

**THE POETIC ACCOMPLISHMENT
OF LANGSTON HUGHES**

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THE POETIC ACCOMPLISHMENT OF
LANGSTON HUGHES

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CHAPTER I

THE HERITAGE

Relation of the Past to the Literary Present

No work of literary merit is entirely the product of any one man. Back of the idea, the ideals, problems and triumphs of the finished page lie years of unmentioned names and unchronicled events. The individual author shapes and uses the historical mass, infusing it with the genius of his flaming mind.

Langston Hughes is, more than others, the product of his people. Out of their tears and tribulations comes the haunting lament of his "blues", the bitter-sharp sting of his natural prose. He is irredeemably linked to that mysterious past of jungle and tribal fires, of slave-and-free oppression, of spirituals and jazz; and he owes as much to the special nutriment of the modern literary world. It follows, then, that a knowledge of that literary past is indispensable to the study and appraisal of Hughes' present poetic accomplishment.

First Negroes In America

As far as present records show, the first Negroes within the territorial limits of the United States were brought as indentured servants to a colony near what later became Jamestown, Virginia, in about 1526.¹ There are

¹B. G. Brawley, A Social History Of The American Negro, p. 5
Also see Ina C. Brown, The Story of the Amer. Negro, p. 2

evidences which point strongly to the presence of Negroes in America even before the coming of Columbus,² and there is positive indication that a Negro, Pedro Alonso Niño, was pilot of one of the famous three vessels of Columbus;² but these records are less substantial and of minor value to this work. The first account of an individual Negro in America is that of Estévan, (Stephen), one of four surviving explorers of the party of Panfilo de Narváez on his Florida expedition in 1528.³ This venture ended tragically in the death of Estévan when he pushed valiantly ahead to a primitive Indian settlement bearing news of the coming of white men. The unbelieving natives killed him promptly.⁴

Negroes were first permanently established on the American mainland in 1619,⁵ when a Dutch merchantman sold twenty Negroes as indentured servants to Virginia landholders. Slavery, as a legal institution, did not begin until 1661 when the Virginia assembly decided that Negroes were "incapable of making satisfaction for the time lost in running away by addition of time"; and so slavery began.⁶

²B. G. Brawley, op. cit., pp. 2 and 3. Also corroborated by Ina C. Brown, op. cit., p. 2. See also Charles S. Johnson, The Negro In American Civilization, Chapter I.

³Ina C. Brown, The Story Of The American Negro, p. 2.

⁴Ibid., p. 3.

⁵B. G. Brawley, op. cit. p. 9.

⁶Ibid., p. 9.

Beginning Of Slavery

The institution spread slowly among the New World colonies; and by the end of the century the holding of slaves had become general throughout the colonies. Frowned upon at first in America, Negro slavery was encouraged by England⁷ as a profitable trade and as an economic asset.⁸ The Negroes themselves did not, as is commonly supposed, calmly resign themselves to their lot as slaves. There were frequent uprisings of blacks; and in 1730 there came to light a widespread plot between Banbaras slaves and Chickashaw Indians to wipe out their white masters and set up an independent republic in Louisiana.⁹ Needless to say, the ringleaders in this scheme were publicly hanged; and Samba, their desperate Negro leader, had his body broken on the torture wheel.

In painting this picture of Negro heritages, it is well to remember something of the actual sea-passage endured by these early martyrs of the slave-ship era. Close and sturdily built, the Dutch slavers were planned for maximum loads; and the natives were compelled to lie side by side, row on row, jammed body to body the whole stormy passage

⁷Ibid., p. 15.

⁸Ibid., p. 15. Brawley says, quoting Bogart's Economic History, p. 73: "About 1663 a British Committee on Foreign Plantations declared that 'black slaves are the most useful appurtenances of a plantation', and twenty years later the Lords Commissioners of Trade stated that 'the colonists could not possibly subsist without an adequate supply of of slaves.'"

through, except for infrequent airings on deck. The situation is best described by Brawley:¹⁰

"Once on board the slaves were put in chains two by two. When the ship was ready to start, the hold of the vessel was crowded with moody and unhappy wretches who most often were made to crouch so that their knees touched their chins, but who were also frequently made to lie on their sides "spoon-fashion". Sometimes the space between floor and ceiling was still further diminished by the water barrels; on the top of these barrels boards were placed, on the boards the slaves had to lie, and in the little space that remained they had to subsist as well as they could. There was generally only one entrance to the hold, and provisions for only the smallest amount of air through the gratings on the sides. The clothing of a captive, if there was any at all, consisted of only a rag about the loins. The food was half-rotten rice, yams, beans, or soup, and sometimes bread and meat; the cooking was not good, nor was any care taken to see that all were fed. Water was always limited, a pint a day being a generous allowance; frequently no more than a gill could be had. The rule was to bring the slaves from the hold twice a day for airing, about eight o'clock in the morning and four in the afternoon; but this plan was not always followed. On deck they were made to dance by the lash, and they were also forced to sing. Thus were born the sorrow songs, the last cry of those who saw their homeland vanish behind them---
---forever.

"Sometimes there were stern fights on board. Sometimes food was refused in order that death might be hastened. When opportunity served, some leaped overboard in the hope of being taken back to Africa. Throughout the night the hold resounded with the moans of those who awoke from dreams of home to find themselves in bonds. Women became hysterical, and both men and women became insane. Fearful and contagious diseases broke out. Smallpox was one of these. More common was ophthalmia, a frightful inflammation of the eyes. A blind, and hence a worthless, slave was thrown to the sharks. The putrid atmosphere, the melancholy, and the sudden transition from heat to cold greatly increased the mortality; and frequently when morning came a dead and living slave were found shackled together. A captain always counted on losing one-fourth of his cargo. Sometimes he lost a great deal more.

⁹Gayarre, History of Louisiana, (Quoted) Vol. I, p. 435.
By B. G. Brawley, op. cit. p. 17.

¹⁰Brawley, op. cit. pp. 18, 19.

"Back on the shore a gray figure with strained gaze watched the ship fade away---an old woman sadly typical of the great African mother. With her vision she better than any one else perceived the meaning of it all. The men with hard faces who came to buy and sell might deceive others, but not her. In a great vague way she felt that something wrong had attacked the very heart of her people. She saw men wild with the whiskey of the Christian nations commit crimes undreamed of before. She did not like the coast towns; the girl who went thither came not home again, and a young man was lost to all that Africa held dear. In course of time she saw every native craft despised, and instead of the fabric that her own fingers wove her children yearned for the tinsel and the gew-gaws of the trader. She cursed this man, and she called upon all her spirits to banish the evil. But when at last all was of no avail---when the strongest youth or the dearest maiden had gone---she went back to her hut and ate her heart out in the darkness. She wept for her children and would not be comforted because they were not. Then slowly to the untutored mind somehow came the promise: 'These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb....They shall hunger no more; neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.' "

It is not to be expected that these people, held in bondage as they were, should develop a literature or participate in the cultural arts of the nation. As slaves, they were brought here to labor and to labor only. Nevertheless, the Negroes began to evolve out of the sweat and pain of their labor a singing consciousness that was to expand to become the most glorious folk-culture known to be truly American. Springing spontaneously from the souls and lips of these black tillers of the soil, these songs became the background of spiritual and blues. One finds in them a dominant sincerity, which coupled with a simple

natural rhythm gave ineffable charm to the listener. Work songs, jump-songs, spirituals, were all given birth in this natural outpouring of emotion. These folk-rhymes are best treated by Thomas W. Talley of Fisk University in his book, Negro Folk Rhymes¹¹. Though a fascinating presentation, the conservative reader will find crudities reflective of untrained minds of untutored peoples. But they are genuine and they are beautiful because they are real. Repeated and varied and added-to from generation to generation, they have remained until recent years unpublished.¹²

Early Negro Literature And Writers

Jupiter Hammon: The first published record we have of Negro poetry is that of Jupiter Hammon, and consists of a religious paen of eighty-eight lines. It was published at Long Island, December 25, 1760, when the poet was about

¹¹T. W. Talley, Negro Folk Rhymes, Wise and Otherwise. See Bibliography. Read especially from pp. 228 to 326.

¹²Consider, for example, the popular railroad work-song: "John Henry". According to B. G. Brawley in his book, The Negro Genius, (p. 5.) the ballad of John Henry tells the story of a contest between the Negro rail-worker and a steel-driving machine---a contest in which John Henry won out, though at the cost of his life. The story is based on an incident, says Brawley, which occurred about 1871 during the building of the Big Bend Tunnel on the C & O Railroad in West Virginia. There are more than fifty-six versions extant: The following is one:

"John Henry said to his captain,
'Well, a man ain't nothing but a man,
But before I'll be beaten by your old steam drill,
I'll die with my hammer in my han',
Lawd, I'll die with my hammer in my han'."

forty years of age.¹³ Hammon was a slave all his life; but his masters (the Lloyd family) were indulgent and religiously inclined. Hammon was given the most favorable treatment on the plantation, but was permitted to receive no formal education.¹⁴ His literary training was therefore rudimentary and elemental; his verses were consequently limited to such language uses as he heard and knew. There seems to be evidence that he had free access to read the Bible, hymn books, and possibly such poems as Michael Wigglesworth's The Day Of Doom.¹⁵ The name of Hammon's first published work was: An Evening Thought: Salvation By Christ with Penetential Cries.

An examination of the actual works of Hammon shows a surprisingly well-ordered rhythm full of dignified thought greatly reminiscent of Puritan hymnology.¹⁶ They show a resignation on the part of the slave to the system, and a

¹³Vernon Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 9.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵Loggins says in his notes concerning Hammon (ibid., p. 369) "One of his (Hammon's) pieces in verse, "A Poem for Children with Thoughts on Death", seems to be a Methodist commentary on the rigid Calvinism expounded in that portion of The Day Of Doom which describes the last judgment of children who have died in infancy and who are not of 'God's Elect'."

¹⁶A fairly accurate, though corrected, reproduction of Hammon's two most important works, (An Evening Thought: Salvation by Christ with Penetential Cries; and a dialogue entitled "The Kind Master and the Dutiful Servant") are found in Brawley's Early Negro American Writers, pp. 23-30. The authoritative edition of

willingness to endure present earthly travail for the sake of future heavenly rewards:

"Dear Jesus, let the Nation's cry,¹⁷
And all the People say,
Salvation comes from Christ on high,
Haste on Tribunal Day."

And again in the same poem:

"Ho! every one that hunger hath,¹⁷
Or pineth after me,
Salvation be thy leading Staff,
To set the Sinner free."

Besides this first poem of 88 metrical lines, Hammon published several other works,¹⁸ among which in 1778 was "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley". All of Hammon's work shows a rare imitative skill (as do those of Phillis Wheatley) coupled with a genuine understanding of that which he wrote. He was an evangelist in every sense of the word, and his message to his people was conciliation rather than rebellion.

Hammon from which Brawley drew his information is not among my references. It is "Jupiter Hammon, American Negro Poet", Selections From His Writings and a Bibliography, by Oscar Wegelin.

¹⁷B. G. Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 24. From "An Evening Thought".

¹⁸Loggins, op. cit. (p. 10), says: "An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley, a poem of twenty-one ballad stanzas, appeared as a broadside in 1778. In 1779 came "An Essay on the Ten Virgins", of which no copy seems to exist. That it was published, however, is scarcely to be doubted since it was advertised in the Conneticut Courant for December 14, 1779. "A Winter Piece", a sermon in prose with "A Poem For Children with Thoughts on Death" tacked-on at the end, appeared in pamphlet form in 1782. Another prose pamphlet, "An Evening's Improvement" including also a dialogue in

Phillis Wheatley.- Much more is known of the life of Phillis Wheatley, long accounted by many the first poet of her race. She was born very probably in 1753, and came to America as a delicate little 8-year-old girl on a slave ship that came from Senegal to Boston in 1761.¹⁹ It is reported that without education or formal assistance this forlorn waif learned to read and speak the English language with ease in sixteen months' time.²⁰ She learned Latin, astronomy, a little ancient history, and geography. Before long, she began to read and translate Pope; and, under the guidance of her interested mistress Mary Wheatley, the child began to compose verses of her own. Her first poem appeared in 1770, and was an ode on the death of the Reverend George Whitefield.²¹ Soon after this Phillis' mistress married a Mr. Lathrop, an event which marked a great change in the young writer's life. Her health began to fail, and by 1773 her condition was adjudged to be critical. The family decided to go to England, and since Phillis was to accompany them on the trip for her health,

verse entitled "The Kind Master and the Dutiful Servant", was published at Hartford without date. These four pieces written during the Revolution, with "An Evening Thought" (1760) and "An Address To The Negroes in the State of New York, (1787) make up all the known writings of Jupiter Hammon.

¹⁹ B. G. Brawley, op. cit. p. 31.

²⁰ Loggins, op. cit. p. 17; from a letter by John Wheatley to the London publishers of the young poet.

²¹ Brawley, op. cit. p. 32.

she was given her freedom.

It was in England that the young poet really blossomed , and the trip marked a high point in Phillis Wheatley's life. Though she was later to be publicly received and complimented by General George Washington,²² she never again shone so gloriously. In 1774 her mistress died. On April 1, 1778, Phillis Wheatley obtained a license to marry John Peters,²³ a union which was to bring her only misfortune and misery, and which ended in her death December 5, 1784.²⁴ The three children of this unhappy marriage were all dead with their mother.

The poetry of Phillis Wheatley bore the imprint of her reading of Pope and Homer, and is in consequence very stately. Her best known work, published while in England, was Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral, a collection of thirty-five pieces. In 1775, while Washington was in command of the American Revolutionary Forces around Boston, she wrote an "Ode to George Washington", which gained her public commendation from the General.²⁵ After her marriage she wrote little: only two

²² Ibid., p. 33.

²³ Loggins, op. cit., p. 19.

²⁴ Brawley, op. cit., p. 33.

²⁵ White & Jackson, Poetry By American Negroes, p. 27.

works are mentioned as worthwhile by her biographer---
"Liberty and Peace" and "An Elegy Sacred To The Memory
of Dr. Samuel Cooper".²⁶ Of these two, the former is
most quoted of all her works.

For most readers of Negro poetry the years between
Phillis Wheatley and Paul Laurence Dunbar stretched void,
a century of literary silence unbroken by the voice of any
bard. Happily, this is not the true case. The intervening
period witnessed events of the highest importance for the
Negro as for all the people of the United States:²⁷

"For a generation after the Revolution there was
reaction from the ideals of Jefferson and Patrick Henry;
the cotton gin was invented, new lands in the South were
opened up, and the exploits of Toussaint L'Ouverture and
the threat of Gabriel's Insurrection tended to make the
actual practice of the slave code more harsh. After 1830,
however, things were somewhat different. Garrison founded
the Liberator, anti-slavery societies became active, and
the Negro began to rise to the stature of manhood. At
last came John Brown's Raid, the Emancipation Proclamation,
and the employment of the Negro soldier at Fort Wayne and
Fort Pillow."

Among the published Negro writers of this turbulent period
were Gustavus Vassa, Benjamin Banneker, George Moses Horton,
Sojourner Truth, and Ann Plato.

Gustavus Vassa.- Gustavus Vassa was not, strictly
speaking, an American Negro;²⁸ nevertheless he spent

²⁶ Authoritative sources are: Phillis Wheatley's Poems and Letters, edited by Charles F. Heartman, (1915). From White & Jackson, op. cit., p. 28. These sources are not included in my references.

²⁷ B. G. Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 56.

considerable time in bondage in this country. He was born in 1745 in Benin, a country of southern Nigeria, and was seized by kidnapers and sold into bondage in America.²⁹ He was able later to purchase his freedom, then to write and publish the story of his life.²⁹ Of interest chiefly because of the background flavor contributed by the author, the narrative is in stiff precise prose of only passing moment to future writers. It received wide attention, however, and attracted many sympathizers to the side of other Negro authors.

Benjamin Banneker.- Benjamin Banneker to all accounts, was the natural grandson of a Negro slave named Banaky and a young white Englishwoman, Molly Welsh, who was first a milkmaid and afterwards an American pioneer.³⁰ He was born of free parentage November 9, 1731, to Mary and Robert Banneker, and was the eldest of four children. The father was a thrifty energetic man and the family appears to have been in prosperous circumstances. The care of the family fell early upon young Benjamin, and he copied his sire in energy and foresight. He was the inventor of a clock that

²⁸ B. G. Brawley, The Negro In Literature and Art, p. 38.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 75

struck the hours, the first of its kind in the country;³¹ and from 1791 on, he was the progenitor of an excellent almanac. His literary compositions were minor and are chiefly remembered for their arguments for political justice. Of these, his "Letter to the Secretary of State" (Maryland) and "A Plan of Peace-Office for the United States" are outstanding. Benjamin Banneker died in October, 1806, still unmarried and his great mind active to the last.³¹

George Moses Horton.- The first person to attain great literary prominence after Phillis Wheatley was George Moses Horton of North Carolina, who was born in 1797 and died about 1880.³² His first book, Poems By A Slave, appeared in 1829, and other books followed until 1865.³³ Most of his poems were of a religious tone, but Horton was the first Negro poet to put his desire for freedom into his poetry.

Sojourner Truth.- Of Sojourner Truth, Loggins says in his book on Negro Authors:³⁴

"If one acquainted with the history of the Negro's past in America were called upon to name the most spectacular and picturesque person whom the race has produced, one would probably think first of Sojourner Truth. She

³¹Ibid., pp. 76, 77.

³²B. G. Brawley, The Negro In Literature And Art, p. 42.

³³Robert T. Kerlin, Negro Poets And Their Poems, p. 25.

³⁴Loggins, op. cit., p. 220.

could neither read nor write; but the Narrative of Sojourner Truth, Northern Slave, published in 1850 as the work of an anonymous biographer, contains so many quotations attributed to her that she is entitled to a place among the makers of slave narratives."

From what has been gathered of her life, Sojourner Truth is pictured as illiterate, superstitious, religiously fanatic and devoted to the cause of freedom. She was accused by W. L. Stone, a writer of the day, of being a sorceress and murderess; but his charges appear to proceed only from his hatred and fear of the Matthias cult, an African mystic order in which Sojourner Truth believed.³⁵

Born under the slave name of Isabella in the state of New York near the close of the eighteenth century, Sojourner Truth joined the Methodists, transferred to the cult of Matthias where she acquired her bizarre appellation.³⁶ When she realized that her religious leader "was mad", she quit the group and became a sort of personal evangelist against slavery and sin.

Ann Plato.- Brief mention should be made here of another woman Negro author, Ann Plato, who in 1841 published at Hartford a book entitled: Essays; Including Biographies and Miscellaneous in Prose and Poetry. Little is known of

³⁵Ibid., p. 221.

