

Historical Allusions as Stylistic Strategy in the Poetry of Langston Hughes

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Introduction

The poetry of one of the most celebrated African American poets, Langston Hughes, is largely informed by indignation and rejection of the racial injustice that characterized America in the time of the poet. As a living and intemperate witness to the social maladies of racial America, Hughes' poetry, tied to the people and their conditions, could not but be inflected and influenced by the mood of anger and frustration, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance era and beyond.

Langston Hughes' life was, for the most part, a typification of that abjection that the circumstances of racial discrimination and exploitation imposed on the African American. His style of poetry, in this vein, derives mainly from the actually lived experiences by the blacks, thus infusing in his art certain folk features, musical forms and speech patterns. But in his poetic oeuvre, one of the most easily identifiable stylistic strategies used to explore the black condition is historical allusion. As Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (1994) note, for full appreciation of the poetry of Hughes and any other committed writer, a respect for, and understanding of, allusions are essential(5).

As a democratic poet, whose vision of art is to serve the people, express their existential burdens, hopes and anxiety, Hughes' revolutionary literary activism is naturally nuanced by earthism, commonality and commitment to the people in consonance with what poetry is to him: "...the human soul entire, squeezed like a lemon or a lime, drop by drop, into atomic words." (Rampersad and Roessel p.5). Part of this service of poetry is the evocation of history to dislocate the logic of racial prejudice.

This paper examines historical allusions as strategy for poetic communication in select poems of Hughes from a New Historicist perspective. The allusions

to historical figures, places, dates, books and events are seen in this study to advance an urgent argument against racial injustice and its irrationality. On the other hand, this strategy makes a case for our shared humanity, ennobled by the recognition of everyone. In Hughes' poetry, history is a character that serves as a rude reminder of not only yesterday that is gone, and yet with us, but also today that is and tomorrow that shall be. To the African American, this history is painful. How it is featured in the poems, what roles it plays, the issues it throws up and engages are central to this study. In this vein, the focal point is the communicative purpose or stylistic function of these rich allusions in the context of the African American experience.

Background of Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Langston Hughes' literary career showed a pedigree of class, tapping unlimitedly from the black experience and devoting his entire career to the exploration of that experience. Among the first fruits of the Harlem Renaissance, he was one of the most prolific and versatile New Negro writers, who came to be popularly regarded as the bard of Harlem, or the black troubadour. Essentially the conscience of the African American at his time, he spared no artistic opportunity of gleaning from and condemning the unsavoury treatment of the Negro by white America.

Hughes' childhood was unsettled, living in many American cities, his parents separated early in life, his father away in Mexico. Despite the unsteadiness of his childhood, he carved a niche for himself as a poet early with the publication of his poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in 1921. His literary career would flourish with many collections of poems, which among others include: *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *One-Way Ticket* (1949), *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz* (1961) and *The Panther and the Lash* (1967).

Langston Hughes was a widely travelled man both within the United States and around the world. Between 1931 and 1932, like a minstrel, he took a tour of poetry reading across the South and West of America to much critical acclaim. Within this time, he travelled to Haiti and then Soviet Union. He was in Spain as a war correspondent for Baltimore Afro-American. On return from Spain, he became interested in the development of Negro theatre and helped found three theatre groups in Harlem, Los Angeles and Chicago.

Even the period of economic depression in the 1930s did not affect his literary productivity. Barksdale and Kinnamon (1972) express this fact as: "The Great Depression...found Langston Hughes rather ensconced as the bard of Harlem" (p.516). In fact, his writings grew steadily through the 1940s and 1950s. From 1947-8, he was a visiting professor of creative writing at Atlanta University. He was also in University of Chicago a poet in residence. The 1950s and 1960s, the period of reduction in Hughes' travels, witnessed a phenomenal literary output of all genres from the writer. In Europe in 1965, he lectured for US Information Agency. The Dakar Arts Festival attracted him to that country in 1966. He died in 1967.

A poet, novelist, playwright, essayist, autobiographer and journalist, Langston Hughes wrote in all genres of literature except formal criticism. He stood as one of the most important literary figures of the Harlem Renaissance. As Rampersad and Roessel (1994) observe, "To many readers who love verse and are also committed to the ideal of social and political justice, he [Langston Hughes] is among the most eloquent American poets to have sung about the wounds caused by injustice" (p.3). He was greatly inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois, whose *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) is a graphic delineation of the black man's ordeal in America. Hughes was also influenced by Walt Whitman, author of *Leaves of Grass*; and Carl Sandburg, a devout apostle of Whitman. Sandburg's *Jazz Fantasies* (1919) "pointed Hughes in the direction of his own music-inflected verse" (p.4). Hughes' response to the transformation of the African culture from the rural South to the North was in his verse, informed largely by the changes in the black music.

In general, he believed in the social commitment of the artist who has to plough his art in the immediacy of his people's life. In this regard, according to him, "A poet is a human being. Each human being must live within his time, with and for his people, and within the boundaries of his country"(Rampersad and Roessel 1994, p.4). Hughes showed this commitment up to his last volume of verse, *The Panther and the Lash* (1967) in which he integrates the thematic concerns from previous publications. He remained steadfast to his racial paradigm of delineating "...the wrong – the sorrows, the humour, and the enduring quality of the Negro" (Davies 1981, p.63). Indeed, Langston Hughes was the laureate of Harlem who displayed a deep love for the city and its changing moods.

Theoretical considerations

The allusions to history and the issues thrown up and engaged in Hughes' poetry are examined from the critical theoretical viewpoint of Marxism, a

theory that views literature as having a social character and situates it in its historical, social and ideological context. As a contextualist approach to the analysis of literature, Marxism underscores historical and ideological awareness, social processes that shape art and art shapes. Marxism is not a self-contained literary theory, rather, it is a set of social, political and economic ideals that are programmed towards enlightening the people on the dialectical relationship in terms of the class struggle and how the people can change their world. The Marxists believe that reality is something that can be defined and understood, and importantly, that our consciousness is shaped by the society. Tied to this, are the ideas that our values and beliefs are influenced by our social and economic conditions. A plan is offered by Marxism for the world to be changed from that of hatred and conflict as a consequence of class struggle to that of a classless society in which love and opportunity flourish (Bressler, 1994).

Marxism asserts that the means of production are in the control of the bourgeois who have continuously enslaved the proletariat through economic policies and a deceptive ideology. If the proletariat rise and overthrow the bourgeois, the means of production will be under government control and then wealth will evenly be distributed.

Ideology is central in Marxism. It refers to the system of beliefs and ideas about socio-economic structure that shape our thinking. Althusser (1992), one of the most influential Marxist philosophers, sees ideology differently. He views it rather as representing “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” and as having “a material existence in the state apparatus or institutions” (pp.56-7). Marxists believe that ideology functions by way of disguising the power relations that exist in society, in which case it becomes a device of the dominant class to maintain economic and political hegemony. They also believe that literature is controlled by the elite, hence it is part of the society’s superstructure and ideology.

Marxist criticism looks at the text in the light of how it represents the class struggle and the connection between it (literary text) and the socio-economic structure in which the work is written. About the place of art in Marxist view, Perk and Coyle (1993) say:

Marxist critics have often revealed a reverence for art, feeling that through literature, the writer can stand apart and see the faults of society. The method of much traditional Marxist criticism has

been to reconstruct a view of the past from historical evidence, and then to demonstrate how accurate a particular text is in its representation and understanding of the social reality. (p.176).

Over the years, Marxism has had to borrow insights from structuralism in drawing attention to the text structure but from the point of socio-economic dialectics. Eagleton (1976), one of the advocates of Marxism, opines that works of literature should portray the struggle of people – men and women – to extricate themselves from the oppressive and exploitative condition. Tolstykh (1980) underscores the same point of artistic relevance in Marxist aesthetics when he notes that the creative activity dignifies man as it involves production of beauty which the people appreciate. In general, literature in Marxist perspective is an instrument of propaganda. Accordingly, the interpretation of literature is more rewarding when it transcends the surface content and goes to the world outside of it for adequate explanation of the text's representation and reflection of social tension, the overall goal of which, according to Bressler (1994 p.122) is to lay bare how ideology is an instrument of control by the dominant class over the oppressed with a view to inspiring action leading to revolution and socialism.

The Marxist theory is preferred in this paper because racial, economic and social tensions that conflicted the black man in America are aptly appraised from a dialectical perspective. In this vein, Herberg (1995) poignantly states that "the Negro in the United States forms a well-defined subject caste, with a distinctly inferior economic, social and political status" (p.200). Arts for the African American writer can be seen to be a struggle to gain freedom from the shackles of oppression. Hence, Hughes and his contemporaries were not only committed in their art but also showed the class struggle which often resulted in social unrest and tension. Equally significant is the propagandist element in the poetry aimed at educating the oppressed blacks towards their pride and value, and the understanding of their unearned suffering. The gain of applying Marxist critical framework to the analysis of a text, according to Ngara(1990), derives from the theory's capability to reveal the ideology of the text or authorial ideology against the backdrop of the dominant ideologies of the time (p.8).

Discussion of Historical Allusions

As a thread that runs through the poetic oeuvre of Langston Hughes, historical allusions and references to personages are a stylistic strategy used in communicating the fierce urgency of the present in relation to the past. Among the poems chosen for analysis are “Jim Crow’s Last Stand”, “Prelude to Our Age: A Negro History Poem”, “Christ in Alabama”, “Song for a Dark Girl”, “Militant” and “Beaumont to Detroit: 1943”.

a. “Jim Crow’s Last Stand”

Hughes’ “Jim Crow’s Last Stand” is an angry denunciation of racial segregation and injustice represented by Jim Crow and how the heroism of African Americans has laid the foundation for the downfall of that unwholesome system. The poem, in the form of a narrative, is replete with allusions to famous human rights activists, important black personalities and a very significant event in World War II. These references to real situations and persons of historical importance have a regular pattern in the poem as a major communicative strategy.

First is the all-pervading mention of “Jim Crow” in its context of racial injustice, hate and justification of same in America. The personalities alluded to in the poem are:

Nehru (line 15)

Marian Anderson (19)

Paul Robeson (19)

Mrs Bethune and Martin Dies (21)

Hitler (23)

Joe Louis (25)

Dorie Miller (28)

The places mentioned in the poem are:

Pearl Harbor(8)

India, China, Harlem (13)

Kansas City (19)

A significant date mentioned in the poem is December 7, 1941, which is repeated twice and graphologically foregrounded in the text by being made to stand out in each instance (line 7 and line 27).

In all, there are 15 instances of allusion in the poem. To understand the communicative import of these references, it is important to briefly examine the personalities and occasions involved in relation to the poet's vision that racial segregation symbolized by Jim Crow will come to an end. Nehru (l.15) refers to the famous Indian independence activist, Jawaharlal Nehru, who became prime minister but was later jailed in 1942. Both Maria Anderson and Paul Robeson were prominent black singers who ardently confronted racism. Anderson, for instance, was the first African American to sing with the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York. Rampersad and Roessel (1994) observe that by mentioning this singer in the context of this poem, Hughes alludes to an event in 1939 in which the singer was not allowed by Daughters of American Revolution (DAR) to sing inside the Constitution Hall in Washington D.C. because of her race, presumably. This had caused Eleanor Roosevelt not only to resign from DAR but also to sponsor Anderson's concert in Lincoln Memorial attended by the president, cabinet members, congress members and others.

Robeson, on the other hand, was known for his principle that he would not perform before a racially segregated audience, a principle he invoked in 1942 in Kansas City Performance. In the same light, Mrs Bethune was an activist suspected of leftist sympathies while Martin Dies (a white) was the chairman of the House Committee on Un-American Office in the 1940s and 1950s. Against the backdrop of these two persons, the ideational import of the "response" by Mrs Bethune becomes clearer (lines 21 and 22).

Equally important is the historical reference to Joe Louis, a former heavyweight boxing champion, and Dorie Miller, a navy mess attendant who made history when he seized a machine gun and brought down four Japanese planes when Pearl Harbour was attacked in 1941. December 7, 1941 was the specific date of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and Hughes' reference to the date is because of what it and the entire World War II portended to the fortunes of the Negro, especially in relationship to segregation.

It can be noticed that in the context of the poem, the historical figures are involved in verbal processes of saying. All they say centres on the system of

segregation and the need to end it. This system of segregation, Jim Crow, is made a central character in this poem around which a story is built. The reluctance to accept the black soldier in the US military, a hard historical fact, is alluded to.

In lines 9-10, we have:

“That crow can’t fight for Democracy

And be same old crow he used to be-?

This conveys the fear that the black man’s engagement in the fight against fascism, which World War II meant, would be a turning point to a radical pursuit of equality and justice at home. And that actually was what it turned out to be even as perceived by the black artist. For example, Rampersad (1988) notes that, “From the outset of the war, Hughes was determined to link the fighting abroad to what was in effect a far longer struggle at home for justice” (p.35).

The allusions mentioned above are all related to the concern and optimism that the system of segregation would soon collapse. Giving more effectiveness to the allusive strategy is the narrative style of the poem. In consonance with this, the poem starts like a fable built around Jim Crow: “There was an old crow by the name of Jim” (line 1). The presupposition imbued in the succeeding lines of the first stanza points to the making and justification of racial segregation and the unavoidable fall of the system, hence crow’s last stand.

b. “Prelude to our Age: A Negro History Poem”

Hughes’ “Prelude to our Age” presents an array of historical allusions to persons (mostly blacks), places and occasional dates of great historical importance. The varied allusions in the text unite at the point of depicting the black man’s travails and triumphs in a hostile world. At the heart of the allusions is the celebrated anguish of the representative poet-persona who consistently identifies himself as a Negro. This allusive strategy is an obtrusive stylistic marker in the poem. Its effectiveness is better examined when the allusions themselves are identified and their significance explained within the context of the overall thematic paradigm of outrage and vision.

Lines 19-20 have “Homers’/ Blameless Ethiopians” as expression that refers to the reputation of Ethiopians’ purity established since the composition of

the Homeric epic poems (c. 800 B.C.E). Rampersad and Roessel (1994) state that "The Greeks believed that the Ethiopians had special reverence for the gods, which caused the divinities to attend in person the feast of the East Africans" (p.669). The references in line 24 to Aesop (c.550 B.C.E), Antar-bin Shedad (c.500 C.E) and Publius Terentius Afer (c.195-159 B.C.E) are aimed at glorifying Africa. Each of these men was a writer of great renown. Antar Bin-Shedad, for example, a medieval poet In Egypt wrote in the style of Arabian Nights; while Terentius Afer ("black"), born in North Africa, wrote Roman stage comedies. The glorification of Arica also extends to Sub-Saharan Africa with the mention of the West African kingdoms of Ghana and Songhay. These in addition to Ethiopia, form the three most significant civilizations before European colonization in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In the same vein of edifying Africa, is the reference to Juan Latino, an ex slave and great intellectual figure of Ethiopian descent. Gates, Jr. and Wolf (1998) attest that:

The first person of Sub-Saharan African descent to publish a book of Poems in a Western language was Juan Latino, a black African ex-Slave, born in 1518, who would in 1566 become the professor of Latin Grammar at the Cathedral in Granada (p.14).

Latino's first book of poems was published in 1573. This is alluded to by Hughes in line 36 of "Prelude to our Age". In line 38, the reference is to Abderrahman Sadi, a writer in Timbuctoo and reputable author of *Ta'rikh al Sudan*. He was called by Hughes as "Tarikh es Soudan". This work is one of the major historical texts of the 1960s. Similarly, in line 43 of the poem (as reproduced here), the poet, Philis Wheatley (1753-84) is referred to. She was the first African American to publish a book, which attracted the admiration and praise of General Washington.

In lines 52, 56 and 58 respectively, Crispus Attucks, Benjamin Banneker and Touissant L'Ouverture are alluded to in the context of the yearning of the poet persona. Crispus Attucks, a runaway slave was killed in the Boston Massacre in March 5, 1770 while mobilizing a crowd to protest against "The beating of a barber's apprentice by British Soldiers" (Rampersad and Roessel 1994: 626). Attucks now stands as a matyr who sacrificed his life to give meaning to black life through freedom, paradoxically. Banneker on the other

hand, wrote the first scientific work by an African to be published. The work was *Farmer's Almanac for 1792 – 1802*. Equally important is Toussaint L'Ouverture who masterminded and led the Haitian slave revolt of 1791. He, like Attucks, sacrificed for freedom. However, the great deeds and sacrifices of these persons mentioned were yet to free the black man as the persona bemoans.

Other heroes of historical importance to the black struggle, alluded to in the poem include Nat Turner, who was the leader of the bloodiest slave revolt recorded in American history; Sojourner Truth, a former slave who became an eloquent and prominent speaker for the abolition of slavery. In the same vein, Elijah Lovejoy, William Lloyd Garrison and Wendell Philips are mentioned. They were all white leaders of prominence in the Abolition Movement in the North of the United States. In the path of the epic struggle towards emancipation is the following personality equally alluded to in the poem: Frederick Douglas, who articulated his campaign through his books and his edited newspaper, "The North Star", mentioned in line 69.

Also referred to by Hughes are African American artists and famous intellectuals: W.C. Handy, a musician and composer regarded as "The Father of the Blues" because of his early effort to make the blues an art form (Ramersad and Roessel 1994: 670); Josephine Baker and Florence Mills, admirable queens of the cabaret. Among the renowned intellectuals mentioned are W.E.B. Du Bois, a sociologist of great standing that sparked off a pan-Africanist fire among the African American writers; Robert Ezra Park, another sociologist that co-authored *The Man Further Down* (1912) with Booker T. Washington. Others are Carter. G. Woodson, James Weldon Johnson and Franklin Frazier, a sociologist who is the famous author of the *Negro Family in the United States* (1939) and *The Negro Church in America* (1964). Hughes also mentions the major black newspapers and magazines which flourished during his literary career: *The Baltimore Afro-American*, Cincinnati's *Black Dispatch*, *The Crisis*, *Phylon*, *Opportunity* and *The Messenger*.

The entire poem is replete with references to persons, places, events, books and materials of significance to black history. The identification of these references and their explanation as attempted above are not exhaustive. But suffice it to say that the allusions demonstrate a consistent pattern seen in terms of frequency to convey a message of the pain and promise of the black race. It is pertinent to point out that the environmental factor of racial oppression has had a conditioning effect, first on the kinds of hero adored or

idolized by the poet persona and second on the references to them and the language as a whole. What is glaring in this poem as in many others by Langston Hughes is the realism and confrontation with actually lived situations and people.

The allusions in the poem can be summarized in terms of grouping. Firstly, there are references to the great civilization of Africa before the advent of colonialism. Secondly, the great writers of old in Africa and the Diasporas are mentioned as a way of acknowledging and extolling the intellectual power of Africans. Thirdly, famous black personalities are alluded to amongst whom are freedom fighters and martyrs, founders of institutions, pioneer scientists and great persons of letters. The fourth group of personalities is made up of musicians, composers and other artists as well as their great works (*magnus opus*), newspapers and magazines significant to the black struggle.

The numerous references make the poem a montage in form and presentation. In all, there are 69 instances of references to names of persons, 32 to names of places and 16 to books, titles of works, newspapers and magazines. References to dates are 2 and 1 to the name of an association. This gives a total of 118 allusions in all. This historical poem that is suffused with allusions is a lamentation of the long and painful struggle toward freedom. The rich allusions which are a stylistic feature serve to paint this struggle vividly to underscore its seriousness while at the same time showing the inventions of the blacks as seen in their contributions to knowledge and civilization generally.

When viewed from a Marxist viewpoint, each of these poems shows African-Americans as the oppressed throughout American history. The poet makes the point that great talent, heroism, artistry, intellectual depth and commitment reside in these oppressed people, as history reveals. Freedom from the shackles of social and economic oppression can be achieved through determination to challenge racial America. Evocating history is part of this awareness, which is essential to the poet, to show the long struggle of the black people. The slave revolts, intellectual engagements and advocacy in books, fighting fascism, etc all speak to the need of uniting the oppressed people to dislocate Jim Crow, the symbol of racial injustice and rabid capitalism. It is by disabling Jim Crow that justice can reign supreme.

Conclusion

So far, this paper has examined representative poems of Langston Hughes from the perspective of the use of allusions as an expressive strategy to

underscore the historic contributions made by the African American to the development of America and the tragic irony of unjustly treating him. The allusions serve to also project the image and identity of the Negro as well as his full claim and entitlement to American citizenship, equal rights and justice, and the need for this cause to be championed by everyone. It can be concluded that Hughes' style of using historical allusions is primarily informed by the exigencies of the time, the expression of vision of inclusiveness and the need to stand up for his people through the agency of art.

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