

THE DIEKE AND HUGHES’S MANIFESTO FOR ASPIRING FOLKS IN *THE BIG SEA* AND *NOT WITHOUT LAUGHTER*

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Abstract

It is very fascinating that the young Langston Hughes (Poet Laureate of African-Americans and a veritable leader of the Harlem Renaissance Movement) was taught and mentored by a Nigerian, Miss Dieke, in his High School days in Cleveland, Ohio. Tellingly, it is Langston Hughes who would later proceed to Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, USA, where he would meet with, impact and rub minds with Nnamdi Azikiwe (the first President of Nigeria), Kwame Nkrumah (the first President of Ghana) and Thurgood Marshall (the first African-American Justice of the United States Supreme Court) who also attended the Lincoln University. Poignantly, Langston Hughes also authored the famous manifesto for African Writing, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” This essay essentially explores the rich influence on Langston Hughes of the teachings and mentorship of Miss Dieke and other teachers who lay the foundation of the education that propelled Hughes to become the veritable scholar and intellectual that he became.

Introduction

In the introduction to his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes asserts that:

“four years at Central High School taught me many invaluable things. From Miss Dieke, who instructed in painting and lettering and ceramics, I learnt that the only way to get a thing done is to start to do it,

then keep on doing it, and finally you'll finish it, even if in the beginning you think you can't do it at all". (Hughes: *The Big Sea* 31).

The young Langston Hughes further states that:

from Miss Weimer I learnt that there are ways of saying or doing, which may not be the currently approved ways yet that can be very true and beautiful ways, that people will come to recognize as such in due time. In 1916, the critics said Carl Sandburg was no good as a poet, and free verse was no good. Nobody says that today-yet 1916 is not a lifetime ago. (Hughes: *The Big Sea* 31).

In the foregoing statements, Hughes emphasizes the enduring usefulness of good educational foundation, especially at an early age in life. He eulogizes his teachers and affirms the impact and significance of their teaching on him and his audience. He therefore reaffirms the maxim: 'knowledge is power.' He does not stop at his teachers, for he also pays glowing tribute to his fellow students from who he further learnt:

From the students I learnt that Europe was not so far away.... From the students I learnt, too, that lots of painful words can be flung at people that aren't 'nigger.' 'kike' was one; 'spick', and 'hunky', other 'kikes' – scorned though they might be by the 'pure' Americans (the Caucasians or Europeans) – all had it on the 'niggers' in one thing. Summary time came and they could get jobs quickly. For even during the war, when help was badly needed, lots of employers would not hire Negroes (African-Americans). A colored boy had to search and search for a job. (Hughes: *The Big Sea* 32)

Thus, through these youthful reminiscences, Langston Hughes introduces us to the stained race relations between people of European and non-European origins.

Whereas, *The Big Sea* is the childhood autobiography of Langston Hughes, *Not Without Laughter* is the fictionalized version of very similar manifestations in the united states of American when the author was caning of age. The experiences recounted in both texts helped greatly to influence Hughes's outlook on life in the USA and his response to such encounters. During his life on Earth, Hughes affirmed a zero tolerance for all forms of racism, gender bias or infractions of basic acceptable and established norms of human behaviour or rights. As we can attest to from a reading of the two texts above, the writer was profoundly influenced by his mother, carrier Hughes and his grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson, who we also encounter in *Not Without Laughter* as Annjelica Rodgers and Aunt Hager Williams, respectively. Hughes's biological mother, carrier Hughes, graduated from the University of Kansas with an Honours Degree, but could not be employed in the racist, Pro-Caucasian establishment since she was a Negro (African-American). The author's grandmother too, graduated from the famous Oberlin College in Ohio. Both these women nurtured and civil rights to their child, Langston Hughes and he would remember their legacy throughout his life and times. (Hughes: *Not Without...* 12-18).

It is not surprising therefore that, in 1926, Langston Hughes authored and published "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which quickly assumed the position of a 'manifesto' for Black writing in America. The relevant arguments and lines in this essay affirm the dignity and pride of African-Americans and, indeed, all Africans universally. The essay, like his groundbreaking poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," essentially celebrates the African heritage throughout human civilization and beckons on all Africans to uphold and endear themselves to this rich cultural heritage.

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful and ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know, and we stand on top of the mountain free within ourselves (Gates et al ed 1267-1271).