³⁶Compare with modern-day accounts of the religious cult of Father Divine. A vivid account of Sojourner Truth to which I am indebted for the textual story is found in Loggins, The Negro Author, pp. 219-23.

her life save that she was possibly of Negro-Indian extraction, and might have been a school-teacher.³⁷ Her works exhibit the timid gentleness of Phillis Wheatley, the strict unyielding "religionism" of Jupiter Hammon--- but approached neither in depth or range; and her quiet acceptance of slavery made her unpopular with the new seekers after freedom.

Outstanding Negroes of the Period.- Other personalities were beginning to write their names large in the struggle to determine the Negro's socio-political future. Of these we mention David Walker, rabid abolitionist,³⁸ whose famous "Appeal" for the rights of Negroes in 1829 was the most daring, inflammably dangerous, radical and most widely-read and circulated work to come from the pen of an American Negro before 1840. Lemuel B. Haynes,³⁹ another ardent worker for social justice, was the son of a white servant woman and a pure-bred African. A Congregationalist minister, Haynes was an eminent scholar, an able pastor; and lived his long life of eighty years among whites without identifying himself as a Negro. Probably the most outstanding name of the period was that of Richard Allen,⁴⁰ founder of

³⁷Original authority listed by Loggins is Miss Plato's Essays, pp. 92, 110-12. Read Loggins, op. cit., p. 248 and Kerlin, op. cit., p. 23.

³⁸Loggins, op. cit., p. 85.

³⁹Ibid., p. 117.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 56.

the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The struggle of Allen after "buying" his freedom by chopping cord wood is a stirring tale of manly heroism and spiritual vision. Seeing his people ostracized, refused and beggared on the religious crumbs from the white man's spiritual feast-table, Richard Allen with the aid of Reverend Absalom Jones and a few white friends organized the first independent Negro Methodist Church in 1786 in a Philadelphia blacksmith shop. Allen was the earliest of many American Negro leaders whose careers prove as false the generally-accepted theory that a spirit of submission is a racial characteristic found in all blacks.⁴¹ His efforts were always practical, efficient and tenacious. When he died, he had by thriftiness amassed a fortune of nearly forty thousand dollars and had earned the undying love of Negroes of all sects and creeds. Allen was the author of numerous articles, pamphlets and hymns of which little was published or preserved. Josiah Henson⁴², another Methodist preacher who rose to prominence in the period, became the hero in Mrs. Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin.⁴³ For a complete account of his life the reader is directed to Brawley's Early Negro American Writers, and Loggins, The Negro Author. (Consult notes 42 and 43.)

⁴¹Quoted from ibid., p. 58.

⁴²B. G. Brawley, Early Negro American Writers, p. 160.

⁴³Loggins, op. cit., p. 216.

With the exception of David Walker alone, there was no more radical figure among Negro personalities of this period than Henry Highland Garnett. Born a slave in Maryland in 1815, Garnett fled with his father to freedom in New York. Here he worked for a time as cook on a schooner.⁴⁴ In 1835 he identified himself with Alexander Crummell and Thomas S. Sydney in an abolitionist movement in Canaan, New Hampshire; but a hostile community wrecked the building and disbanded the group.⁴⁴ Because of Garnett's fiery views and insurrectionist ideas, he failed to win support with Frederick G. Douglass or other Negro leaders working less spectacularly for freedom's cause. He made many revolutionary speeches, advocated Negro emigration to Africa, and at last won for himself appointment as U. S. minister to Liberia.⁴⁵ He died two months later.

Returning to the field of literature, we find James M. Whitfield publishing a book of verse in 1853, America, and Other Poems, a volume which expounded his theory of the necessity of Negro emigration from the United States.⁴⁶

"America, it is of thee,
Thou boasted land of liberty,---
It is to thee I raise my song,
Thou land of blood, and crime, and wrong."⁴⁶

⁴⁴ B. G. Brawley, The Negro Genius, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

⁴⁶ Loggins, op. cit., p. 242. Quotation by author from "America" in the cited volume of verse.

Writing at about the same time in this period which finds its close in the Civil War were Charles L. Reason and George B. Vashon, both Negro professors in Central College of New York.⁴⁷ Reason wrote with convincing feeling of the struggle by Negro Americans for liberty, and of little else; but Vashon demonstrated a wide poetic technique much more commendable.⁴⁸ His Autographs For Freedom, (1854) smacks of Byron and Scott,⁴⁹ but the story (of a Santa Domingo mulatto rebellion) is singularly good and of compelling interest.

No more than passing comment alights on the poetry of James Madison Bell⁵⁰ and Alexander Crummell.⁵¹ We have already heard of the latter in connection with the abolitionist movement and Bell's writings show little poetic value other than an earnest advocacy for freedom. In the general field of literature, however, Crummell ranks among the foremost group of early Negro writers. His voice boomed out in energetic attack on American race-attitudes and in defense of the social rights of Negroes. The principles to which he adhered have had

⁴⁷Ibid., pp. 234-39.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 235.

⁴⁹Ibid., p. 237.

⁵⁰Kerlin, Negro Poets And Their Poems, pp. 32-35.

⁵¹Loggins, op. cit., p. 199.

lasting influence up to the present day. Quoting from his The Social Principle Among A People, on the subject:

"Can A Negro....Forget He Is Colored?", he declares:⁵²

"Forget it forsooth when you enter a saloon and are repulsed on account of your color! Forget it when you enter a car, South or West, and are denied a decent seat! Forget it when you enter the church of God and are driven to a hole in the gallery! Forget it when every child of yours would be driven ignominiously from four-fifths of the common schools of the country! Forget it, when thousands of mechanics in the large cities, would make a "strike", rather than work at the same bench with a black carpenter or brickmaker! Forget it, when the boyhood of our race is almost universally deprived of the opportunity of learning trades, through prejudice! Forget it, when in a single state, 20,000 men dare not go to the polls on election day, through the tyranny of caste! Forget it, when one great commonwealth offers a constitution for adoption; by which a man like Dumas, the younger, if he were a North Carolinian, could be indicted for marrying the foulest white woman in the State; and merely because she was white. Forget that you are colored in these United States! Turn madman, and go into a lunatic asylum; and then, perchance, you may forget it!...."

Probably the last Negro poet of note to write before the Civil War was Frances Ellen Watkins (afterwards Harper). She was born of free parentage in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1825.⁵³ She early dedicated herself to the fight for freedom; and her many literary works carried out the spirit of her life. Of these the best known are Poems (1871) and Sketches of Southern Life (1872). Mrs. Harper deserves attention, if for no other reason, as the most outstanding

⁵² Ibid., pp. 206, 207. (January 14, 1876)

⁵³ Brawley, The Negro Genius, p. 116.

early Negro female poet, with the possible exception of Phillis Wheatley.

Although this is not primarily a history of Negro achievements, we must not neglect the race's most important leaders of this entire nineteenth century. In the American group were Frederick G. Douglass, Samuel Ringgold Ward, William Wells Brown, William C. Nell, and Booker T. Washington. From abroad came the inspiration of the accomplishments of such eminent Negro men as Toussaint L'Ouverture and Alexander Dumas. The deeds and thoughts of such an illustrious group could not fail to have great effect upon Negro literature from that time on.

Frederick G. Douglass.- Frederick Douglass has been called by many the greatest of American Negroes.⁵⁴ He was without doubt one of the most accomplished men of his time, white or black. Born as a slave in Maryland in 1817, of an unidentified white man and his African mother, Frederick Douglass gave early promise of his great oratorical future. Treated harshly by his white masters, Douglass escaped to New York in 1838, where at the advice of David Ruggles, Negro Abolitionist, he worked three years as a dockhand.⁵⁵ He read Garrison's The Liberator with avidity, and on one occasion in a Massachusetts meeting of the

⁵⁴Loggins, op. cit., p. 135.

⁵⁵Brawley, The Negro Genius, p. 51.

abolitionist society was asked by the publisher to speak.⁵⁶ His eloquence so impressed the gathering that he was invited to become a member of the group.

For the next four years (1841-45), Douglass was a platform speaker for Garrison in the abolitionist cause.⁵⁷ He lectured independently for freedom afterwards, and in 1851 broke with Garrison to join the Liberty Party, a body more desirous of immediate political action.⁵⁷ He had established his own newspaper, the North Star, in 1847, and in 1858 he also began the publication of a small magazine, the Douglass Monthly.⁵⁸ From 1869 to 1872 he edited in Washington a weekly magazine, the New National Era.⁵⁹ After freedom he held many important governmental posts---among them the post of minister to Haiti, United States marshal, and Recorder of Deeds for the District of Columbia.⁵⁹ Everywhere his fine prominent figure and eloquent voice won him friends. But Douglass was a fighter and counted his convictions dearer than the plaudits or approval of friends or the criticism of enemies. On one occasion he alienated a large group of Negro religionists by refusing to thank God for a

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 52.

⁵⁷Loggins, op. cit. p. 136.

⁵⁸Brawley, op. cit., p. 53.

⁵⁹Ibid., p. 54.

freedom "wrought out through our common humanity."⁵⁹

The literary productions of Frederick Douglass have never been completely collected, but it is certain that he was the author of a voluminous mass. Of these the most significant for our purposes are: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845), My Bondage and Freedom (1855), and Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (1881).

William Wells Brown.- Of Samuel Ringgold Ward⁶⁰ and William C. Nell⁶¹ much might be herein written, but we shall resist the temptation and hurry on to William Wells Brown, another Negro man of letters. Brown has been described as the most voluminous Negro writer of his day in the United States.⁶² His most noted works are in history and biography, but he wrote novels and drama as well. He was born a slave in Lexington, Kentucky (1815?), but escaped to Cincinnati in 1834 and later went to England. Among his most important prose works were The Narrative of William W. Brown (1847), The Black Man: His Antecedents, His Genius, And His Achievements (1863), The Rising Son (1874), a history; and in poetry, The Anti-Slavery Harp.⁶³

⁶⁰Loggins, op. cit., p. 173.

⁶¹Ibid., p. 177.

⁶²Brawley, op. cit., p. 59.

⁶³Ibid., pp. 60-62.

Booker T. Washington.- If Douglass was the Negro's greatest orator, then Booker T. Washington was surely the greatest educator of the race. He was born about 1858, in Franklin County, Virginia.⁶⁴ His early life was a struggle of hunger and labor and thrift; and it was on this pattern he worked his way through Hampton Institute to a career that has now become classic. In 1881, he organized at the little town of Tuskegee, Alabama, a small school of thirty pupils. The building was little more than a shanty, but the dream lived in the builder's soul. Today that school is the internationally famous Tuskegee Institute.⁶⁵

Washington was no less a speaker than Frederick Douglass. In the course of his career he delivered hundreds of addresses on distinguished occasions, and was in constant demand at colleges and universities and public meetings of every description. In 1896, Harvard University conferred upon him the degree of Master of Arts, and he received the degree of Doctor of Laws from Dartmouth in 1901.⁶⁶ He died in 1915.

In comparing the speaking talent of Washington and Douglass, Brawley has said:⁶⁷

⁶⁴Brawley, The Negro In Literature And Art, p. 59.

⁶⁵For the complete dramatic story of this venture, see Booker T. Washington, The Story Of My Life And Work, Chapters V to VII.

⁶⁶Brawley, op. cit., p. 60.

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 62, 63.

"The eloquence of Douglass differed from that of Washington as does the power of a gifted orator from the force of a finished speaker. The one was subjective; the other was objective. Douglass swayed his audiences, and even himself, by the sweep of his passion and rhetoric; Washington.....weighed every word, always keeping in mind the final impression to be made. Douglass was an idealist, impatient for the day of perfect fruition; Washington was an opportunist, making the most of each chance as it came.Both loved their people and each in his way worked as he could best see the light....."

Before we conclude this chapter of early Negro literature, we must consider two Negroes who were not Americans; and yet who contributed a spiritual enthusiasm to American Negro cultures. They are Toussaint L'Ouverture and Alexander Dumas. The first was born Francois Dominique Toussaint in 1743 at Haiti, of full-blood Negro parentage.⁶⁸ When in 1791, the blacks rose in rebellion against the injustices of the colonial white planters, Toussaint's extraordinary prowess as their leader caused the admiring French governor, Laveaux, to exclaim: "Mais cet homme fait l'ouverture partout";⁶⁹ and thus Toussaint gained his name. L'Ouverture's exploits became known to the workers for freedom in America; and the warrior was the subject of both literary and public praise. Neither Dumas in France⁷⁰ nor Alexander Pushkin in Russia⁷¹ were well known to

⁶⁸Brawley, The Negro Genius, p. 35.

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 36.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 37.

⁷¹Ibid., p. 39.

American Negroes of this period, but as Negroes they were later to wield contributory influence on race literature in this country. Perhaps no more apt illustration is at hand than that of Martin R. Delany,⁷² whose children bore the names of famous Negroes---among them, these two.

Discussion has been purposely omitted of such writers as Joseph S. Cotter, Sr., and James D. Corrothers in the period in which they began to write in order that their works might more properly enter for consideration in the contemporary body of Negro writers. From the standpoint of letters, all that which came after the Civil War and within the period of Dunbar are contemporary to him. These writers and their works form the nucleus for the discussion in the next chapter.

Summarizing this hereditary background for the influences which are found in Langston Hughes' poetry, we find:

(1) Hughes was greatly stirred by the historical past of his people: he speaks of their sorrow-songs, their slavery, and their noble accomplishments of freedom. He holds the same high yearning for liberty and equality that marked their writings, although it is sought by Hughes in a new quick pride of race and lineage. He differs from his literary predecessors in his appreciation of the present Negro, but like them he sees that the paths of

future progress lie along social and economic lines of freedom as well as political lines. In the most recent years Hughes has returned to school to fit himself with adequate training for leadership in such progress.

(2) Hughes is radical in his desire for freedom as were Frederick Douglass and David Walker considered radical in their times. But such radicalism is a compliment rather than a rebuke, for it evidences a healthy dissatisfaction with present intolerant injustices.

(3) Hughes is visionary, as Phillis Wheatley, Booker T. Washington, and George Moses Horton were before him visionary. His dream of the future is often drowned by the harsh clangorous disquiet of the present, but in the quiet lines Hughes finds time to build a dream of the tomorrow when the Negro will no longer take a back seat in American civic life.⁷² And in the meantime, the aching heart will wear a laughing mask while the body sits at the table and eats and grows strong.

Again, the study of Langston Hughes is made intelligible by a consideration of the people of his literary past. Hughes owes a direct debt to these people in blood-heritage and in heritage of thought. Although he is of a time and culture radically differing from theirs, it is their emotions

⁷²Hughes, The Weary Blues, Epilogue, p. 109.

and their aspirations so often trampled that find reflection in his "blues" and free-verse duplication of jazz themes. He is as proud of this past as he is conscious of it---and desires that his own work shall be an improvement in thought built upon and beyond the philosophy of the past.

There is still no more adequate method of measuring accomplishment than the time-honored procedure of comparing the individual work with that of others in the same field. Langston Hughes' suffers nothing by such a comparison: in fact, his work is not significant until it is so compared. In the present chapter we shall briefly consider the major poets of America's time and after, discuss the Dunbar tradition, discuss the new school of Negro poetry as typified by Collins, McKay, Brathwaite, Johnson, etc., and we shall discuss the place of Langston Hughes among these poets, new and old.

Some criticism may be justly directed against the viewpoint that a study of contemporary Negro poetry is a legitimate background standard against which to measure the accomplishment of a writer like Hughes. Obviously, neither literature nor any other field of American arts or sciences should be limited by the race or social position of the writer-creator. Hughes like Dunbar, belongs to the whole American people--more than that, he belongs to the entire literary world. Any lesser judgment invalidates the conception of poetic merit.

We cannot ignore, therefore, the writings of poets, classic and modern, who were not Negroes nor who were

CHAPTER II

CONTEMPORARY NEGRO WRITERS

Justifying The Chapter

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We cannot ignore, therefore, the writings of poets, classic and modern, who were not Negroes nor who were

concerned with the portrayal of Negro life. On the other hand, a work of this limited scope does not permit the detailed study of so vast a body of writers and literature. The only possible intermediate method is to abstract the standards which authoritative review has established as admissible criteria for the appraisal of poetry---and to apply these standards to the work of the particular author.

Yet we cannot deny that the particular impress of writers of the same period has a conditioning effect upon the literary productions of the individual author. Thus Wordsworth and Coleridge; Johnson and Goldsmith; Byron, Shelley, and Keats. The works of Chaucer do not live until they are compared with the writings of others of his day. The greatness of Shakespeare is conditioned by the literary environment in which he wrote. The study of Langston Hughes must therefore involve his contemporaries. And Hughes bears the indelible impress of his people.

Paul Laurence Dunbar.-- More than any other Negro, the writings of Paul Laurence Dunbar exercised a compelling influence over his contemporaries.. None other of his race has yet achieved the degree of acceptability which Dunbar's works attained. Negro dialect poetry was written before his time,¹ but only in Dunbar does it breathe the essential

¹James W. Johnson, Book of American Negro Poetry, p. xxxiii. (in his literary preface to the anthology.)

spirit of the Negro people. The genius of his art shines through the broken speech and identifies the author's true creative excellence. Yet Dunbar did not intend that his literary merit should rest upon his dialect poetry.² His true ambition was to create ranking American poetry that had no stamp of color. He did not fail.³ His standard - English verse is by no means inferior to the great bulk of American poetry. Impeccable in grammar and rhythm, some few of these are literal gems to be long remembered. And it was for these poems the poet's own hopes beat highest. He was proud, to be sure, of his dialect verse---but it was for the other his soul-fired imagination blazed. On one occasion he told a friend almost tearfully: "I've got to write dialect poetry: it's the only way I can get them to listen to me."⁴

In spite of Dunbar's concern for his poetry, it was through his dialect that his powers shone; and through them

²Ibid., p. xxiv.

³Examine, for instance these lines from Dunbar's "Ships That Pass In the Night."

"Out in the sky the great dark clouds are massing;
I look far out into the pregnant night,
Where I can hear a solemn booming gun
And catch the gleaming of a random light,
That tells me that the ship I seek is passing, passing.

My tearful eyes my soul's deep hurt are glassing;
For I would hail and check that ship of ships.
I stretch my hands imploring, cry aloud,
My voice falls dead a foot from mine own lips,
And but its ghost doth reach that vessel passing,
passing."

⁴J. W. Johnson, op. cit., p. xxxiv.

he most surely lives forever. No folk-poetry of any people is more tender, more picturesque, more rhythmic, lively and genuine than these, his "lyrics of lowly life." Drawn from the tears and laughter of the people he knew and loved so well, they have won the hearts of all Americans. White people read and laugh because they are amused; colored folk read and laugh because these poems strike a chord still vibrant in their lives.

Dunbar was born in Dayton, Ohio, June 27, 1872. His first book, "Oak and Ivy", (1893), was a thin collection of standard English verse showing the influence of James Whitcomb Riley.⁵ With the publication of his second book "Majors and Minors" and a favorable criticism by William Dean Howells, he became a famous man.⁶ He was the author of several prose works as well as his later much-beloved poetry. The best known of these are Lyrics of Lowly Life, Lyrics of the Hearthside, Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow, Folks From Dixie, (short stories) and The Uncalled and The Love of Landry (Novels)⁷

Probably the best standard English verse of Dunbar is typified by the following excerpts from his most-often

⁵Ibid., p. xxxiv.

⁶Countee Cullen, "Caroling Dusk", p. 1.

⁷Other Dunbar works and uncollected poems are to be found in Dodd & Mead's Complete Works of Paul Laurence Dunbar (1916).

praised work:

"Ere Sleep Comes Down To Soothe The Weary Eyes"⁸

Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes,
Which all the day with ceaseless care have sought
The magic gold which from the seeker flies;
Ere dreams put on the gown and cap of thought,
And make the waking world a world of lies,---
Of lies most palpable, uncouth, forlorn,
That say life's full of aches and tears and sighs,--
Oh, how with more than dreams the soul is torn,
Ere sleep comes down to soothe the weary eyes.

.

When sleep comes down to seal the weary eyes,
The last dear sleep whose soft embrace is balm,
And whom sad sorrow teaches us to prize
For kissing all our passions into calm,
Ah, then, no more we heed the sad world's cries,
Or seek to probe th' eternal mystery,
Or fret our souls at long-withheld replies,
At glooms through which our visions cannot see,
When sleep comes down to seal the weary eyes."

A fine opportunity to compare Dunbar's genius in handling a similar theme in dialect is found in these equally popular lines of his:

"A Death Song"⁹

"Lay me down beneaf de willers in de grass,
Whah de branch'll go a-singin' as it pass.
An' w'en I's a-layin' low,
I kin hyeah it as it go
Singin', 'Sleep, my honey, tek yo' res' at las'.

⁸Cullen, op. cit., pp. 2-4.

⁹White & Jackson, Poetry By American Negroes, p. 81. Of this poem the editors offer the following pertinent note:

"At the time of Dunbar's death, many persons were of the opinion that this poem was of very recent date. The truth is that it was written as far back as 1898, while the author was in Washington, and appeared in the Congregationalist in September or October of that year. These

Lay me nigh to whah hit meks a little pool,
An' de watah stan's so quiet lak an' cool,
 Whah de little birds in spring,
 Ust to come an' drink an' sing,
An' de chillun waded on dey way to school.

Let me settle w'en my shouldahs draps de load,
Nigh enough to hyeah de noises in de road;
 Fu' I t'ink de las' long res'
 Gwine to soothe my sperrit bes'
Ef I's layin' 'mong de t'ings I's allus knowed."

Dunbar loved best to portray the happy carefree Negro in overalls, at work, at play, at parties, and in love. But he also knew how to paint the sterner, bitter realities of the lives of these simple folk, as when he sings:¹⁰

"Oh dere's lots of keer an' trouble
In dis world to swallow down;...."

But his is not the insurgent causticity of McKay, nor the biting sarcasm of Langston Hughes. Dunbar's characters dance and struggle with the shadowy giants of joy and sorrow, quite apart from the baser realities of the white man's oppression. Save in the rare instances when Dunbar attacks in retrospect the now-dead institution of slavery as in "An Ante-Bellum Sermon", the deep hurt which must have attended the knowledge of his restricted opportunities as a Negro never surged into open print. It cannot be denied that this has been a factor in Dunbar's great

stanzas were printed in almost every newspaper in the country when the poet passed away, and the request embodied in the lines was followed as nearly as possible in the selection of a burial site."

¹⁰Ibid., p. 68, from Dunbar's "A Banjo Song".

acceptability with white readers. For the same reason, Dunbar was less popular with the new race writers who, while they confess his greatness, have no place for his "milk-and-water verse" where the fight for social justice begins.

Stemming from Dunbar there are two great schools of Negro poetry: one group burning with protests and fiery zeal against the many present-day racial injustices and social discriminations---the other believing just as earnestly that ~~its~~ mission is to write, not Negro poetry, but poetry of the whole America. One group seeks to win literary distinction regardless of color; the other fights for the social and political future of fourteen million Negroes. One refuses to be bound by the badge of color; the other refuses to admit that the bonds are there. Both groups are pioneers, working along different paths toward the same goal of social justice.

In The Dunbar Tradition

James Edwin Campbell.- James Edwin Campbell belongs to the group in the Dunbar tradition; most of his poems are in the familiar dialect which he wrote before Dunbar made it so popular. We know little of Campbell's early life. He was born in Pomeroy, Ohio, in the early sixties.¹¹ For

¹¹James W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 209.

several years he contributed to literary publications; he also published a volume of poems, Echoes From The Cabin And Elsewhere. Out of this group, the best known is "De Cunjah Man", a Negro folk-tale in dialect. Campbell died about 1902.¹²

The Joseph S. Cotters.- Although Joseph S. Cotter began to write before Dunbar did,¹³ he belongs with his son in the contemporary field. Again we have a poet in the "harmony tradition", rather than the virile fierceness of the other school. A prolific writer, Cotter composed dialect folk-tales in prose as well as in verse. One ambitious piece continued the school-book story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, and is called its 'Sequel'.

The son, Joseph S. Cotter, Jr., lived only the short span of twenty-three years;¹⁴ but in even that brief space of time he gave promise of the genius he was not to live to fulfill. His whole work consists of about twenty lyric poems and some plays,¹⁴ in a little volume called the Band of Gideon. They are strongly religious and full of quiet philosophy quite apart from race struggles, except for the low, small, plaintive cry of a noble soul locked

¹² Ibid., p. 209.

¹³ Joseph Seamon Cotter, Sr., was born at Bardstown, Kentucky, February 2, 1861. His son, Joseph S. Cotter, Jr., was born in Louisville in 1895. The father was still living at the date of publication of the cited source. (See 14.)

¹⁴ Kerlin, op. cit., p. 81.

in a breast of black. Death early turned the key of freedom: there is no color in the grave.

William Stanley Braithwaite.- Probably the most widely-read Negro poet immediately following Dunbar was William Stanley Braithwaite. Born in Boston just six years after his famous contemporary,¹⁵ Braithwaite boasts an education wrought from his own personal ambitions and the chance happenings of circumstance. A great admirer of Dunbar, Braithwaite nevertheless conscientiously abstained from the writing of dialect, a language which he believed to be the dying voice of an unhappy era. He turned rather to the measured stances of stately Elizabethan verse, collecting and editing several scholarly volumes on this and similar periods. A tireless worker, his yearly-collected publication of American magazine verse is an example of his outstanding contributions to his country's literature, regardless of color. He is the author of several books of his own; among which are: Lyrics of Life, The House of Falling Leaves, and The Poetic Year. Braithwaite's verse is singularly free of any hint of race. Many of his readers do not know that he is a Negro.

Contemporary Negro poets are too diverse to be grouped into schools.¹⁶ Roughly, for the sake of discussion

¹⁵ J. W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 209.

¹⁶ Sterling A. Brown, Negro Poetry and Drama, p. 79.

ease, I have divided them into two groups: the first, of those who seek to be ranked for their poetic excellence alone---the second, of those who direct their lines against the bars of color and race in their poems of protest. The trend of the former group has been toward "bookishness"; that is, a dogged imitation and expansion of old classical forms, with the result that Twentieth Century ideas are sometimes incongruously dressed in Victorian garb. But this is not always true.¹⁷ Many of these writers dropped the sagging props and launched courageously out with new poetic forms and concepts. We shall take a later look at these.

Group I

Among the writers which are to be included in this first class are these: Daniel Webster Davis (1862), William H. A. Moore (188?), George Marion McClellan (1860), George Reginald Margetson (1877), John Wesley Holloway (1865), Leslie Pinckney Hill (1880), R. Nathaniel Dett (1882), Ann Spencer (1882), Alex Rogers (1876), Alice Dunbar Nelson (1875), Charles Bentram Johnson (1880), Benjamin Brawley (1882), Mary Effie Lee Newsome (1885), Clarissa Scott Delany (1902?), Gwendolyn B. Bennett (1902?), Donald Jeffrey Hayes (1904), Lucy Ariel Williams (1905), Richard Bruce (1906), Eva A.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 80.

Jessye (1899), and J. Mord Allen (1875). Some of these will receive special attention in later paragraphs. There are others of too-recent birth, or of too-scanty production, to be recorded here.

Daniel Webster Davis.- Daniel Webster Davis, who until his death several years ago was the principal of the largest public school in Richmond,¹⁸ is remembered for his dialect poetry. Like Dunbar's it delineated the familiar Negro of the South in warmly rhythmic lines like these:¹⁹

"Larnin' is a blessed thing,
An' good cloze berry fin',
But I likes to see de cullud gal
Dat's been larnt how to 'ine;
Gimme de gal to wash an' scrub,
An' keep things white an' clean,
An' kin den go in de kitchin
An' cook de ham an' greens."

J. Mord Allen.- J. Mord Allen grew to manhood in Topeka, Kansas.²⁰ He learned to write with a theatrical company with which he travelled for some years. In 1906, he published "Rhymes, Tales and Rhymed Tales", a volume of dialect and standard-English poetry and prose. An accomplished and skilled writer, Allen gave full exercise to his prolific talent---some critics rate him with James Weldon Johnson.²¹ It is certainly true that in such

¹⁸J. W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 210.

¹⁹White & Jackson, op. cit., p. 102. From Davis' "Stickin' to De Hoe".

²⁰Ibid., p. 116.

²¹Ibid., p. 17.

moments as:

"Still comes the Perfect Thing to man
As came the olden gods, in dreams;
.
.
And shall we strive? The years to come,
The sunset of eternity,
Are given to the fairest god,
The God Of Things As They Should Be....."²²

his skill has earned undying fame for him. Again, he breathes through the comfortable medium of dialect:

"Jes er settin' by de fire;
Jes' er soaking up de heat;
Jes' er living life easy;
Jes' er restin' han's en feet;"²³

or dedicated to a more bitter task:

"What was the game we used to play?
Yes! Hide-and-peek. And at the base,
Who first must go and hide his face?
Remember---standing in a row---
'Eeny meeny miny mo'?

'Eeny meeny miny mo'.
How fare we children here below?
Our moon is far from treetop now,
And Heaven isn't up, somehow."

.

Alice Dunbar Nelson.-- Alice Dunbar Nelson, wife and widow of the most famous Negro poet, was not without considerable literary talent of her own. A teacher, she has published several volumes of commendable merit, among

²²From J. Mord Allen's "The Psalm of the Uplift".

²³From the same author's "Shine On, Mr. Sun".

which are: Violets and Other Tales, and The Dunbar Speaker, a collection of her husband's verses.

Other Women Poets.- Two other women poets stand out in this group: Ann Spencer and Eva A. Jessye. The latter was the first recorded Negro poet to be born in Kansas.²⁴ Mrs. Spencer's poetry reveals deep thought and a quiet appreciation of things, the untouched forces underlying human experiences. She has written these lines to Dunbar, which also aptly show her own poetic stance:

Dunbar²⁵

"Ah, how poets sing and die!
Make one song and Heaven takes it;
Have one heart and Beauty breaks it;
Chatterton, Shelley, Keats and I---
Ah, how poets sing and die!"

It is with regret that we turn away from a further consideration of the poets of this group, but the present emphasis is not on their writings. Donald Jeffrey Hayes' "Confession" is as thrilling a composition as any masterpiece---but the page is turned, and the "moving finger of fate having writ, moves on".

Group II

Among the poets of the second group are some of the most prominent and promising writers of the present era of Negro literature. Names such as: W. E. B. DuBois

²⁴Kerlin, op. cit., p. 274.

²⁵Cullen, Caroling Dusk, p. 50.

(1868), James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), Raymond G. Dandridge (1882), Fenton Johnson (1888), Claude McKay (1889), Jessie Fauset (188?), James D. Corrothers (1869), Jean Toomer (1894), Blanche Taylor Dickinson (1896), Frank Horne (1899), Lewis Alexander (1900), Sterling A. Brown (1901), Arna Bontemps (1903)?, Albert Rice (1903), Countee Cullen (1903), Waring Cuney (1906), Edward S. Silvera (1906), Helene Johnson (1907), Walter Everette Hawkins (1888?), Georgia Douglas Johnson (1886), Angelina Weld Grimke (1880), and Roscoe C. Jamison (1888-1918). Names that belong to our present generation. Names that loom large on modern literary fronts.

It is time again to sound a caution against attempting to pass judgment on writers who are still so near to us that we have not developed a perspective. Most of these men and women are still living and creating poetry. Most of them are still widely unread. They form the living background for this study of Langston Hughes. They are his true contemporaries in spirit and in times.

Alain Locke, in writing of Negro music, has said:²⁶

"Without doubt the Negro's chief native musical gift is his instinctive mastery of rhythm.....Many reasons have been given, but the most likely is the Negro's long and intimate contact with the original source of rhythm,----the dance."

If this is true of music, it is doubly true of the Negro's

²⁶Alain Locke, The Negro and His Music, p. 14.

poetry. Even where its authors were most untrained, as in the origin of the "sorrow-songs", the natural beauty of pure rhythm shone through the crudeness of rhetorical language.²⁷ It exists today in the syncopated jazz and "swing" of the nation's most popular musicians. It is still finding expression in the "blues" of Langston Hughes and the lyrics of his brothers. It lashes out in the unsuspected bitterness of McKay and Horne. It dances as of old with the songs of Georgia Douglas Johnson. It is on the lips and in the souls of a thousand dreaming youngsters not yet ready to sing.

James Weldon Johnson.- James Weldon Johnson was the dean of this school of writers. Until his tragic death two summers ago, he was secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; prior to that he was U. S. consul to Venezuela,²⁸ and held a similar portfolio to Nicaragua.²⁹ His lectures and writings embraced many fields of Negro culture and art. With his brother, J. Rosamund Johnson, he is the author of the "National Negro Anthem".³⁰ He is the author of several volumes of verse, biography, anthologies, and

²⁷ Talley, op. cit., (see introduction pp. vi-xi.)
See also James W. Johnson, op. cit., (pp. xvii, xix).

²⁸ Appointed 1906.

²⁹ Appointed 1909.

³⁰ "Lift Every Voice And Sing".

criticism. His most popular works are his creations anew in verse of Negro sermons.³¹

W. E. B. DuBois.— The oldest living author in this group is W. B. DuBois, most famous for his prose works, drama, novels and history. DuBois was born in Massachusetts in 1868. His first book was published as a doctor's thesis on the slave-trade.³² His most famous poetic creation is the semi-prose "Litany Of Atlanta", a powerful prayer of protest. He is at present editor of the Crisis, national Negro magazine.

James D. Corrothers.— James D. Corrothers strikes the keynote of the whole new movement in these magnificently compelling lines:³³

"To be a Negro in a day like this,
Demands forgiveness. Bruised with blow on blow,
Betrayed, like Him whose woe-dimmed eyes gave bliss,
Still must one succor those who brought one low,
To be a Negro in a day like this.

"To be a Negro in a day like this
Demands rare patience---patience that can wait
In utter darkness. 'Tis the path to miss,
And knock, unheeded at an iron gate,
To be a Negro in a day like this.

"To be a Negro in a day like this
Demands strange loyalty. We serve a flag
Which is to us white freedom's emphasis.
Ah! one must love when Truth and Justice lag,
To be a Negro in a day like this.

³¹ James Weldon Johnson's works include: Fifty Years and Other Poems, Autobiography of An Ex-Colored Man, God's Trombones, The Book of American Negro Poetry, The Book of American Negro Spirituals, Second Book of Negro Spirituals, and English Libretto of "Goyescas".

³² Cullen, op. cit., p. 25.

"To be a Negro in a day like this---
Alas! Lord God, what evil have we done?
Still shines the gate, all gold and amethyst,
But I pass by, the glorious goal unwon,
"Merely a Negro"---in a day like this!"

Angelina Weld Grimke was born in Boston, Massachusetts, February 27, 1880.³⁴ Her verse is best characterized by the sharply-drawn, finely-executed, polished and finished perfection of the lines. To her, the correct thought is the exact thought; and in her aspiring to capture it in print she has created masterpieces. It must have been a person of rare understanding who could write with such subdued passion as is found in "Grass Fingers" and "Hushed By The Hands Of Sleep". These poems know no race or color: they are ageless already. Her deeply-seeing soul is not unaware of the realities of life. "Tenebris" foreshadows the day of black reckoning with white:³⁵

"There is a tree, by day,
That, at night,
Has a shadow,
A hand huge and black,
With fingers long and black.
All through the dark,
Against the white man's house,
In the little wind,
The black hand plucks and plucks
At the bricks.
The bricks are the color of blood and very small.
Is it a black hand,
Or is it a shadow?"

³⁴Cullen, op. cit., p. 35. "Closed Gate of Justice".

³⁵Ibid., pp. 40, 41. p. 134.

Georgia Douglas Johnson.- Close to Angelina Grimke stands Georgia Douglas Johnson, neophyte of Braithwaite and DuBois.³⁶ Hers is a lighter touch, but no less clear and beautiful. Race is to her neither a curse nor a blessing: it is a harmonious part of a wholly unfathomable past, a badge of courage for the future. Among her better poems are a lyric, "I Want To Die While You Love Me" and "The Heart Of A Woman", a plaint.

Fenton Johnson.- Fenton Johnson's poetry breaks with the conventional forms of versè more sharply than any prior Negro poet. There is about him a blunt directness of purpose and sureness that frightens would-be admirers; but he is not all "bombast". Indeed, his conventional stanzas are as stately as the others are turbulent; however, the latter group is by far the better. Best known of either group is his "Children of the Sun".³⁷

Claude McKay.- Claude McKay has the reputation of being the most bitter of all these new poets. He bristles under the yoke of white oppression and will not yield. Strong and passionate and impressionable, his is the flaming spirit of those who will die, if need be, but:³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., p. 74.

³⁷ J. W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 117.

³³ From Corrothers' "At the Closed Gate of Justice".

³⁸ J. W. Johnson, op. cit., p. 134.

.....Let us nobly die,
So that our precious blood may not be shed
In vain;.....

and:

"Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,
Pressed to the wall, dying, but---fighting back!"

With the fierceness born of a sensitive soul rankling under
the white man's injustice, he asks:³⁹

"Think you I am not fiend and savage too?
Think you I could not arm me with a gun
And shoot down ten of you for every one
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?"

And again, in protest against hypocritical society which
pushes clean brown maidens to the scarlet houses of shame
and dark midnight streets:⁴⁰

"In Negro Harlem when the night lets fall
Its veil.....I see the shapes of girls who pass
Eager to heed desire's insistent call:"

McKay found instantaneous audience in America;⁴¹ but the
popularity of his protest poetry has dwindled somewhat
because race leaders are not altogether in accord with
his brusque directness. Like Hughes, McKay is accused of
an exaggerated portrayal of the darker side of Negro life,
---the criminal, prostitutes, and gamblers. His pictures
are real enough, they admit, but they are not universal.

³⁹"To The White Fiends", ibid., p. 135.

⁴⁰"Harlem Shadows", ibid., p. 137.

⁴¹McKay was born in Jamaica.

Some of this criticism is justified. But McKay is not all passion. He is a clear-eyed, vivid realist with a heart of steel and a vitriolic pen.

Other Protest-Writers.- Walter Everette Hawkins and Frank Horne are, besides McKay, the most bitter realists of these contemporaries of Langston Hughes. Hawkins is at his apex in the lynching scene of "A Festival in Christendom":⁴² and Horne is always powerfully bitter. Probably the most insurgent of his expressions finds voice in "Nigger, A Chant For Children", in which after reviewing several of the most trying humiliations of being a Negro, he portrays another maligned martyr:⁴³

Jesus....Jesus
Son of the Lord
--Spit in his face
--Nail him on a board
"Nigger....nigger....nigger...."

With hands made rough by his constant clashing with hypocrisy, Horne rips off the righteous mask of our culture in "Letters Found Near A Suicide".⁴⁴ He pictures a derelict lover, sick of living and love, sick of pretense and sham and vice and hatred. Before he drowns himself, he writes letters of denouement to those people who made up his social world---letters that ache with the agony of

⁴²Kerlin, op. cit., p. 234.

⁴³White & Jackson, op. cit., p. 121.

⁴⁴Cullen, op. cit., p. 114.

the writer, the futile bitterness of his soul. It is Horne's best long poem.

Horne never loses his bitterness. "On Seeing Brown Boys In A Catholic Church" is Horne's indictment of the secularity of religion:⁴⁵

"It is fitting that you be here
Little brown boys
With Christlike eyes
And curling hair.

Look you on yon crucifix
Where He hangs nailed and pierced
With head hung low
And eyes a'blind with blood that drips
From a thorny crown....
Look you well,
You shall know this thing.

(.....)

They will spit in your face
And laugh....
They will nail you up 'twixt thieves
And gamble for your little garments.

And in this you will exceed God
For on this earth
You shall know Hell---"

Lewis Alexander brings to Negro poetry the influence of his study of Japanese literature.⁴⁶ Proudly he revels in the dark beauty of his people, making no apology, seeing no difficulty that cannot be erased. Among his most popular poems are "Negro Woman"⁴⁶ and "Day and Night".⁴⁷ He has

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 122.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

published no books of his own.

Sterling A. Brown.- Sterling A. Brown was born in Washington, D. C., May 1, 1901. He was one of several Negro poets to win Phi Beta Kappa keys in college.⁴⁸ Of himself, Brown writes:⁴⁹

".....sought to convey the tragedy of the Southern Negro in poems like (.....) "Children of The Mississippi", "King Cotton", and "Sam Smiley", (.....) has made a fairly close study of folk-ways and folk-songs...."

He has published two volumes of verse: Children of The Mississippi, and No Hiding Place; also, a novel, Southern Road,⁵⁰. His latest Bronze Booklet, "Negro Poetry and Drama" is an authoritative voice in the field.

Countee Cullen.- Countee Cullen stands close to the top among Negro poets who have earned permanent popularity. A brilliant student as well as writer, Cullen was the winner of many nation-wide poetry contests in high school and college; and he published his first volume of poetry when he was only twenty-two.⁵¹ His writings show the wide range and serious nature of his studies. He was much impressed by the lyric power of Keats,⁵² and adapted his own verse with much skill into the mould, as witnessed in his "Ballad

⁴⁸ Others are Jessie Fauset and Countee Cullen.

⁴⁹ Sterling A. Brown, op. cit., pp. 76, 77.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 76.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 69. This book was entitled "Color" and according to Sterling A. Brown, is considered his best.

⁵² Ibid., p. 70.

Of The Brown Girl". Apart from his poetry, Cullen has rendered valuable service with his critical anthology of Negro poetry, Caroling Busk.

Cullen does not want to be known primarily as a Negro poet.⁵³ Like James Weldon Johnson, he is first an American and afterwards a Negro. He does not want his poetry to stand or fall on a racial basis. And he is right. But it is an ironic truth that Cullen writes best when he writes of his race.⁵⁴ Nor is this strange, either. Poetry, like other arts, springs out of the hearts and lives of the people who create it. Inevitably, the poet reaches his greatest heights when he deals with the background environment of life against which his shadows fall. And for Cullen, that background is inevitably "Negro".

It is not meant to imply that Cullen thought less of his Negro heritage. Dunbar did not want to be known for his dialect; and he wept that the nation turned to praise the "jingle in a broken tongue".⁵⁵ What Cullen wants, and what he deserves, is a place among the chief American poets that knows no stain of color. It has been the secret desire of every other Negro poet of America since the beginning.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 71.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

⁵⁵ Cullen, op. cit., p. 1.

Cullen says of himself that his chief problem has been that of "reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination".⁵⁶ If so, this pagan element is not present in his poetry. For Cullen is deeply religious, always reverent, and close to the real tradition. His most serious outbreaks are against the bars of color; and it is then that he is most effective. Besides the books previously mentioned, Cullen has published several other volumes among which are: Copper Sun, The Medea and Other Poems, and The Black Christ.

Cullen gained early notice with his answer to Alan Seeger's pessimistic "I Have A Rendezvous With Death", his own poem declaring that he had a "rendezvous with Life". He won added repute with his quotable four-line portraiture of a certain white lady:⁵⁷

"She even thinks that up in heaven
Her class lies late and snores,
While poor black cherubs rise at seven
To do celestial chores."

Cullen's longest work is the title poem of his volume, "The Black Christ". It is among the most successful of his pieces, portraying a martyred twentieth century Christ in the personality of a lynched Negro. Written for the most part in the lyric style which made him famous, the work contains some of the most memorable lines from Cullen's pen.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 179.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 187.

Cullen exulted to sing of his brown compatriots. Many of his poems carry the word "brown" in their titles. In "Near-White" Cullen sums up all the pent-up emotion which must have been a part of his own life:⁵⁸

"Ambiguous of race they stand,
By one disowned, scorned of another,
Not knowing where to stretch a hand,
And cry, 'My sister' or 'My brother'".

Countee Cullen has been accepted by most peoples of both races, but the problem of his brown brothers who are "neither Negro nor white" still finds echo in our own experiences. In "Two Who Crossed A Line", Cullen paints a picture of light-skinned Negroes "passing" for white--- a picture which finds its actual counterpart more often than we know or think.

Cullen's mastery of the epigram,---the apt remark--- this is one of the chief charms of his poetry. His books are full of it: you cannot go through "Color" without marvelling at it, rejoicing with it, and sucking in the breath in sheer ecstatic surprise that so much is there. This is the quality, more than any other, which will make Cullen live---not as a Negro poet, but as a singer of all times and of all peoples.

Summary

It is well to re-evaluate at the conclusion of this rapid survey of Negro writers, the probable position of

⁵⁸ Cullen is, in physical appearance, a very light-brown-skin man. See Embree, Brown America, on this topic.

Langston Hughes among them. Hughes is not as radical as some, yet he is far from accepting a conservative viewpoint. Most certainly he would be included in Group II. Like Dunbar, Hughes is able to make effective use of dialect,--- but with greater restraint and more bitterness of feeling. Like McKay, Hughes' voice is raised in protest against wholesale discriminatory practices---but it is the cutting lash of satire rather than the angry vindictiveness of Horne and Hawkins. Like Cullen, Hughes sees the heartbreak of the mulatto, that in-between race which is neither white nor black. Like only himself, Hughes departs from conventional patterns of both poetry and thought to vivify Gigolos and tramps as he has sometimes found them.

Hughes is not the greatest poet among present Negro writers, but he is a vital force among them and will exercise great influence on later Negro poets who arise. Probably his greatest effect will be in the contained music of his lines and language, his magnificent free-verse, and his attitude of honest-appreciation-without-apology of Negroes of the masses, the workingmen, the "rounder".

Hughes is solidly entrenched in the ranks of modern writers, both in poetic form and in his philosophy of portraying the common element as it is without retouching. He was one of the first Negroes to use free-verse effectively and ranks in this field as a contemporary of Vachel Lindsay,

Carl Sandburg, Walt Whitman, and other great free-verse writers.

What most distinctly marks Langston Hughes as one apart from this general field is his energetic avowal of his purpose to write poetry about people who are unmistakably Negro in origin, outlook, and opportunity. Because he does not care whether he is known primarily as a Negro poet or as an American poet, Hughes is free to write with that earnest searching quality that is so essentially a part of his works. And because of that same careless freedom, he is ironically destined to gain the attention and recognition by the whole nation as an American poet of importance to the entire field of literature.

His mother was a school teacher, his father a lawyer. During most of his childhood he lived with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas, where he went to school. This old lady, Mary Elizabeth Witherson Leary Langston, was the last surviving member of John Brown's Raid, her first husband having been one of the five colored men to die so gloriously at Harpers Ferry. She had then married Charles Langston, brother of the Negro Senator, John W. Langston, and in the seventies they came to Kansas where

¹ Countee Cullen, *Caroling Dawn*, p. 144.

² Loggins, op. cit., pp. 259, 255-56, 293-94, 325, 329, 462, 440, 447. Of John W. Langston, Loggins wrote:

"Among the Negro leaders who became prominent in national politics after the Civil War, John Mercer Langston is the one about whom we know the most. From The Virginia Plantation to The National Capital, (1894), a volume running well beyond five hundred pages, is a detailed account of his remarkable career. Whether Langston wrote it himself is a question. Six printed speeches (.....) prove that he would have written it in even a better style than that in which it was produced. The copyright was secured in his

CHAPTER III

HUGHES' TIE TO THE PAST

Orientation

It has already been stated that Langston Hughes is, more than others, the product of his people. The preceding chapters have been based upon this premise. In this chapter, the influences and characteristics of the past which have played a part in the building of the poet will be brought before the reader.

History And Early Life

Langston Hughes was born February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. An autobiographical sketch of him appears in Cullen's anthology:¹

"His mother was a school teacher, his father a lawyer. During most of his childhood he lived with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas, where he went to school. This old lady, Mary Simpson Patterson Leary Langston, was the last surviving widow of John Brown's Raid, her first husband having been one of the five colored men to die so gloriously at Harper's Ferry. She had then married Charles Langston, brother of the Negro Senator, John M. Langston², and in the seventies they came to Kansas where

¹Countee Cullen, Caroling Dusk, p. 144.

²Loggins, op. cit., pp. 259, 265-66, 293-94, 396, 399, 462, 440, 447. Of John M. Langston, Loggins wrote:

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the mother of the poet was born.

"When Langston Hughes was thirteen this grandmother died, and the boy went to live with his mother in Lincoln, Illinois. A year later they moved to Cleveland where he attended and was graduated from the Central High School. Then followed fifteen months in Mexico where his father had been located for some years. Here the young man learned Spanish, taught English and attended bull-fights. Here, too, he wrote "The Negro Speaks of Rivers", his

own name, and the book has been generally accepted as a pure biography. But the account is told in the third person, and is not written with that now natural modesty which one expects in the self-written memoir. In whatever way it came into being, it is an illuminating work, bearing such a relation to the political problems of the Negro as Payne's Recollections Of Seventy Years bears to the educational and religious problems. It traces Langston's life from the year of his birth, 1829, until after he had made his first speech at the national Capitol in 1891 as a Representative in Congress from Virginia. We see him as a boy in Ohio, as a student at Oberlin, as one of the first Negro lawyers in the West, as an educator at Howard University and Virginia Institute, as Minister to Haiti, and finally as a Congressman. As in Payne's Recollections, there is much in the book which is of value to these students of the social history of the Negro. For example, a chapter on the place of the Negro in the early history of Oberlin College provides information which is perhaps nowhere else obtainable. Moreover, there are many pages in From the Virginia Plantation to the National Capitol which afford interesting reading.

"Langston no doubt lost the sympathy of many members of his race by giving up his work as an educator in order to become a nondescript member of Congress long after Reconstruction had proved that the Negro's work as a leader in national politics was for years to come to be negligible. A more notable Negro educator of the period, Booker T. Washington, adhered to a social doctrine which was the direct opposite to that of Langston. Washington's prime message to his race was, "Begin at the bottom." Because of the program of industrial education to which he devoted his life, it has been claimed that his (Washington's) theories involved too great a compromise with white prejudice to admit of the highest cultural progress of the colored race. Whether we defend him or oppose him, we must agree that he (Washington) is today the most respected and admired of all the American Negroes of the past, not even excepting Frederick Douglass."

first poem to be published in the magazines.

"In 1921, he went to New York for a year at Columbia University. A break with his father followed and he secured work for the summer on a truck farm on Staten Island. Then for almost two years he travelled as a member of the crew of freight steamers voyaging to the West Coast of Africa and Northern Europe. In February, 1924, he went to Paris. When he arrived he had seven dollars in his pockets; so he soon found a job as doorman in a Montmartre cabaret. Later he became second cook and pancake maker at the Grand Duc, a Negro night club where Buddy Gilmore sometimes played and Florence sang. That summer he went to Italy, and September found him stranded in Genoa. He worked his way back to New York on a tramp steamer, painting and scrubbing each deck.

"A year in Washington followed, where he worked in the office of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, and later as busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel. There Vachel Lindsay read some of his poems and he was discovered by the newspapers. Then his first book, The Weary Blues, appeared. He has now resumed his formal education at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, which he says is a place of beauty and the ideal college for a poet. His second book of poems, "Fine Clothes For The Jew", is a study in racial rhythms."

In 1923, Robert T. Kerlin,³ in speaking of Langston Hughes, described him as a young Columbia student, writer of some of the most symmetrical and effective free-verse poems that had come to his attention. He lauds Hughes as a new and promising poet, and quotes from his "The Negro" from the January Crisis for 1922. Kerlin foresaw for the young poet a brilliant creative future.

In 1924, Langston Hughes gained the mentioned notice of W. E. B. DuBois, in his history-novel, "The Gift Of Black Folk," as one of a group of young Negro writers who had

³Robert T. Kerlin, Negro Poets And Their Poems, pp. 199-201.

⁴W. E. B. DuBois, The Gift Of Black Folk, p. 304.

done creditable work in verse.

In 1928, after the publication of his first volume of poetry, Langston Hughes received wider attention.

William Ellsworth has included him in his anthology of new poets.⁵ The following is the introductory passage on Hughes:

"Another young Negro poet is Langston Hughes, now twenty-six years old. He has had the most versatile life that can be imagined. Before he was twelve years old he had lived in Missouri, in the City of Mexico, in Kansas, Colorado, South Carolina, Indiana, and New York State. He was class-poet in a high school in Cleveland, he was in Columbia University for a while, he has been a farmer, a sailor, a delivery-boy, a doorman. He knows the Canary Islea and the West Coast of Africa, he describes the long shining days at sea, the masts rocking against the stars at night, the desolation of the Congo, the millions of whiskey bottles buried in the sea along the West Coast, the daily fights on the ship, officers, sailors, everybody drunk; the frightened missionary passengers, the George, the Kentucky colored boy, dancing and singing the Blues on the after-deck under the stars."

Under the heading, "New Realists", Benjamin Brawley in 1929 described Langston Hughes as belonging to the school of Vachel Lindsay,⁷ producing savage, highly-colored rhythms, redolent with dancing, throbbing, pulse-stirring music comparable to that found in "The Congo".

Four poems by Langston Hughes appear in the anthology of Negro American Literature by V. F. Calverton, (1929), along with a short biographical sketch.⁸

⁵ W. W. Ellsworth, Readings From The New Poets, pp. 41-44.

⁶ Ibid., p. 45.

⁷ B. G. Brawley, The Negro In Literature And Art, p. 123.

⁸ V. F. Calverton, Anthology of American Negro Literature.

In the early part of 1931, Langston Hughes was given citation by Vernon Loggins as an authority on what Negro folk-lore means to the American writer of today,--- including him in a group which also mentioned James Weldon Johnson, DuBose Heyward, and Marc Connelly.⁹ Also in 1931, Hughes was listed by Otelia Cromwell as one of the five prominent Negro poets of the century.¹⁰ A short biographical sketch accompanies numerous included poems.

In 1936, Ina Corrine Brown points triumphantly to Langston Hughes as one who "no longer feels that he must write with one eye on the white gallery, that he must beg favors, put the race's best foot forward, or assume an air of sophistication".¹¹ She goes on to describe his unyielding defiance in lines such as:¹²

"O World,
No longer shall you say
With arrogant eyes and tall white head:
'You are my servant, Nigger---
I, the free!"
That day is past---"

Langston Hughes came in for a much wider attention in Brawley's second handling of Negro literature,¹³ in 1937. In the introduction to that work he quotes Hughes as saying:¹⁴

⁹Loggins, The Negro Author, p. 360.

¹⁰Cromwell, Turner & Dykes, Readings From Negro Authors, pp. 4, 17-20, 314, 320, 323, 367, 373, 377.

¹¹Ina C. Brown, The Story of The American Negro, pp. 150-151, 153, 165.

"We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual selves without fear or shame. If the 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 them, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

Brawley does not entirely approve of Langston Hughes' position. In the effort to eradicate bourgeoisie smug hypocrisy, Brawley charges, Hughes and his contemporaries of spirit have unduly lauded the low-down, indecent element in Negro life---the bawdy gambler, prostitute and ne'er-do-wells. This valid criticism will be discussed later.

Brawley has devoted five pages of this same volume to a critical discussion of Hughes. In them he characterizes the poet as being in single-minded rebellion against conventional patterns, living his own life as he sees best. An abbreviated life-history is followed by an excellent critical review of Mr. Hughes' works.

Also in 1937, Sterling A. Brown wrote a splendid review of Langston Hughes' accomplishment in two Bronze Booklets released through "The Associates In Negro Folk-Education" from Washington, D. C.¹⁵ In the booklet dealing

¹² The Crisis, March, 1933, