Langston Hughes and the American Dream

In the early 20th century, Black Americans found a way to express and celebrate their heritage and culture through the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance, 1918-1937, was an explosion of the creativity that had been shunned from African Americans from the three centuries prior. Poet Langston Hughes was among the many talented innovators of the short lived era; he “resonat[ed] [the] affirmation and celebration of black people” (Hernton 108). As he “asserted” the “aesthetic of Black is Beautiful” (Hernton 108), Hughes is also an icon of “‘protest’ poetry” (Hernton 108). Just as he is known for his jazz related themes and motifs of black livelihood, Hughes is best known for themes of “the American Dream [being just] that--a dream” (Presley 282). Therefore, Hughes depicts the racial inequality of the American Dream with his poems “Let America Be America Again” and “Harlem.”

“Let America Be America Again” was written in 1936, one year before the end the Harlem Renaissance, as well as the reign of Jim Crow. Like many works by Hughes, the main theme of this poem is the dream of the American Dream and how “the transition from theory to practice has not been made” (Simple 284). The tone of the poem is bitter yet optimistic, using words such as “love”, “free” and “liberty”, followed by lines such as “it was never America for
The poem is described as “Whitmanesque” (Westover 2) as even “Whitman [himself] once said ‘that a poet enlisted in a people’s cause can make every word [they write] draw blood.’” (Hernton 110). Hughes’s poetry is written to address the issues of American society, and bring about change.

With this in mind, in his poem “Let America Be America Again”, he uses the line “America never was America to me” to connote the Hughes has “never” been able to experience what America is meant to be. Hughes first experiences “the American dream explode in his face” (Presley 282) in his “teen[s]” when “a gang of white youths beat him up …. for cutting through a white neighborhood … on his way home from work” (Presley 282). James Presley goes on to say, “as he tended his injuries [he] must have [been wondering] about fulfillment of his… dream of freedom, justice, and opportunity for all” as he includes more than one minority; the word “my” in the phrase “my land”, displays how Hughes distances the experience of oppressed from the privileged. In this case, not only is he speaking for “the Negro bearing slavery’s scars” just as well as “the poor white[s]” but also Native Americans (“the red man driven from [their] land”), and “the immigrant”; he also speaks for the “humble, hungry [and] mean” working class-- “the farmer” and “the worker.” In doing so, Hughes addresses the injustices and inequality against all the non-white or non-rich minorities.

No doubt, Langston Hughes uses vivid imagery in “Let America Be America Again” to convey the hardship of being denied the “American Dream” that is promised by the Constitution. In the twelfth stanza, Hughes writes: “...torn from Black Africa’s strand I came/ to build a “homeland of the free”; he is reminding the public of slavery in America and denoting that slaves “buil[t]” the country that is denying their freedom and equality. In the tenth and eleventh stanza,
he uses the lines “the poorest worker bartered through the years/ yet I’m the one who dreamt our basic dream” to refer the black population as descendents of enslaved people who believe in the democracy and the ideal of the American Dream. Even stanza ten reads: “I am the farmer, bondsman to the soil/ I am the worker sold to the machine/ I am the Negro, servant to you all”. The last line suggests that Hughes noticed that black people were treated as subservient, even to the minorities whom he spoke for in their fight for equality.

Despite the negative undertone that oppressed people have been deprived of their constitutional right, “Let America Be America Again” has an optimistic tone. As the sixteenth stanza suggests, “America never was America to me/ and yet I swear this oath--/ America will be”, Hughes militantly declares his hope and optimism for the future. Stanza fifteen displays a different form of optimism. As the first line of the stanza reads, “...call me any ugly name you choose--”, it suggests to the audience either his knowledge of the harsh criticism of his “radical poetry” (Westover 2) or “depict[ing] the everyday experience of African Americans”, according to the critics in the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* article. This line is immediately followed by “the steel of freedom does not stain” which asserts the idea that no amount of bigotry against them will deter them from their belief in the American Dream.

While the American Constitution declares that “all men are created equal”, the 7th President of the United States, Andrew Jackson, declared in 1830 that “America is a country for white men”; Hughes alludes to this hypocrisy “of systematic racial injustice in a... democratic nation” (Westover 2) by creating a paradoxical tone in “Let America Be America Again”. Hughes displays an optimistic tone by “boast[ing] .... [America as a] great strong land of love” (Presley 283). Yet, he alludes to the acrimonious and oppressive ideology of Jim Crow that
reigned during this time period in stanza thirteen: “Who said the free?/ Not me?/ Surely not me?” Hughes is stating that non-white Americans have yet to have known the freedom of the American Dream.

Comparatively, Hughes’s later work “Harlem”, or “Montage of A Dream Deferred”, was written fifteen years after “Let America…” and three years before the Civil Rights Movement. Like his previous work, the main theme of “Harlem” is the American dream, yet the tone of the poem is more pessimistic in his belief in the dream. The fifteen year difference between both poems pulls the audience into his different mindsets on the same topic. While “Let America…” is a declaration of “we deserve freedom and equality”, “Harlem” is a reminder that there has been no progress and raises the question “how long is the black race going to take this oppression”.

As opposed to Hughes’ “Let America…”, “Harlem” is said to “return to the pessimistic and here and now” (Presley 284). In the beginning line “what happens to a dream deferred?”, the poem begins addressing the present without looking towards the future; however, the word “deferred” denotes that the “dream” is not gone, rather is it delayed. Just as well, he constantly refers to the “dream” as something “frayed and ragged” (Presley 283). Hughes writes, “Does it dry up/ like a raisin in the sun?/…. Does it stink like rotten meat?/ ….Maybe it just sags/ like a heavy load”; the usage of similes and metaphors in the second stanza connote that the ideology of the “American Dream” (Presley 284) was once fresh and relieving, and is turning out to be burdensome with a “heavy load” as the “dream” has not been fulfilled.

Arguably, Langston Hughes’ “Harlem” is believed to have sparked the revolution that is the Civil Rights Movement. The last stanza of “Harlem” simply raises the question: “or does it
explosive? The word “explode” alludes to violence or destruction; however, an explosion does not have an immediate impact. An explosion is set off either over time or with some sort of force. Though there is little violence or destruction caused by the members of the Civil Rights Movement, the “explo[sion]” works as the abrupt “consciousness” (Hernton 108) of the “deferred [dream].” Once the black population were emancipated from slavery, they were, by law, considered American citizens and were promised the privileges of being such. With “Harlem”, Hughes is calling to attention that these privileges have yet to be granted to them, and compels black people to stand up and demand the rights that were guaranteed.

Furthermore, Langston Hughes’s “Harlem” has been known to provide inspiring words to those who fight for change. As Hughes is often referred to as a “radical” (Scott 107), according to Mumia Abu-Jamal, he is “in touch with the roots of [black] people, … speak their truths, … reflect their realities and ...give [them a] voice…”. The short poem “Harlem” has “awed and inspired”(Hernton 108) many people with the “consciousness of black people” (Herton 108). As the poem is dated before the Civil Rights Movement, the poem arguably could have been of great use to the start of this movement; according to W. Jason Miller, the late “[Dr.] King [often] alluded to….images used in Hughes’s [“Harlem”]…”. Just as well, Hughes has also given a voice to the people of Harlem. The city of Harlem has a “wall about [it], and the American Dream … exists outside [the wall]” (Presley 283). Hughes refers to the dreams of the “Harlemites” as being “deferred” because of their “walled-in reality” (Presley 283). Hughes shows that the misery of the people in Harlem as their dreams and aspirations are delayed because of their disposition.

Ultimately, Langston Hughes’s poetry has often been a uses of call-to-actions. According to the Contemporary Literary Criticism article, “Hughes remained constant in his poems on the
problems of racism and the failure of African Americans to realize the American Dream”. Both “Let America Be America Again” and “Harlem” delve into the eyes of the oppressed in their struggle for freedom and equality. Like many “radical[poets]” (Westover 2), Hughes “simply and direct[ly]” depicts the prejudice in the lives of black people. Hughes’s work is often known to “present the unfulfilled fraction of the American dreamers” (Presley 284) and “the great stain of the American Dream” (Presley 282). Langston Hughes’s poetry has influenced many individuals, and will continue to do so because of his bold stances against inequality and optimism for the future.
Works Cited


