance between the black and white women corresponds to the "black is beautiful" doctrine that emerged during the 1920s and 1930s. Despite the hardships that the black girl has been subjected to, she could emerge as a talented pianist, with a hard body and an electric strength. In "I, Too, Sing America," Hughes says:

I am the darker brother.  
 They send me to eat in the kitchen  
 When company comes  
 But I laugh,  
 And eat well,  
 And grow strong.  
 .....  
 .....  
 Besides,  
 They will see how beautiful I am  
 And be ashamed—  
 I, too, am America. (1-6,14-17)

Yet, the difference in age between the white lady and the Negro girl has a further implication and significance. Mrs. Ellsworth's old age stands as a symbol of the old-standing white culture. Nevertheless, old age here is a self-contradictory symbol—old age is usually connected with wisdom and insight; however, in the case of Mrs. Ellsworth, whose ignorance and absurdity the story fully exposes, old age is a symbol of exhaustion and emptiness.

Thus, instead of the exhausted, all-white culture, Hughes offers a solution—the fusion of a blossoming, fertile, and thriving black culture; an idea that has been circulated during the Harlem Renaissance of which Hughes is the chief literary artist and survivor. This same idea concerning the emptiness, exhaustion, and lassitude of the white culture is also conveyed in his poem, "Dream Variation," in such lines like "Till the white day is done" and "Till the quick day is done." Hughes says:

To fling my arms wide  
 In some place of the sun,  
 To whirl and to dance  
 Till the white day is done.  
 Then rest at cool evening  
 Beneath a tall tree  
 While night comes on gently,  
 Dark like me—  
 That is my dream!

To fling my arms wide  
 In the face of the sun,  
 Dance! Whirl! Whirl!  
 Till the quick day is done.  
 Rest at pale evening....  
 A tall, slim tree....  
 Night coming tenderly  
 Black like me. (1-17)

### 3. Conclusion

Aiming to fight the sinister notion of "black inferiority" and to resolve his true identity, Hughes, aware of the strength of this entrenched notion, knows that, to win his battle, he has to arm himself with the powerful weapon of time.

However, time for Hughes is not only a means of attacking an enemy; it is, at times, a reflection of the Negro heritage; at other times, it is an expression of a dream; and, at others, it simply is a means of exposing the fallacy of the "white supremacy" slogan and, hence, a means of venting anger against the claim of black inferiority.

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