The 1926 Declaration or Manifesto in the essay by Langston Hughes marked a huge turning point for Black writing globally and not just in the United States or the rest of the African Diaspora as it energized and spurred other African writers to boldly emerge from behind the veil of the racial mountain and express themselves freely on all fronts. In his Foreword to the 1969 edition of Langston Hughes's novel, *Not Without Laughter*, Arna Bontemps observes that:

The poets had become bellwethers, and protest organizations and friends of the Blacks were following almost as if transfixed. Crusading civil-Rights leaders suddenly decided that a touch of magic had been found. They paused and began writing novels and poems themselves. W. E. B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White all picked up the cue, but it was easy to recognize that the special new note was being sounded by their juniors, even though there was no tendency, such as became noticeable in the 1960s, to downgrade the elders. (Hughes: *Not Without...12*)

The Crux:

In *Not Without Laughter*, Langston Hughes depicts a child protagonist, Sandy Rodgers, who is mentored and largely raised or reared by an illiterate, but kindhearted and deeply religious grandmother, Aunt Hager Williams. Sandy's mother, Annjelica Rodgers works as a cook for a white family in Stanton, a little town in Kansas State. Although Aunt Hager Williams is illiterate, she fears God and is kind and loving. She imbibes these traits in her children and grandchildren. She also advises them to aspire to attain higher education so as to become leaders and spokespersons for the African-American Community in the United States.

In *Black Male Writing and Black Female Responses in the United States*, I argued that:

Through, she is illiterate (during slavery, Blacks were barred from acquiring formal education), Aunt Hager

values education greatly and seeks to obtain it for her children...

Hager resolves to ensure that her offspring are educated with in their American society. (Mogu 49).

Roger Rosenblatt in his book, *Black Fiction*, further asserts that:

Hager Williams – despite her poverty and the austerity of the general circumstances in which she struggles, never surrenders hope. Although conditions do not permit her to be a great leader of her people like a Sojourner Truth, she nevertheless ensures that her grandson will be such a person by giving him all her love and a sound moral and cultural foundation.

She is, “gwine to make a edicated (sic) man out o’him and wants him to be aleading de people.” Again and again, the grandmother tells the grandson he is ”gwine to count to something in this world.” And the grandson (Sandy – the fictional young Langston Hughes) knew what she meant. She meant a man like Booker T. Washington or Frederick Douglass, or like Paul Laurence Dunbar, who did poetry writing (Rosenblatt 92).

Langston Hughes was almost exclusively raised by women such as his grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson and his mother, Carrie Hughes. His father James Nathaniel Hughes, was virtually absent in much of his entire life. Thus, it is not surprising to see the young Langston Hughes’s profuse affection for his grandmother and mother in *The Big Sea*. This is further magnified in his 1930 novel, *Not Without Laughter*.

In *Not Without Laughter*, the protagonist Sandy Jimboy Rodgers, who is really, Langston Hughes in disguise, equally dotes on his grandmother and mother. He has a father who is mostly absent in his life and who fails woefully to mentor and provide for his son and wife. However, in both *The Big Sea* and *Not Without Laughter*, the two matriarchs, Mary Sampson Patterson and Aunt Hager Williams instill discipline and the fear of God in their young male wards. They further inculcate a burning desire for education in their grandchildren by urging

them to study hard, be focused and never to give up on their aspirations. According to Calvin C. Hernton:

....the tendency by African-American women to inculcate high and sound intellectual values in their children and wards is equally age-old... “This selfless giving, teaching and inspiration of the grandmother is something every black person can relate to, it runs deep in the life experiences of Black Americans. (Mogu 50).

There is an age old adage “Knowledge is Power.” The inculcation of high and sound intellectual knowledge in children globally helps to discard ignorance and unlocks enlightenment which, in turn, holds the key to empowerment in all realms of human quests or endeavours.

Just as W. E. B. Du Bois did before him, Langston Hughes believed that a humane, deliberate and comprehensive education and enlightenment of African-Americans from their cradle to their coming of age, was essential for their uplift or advancement. Indeed, both Du Bois and Hughes believed that the educational enlightenment of African-Americans would, in turn, make them to become masters of their destinies not only in the United States, but globally. Hence, Du Bois’ famous coinage of the “Talented Tenth” terminology during his formation of the *Niagara Moment* in 1910. The *Niagara Movement* subsequently became transformed into the *National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples (NAACP)*, the largest African-American Pressure Group in the United States of America. The “*Talented Tenth*” referred to the educated ten percent (10%) of the African-American population in the early Twentieth Century). Similarly, in his writing, Langston Hughes, like his mentor, W.E.B. Du Bois, repeatedly emphasizes educational enlightenment as a veritable and enduring gateway to attaining equality and competence with Caucasians in all social endeavours. This is the key message in his 1926 critical essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” and more so, in his poem, “Mother to Son,” written in 1922:

Well, son I’ll tell you:
Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair
It’s had tacks in it,

And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor-
Bare,
But all the time
I've been a'climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
When there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps,
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now -
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.(Gates
et al ed. 1254-1255).

The recurrent emphasis on sound and lofty education for African-American people resonates not only in Black America, but is also now common in the entire African and African diaspora world. Such deep emphasis on the sound education of Africans in the United States of America provided the backdrop and laid the foundation for independence movements across Africa for their political emancipation and the freedom to govern themselves as manifested in the struggles of African scholars and statesmen for the freedom of their people from colonial and neo-colonial rule and domination. Indeed, scholars and contemporaries of Langston Hughes at the Lincoln University, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. such as Thurgood Marshall, Nnamdi Azikiwe and Kwame Nkrumah became deeply involved in social justice causes and worked very assiduously for the liberation of their people from foreign rule. The **Harlem Renaissance** awareness effort to liberate Africa and its Diaspora from European colonialism was replicated in the French colonized territories by the **Négritude Movement** which was led by Leon Damas, Leopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire.

Tellingly, in 1926, Langston Hughes provided a sustaining and blunt manifesto or blueprint for universal African writing in his essay, "The

Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”. Thurgood Marshall sued for equality between Blacks and Whites in the U.S.A. in the famous 1954 “Brown versus Board of Education” U.S Supreme Court case that resulted in an official end to social discrimination in the United States of America. Not only was Thurgood Marshall able to accomplish this major feat, he was also the first African-American Justice or Judge of the U.S Supreme Court. Kwame Nkrumah returned home to Ghana in 1957 and became Ghana’s post independence first leader. Nnamdi Azikiwe equally returned to Nigeria and challenged the British colonialists and successfully obtained political independence for Nigeria in 1960. He also became the first president of Nigeria upon her independence.

In addition, Langston Hughes met with like-minded Black folks at the Lincoln University and equally interacted actively with colleagues and mentors in the Harlem Renaissance Movement - a Black Literati group based essentially in the Harlem area of Manhattan, New York. Essentially, the Harlem Renaissance folks explored the African heritage and showcased positive attributes about African peoples and culture, especially those in the United States of America. These scholars and liberators also raised awareness about the magnificent potentialities inherent in Africa. The works of this cultural liberators in the view of (Nathaniel and Akung: 2022), became site “for empowering black imagination, body, history, literature and experience” (2)

Thus, Hughes was just a torchbearer, but also an instrument used to raise consciousness or awareness about Africa in America, for the world to observe and respect. In his 1969 introduction to *Not Without Laughter*, Arna Bontemps argues that:

The Harlem Renaissance can be more precisely dated from 1917, the year in which certain seeds were planted. Then, while Claude McKay and Jean Toomer were writing and putting together the poems and stories that were to transmit the mood in 1922 and 1923 respectively, Marcus Garvey came to the United States and awakened pride in blackness and a conviction that black is beautiful with unprecedented vigor and drama. Poetry had been the first to catch the beat, and the names

of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen appeared like unannounced stars in the small gray dawn (Hughes: *Not Without...* 13-14).

Thus, Langston Hughes's contributions to the literary and cultural reawakening of the Black world are vast and reassuring to the extent that he physically undertook a trip to Africa in 1923. This trip was educative, soothing and memorable as he recalls in Section Two (Hughes: *The Big Sea* 101-122) of his autobiography, *The Big Sea*, from which the book's title is derived.

Summary and Conclusion

In a nutshell, the seeds that were sown into the young Langston Hughes by his High School teachers such as Miss Dieke, who taught Hughes how to persevere in order to overcome obstacles in any given situation, became apparent and poignant in the life of this great African-American writer. Today, we are all happy beneficiaries of such enduring and veritable wisdom. Indeed, Langston Hughes remains forever alive in our consciousness and memories as he teaches us to never give up on doing things that are beneficial to fellow humans. In a single word summary, Miss Dieke and Langston Hughes recommend "perseverance" for aspiring folks universally in all their positive endeavours.

Hughes was impacted and mentored by people such as Miss Dieke in the Central High School, Cleveland, Nicholas Vachel Lindsay, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, among other people. These other influential people include his mother, Carrie Hughes, his grandmother, Mary Sampson Patterson and Auntie and Uncle Reed in Lawrence, Kansas. Clearly, these aspiring folks mentored Hughes for the rest of us to learn from and emulate for our general good and well being.

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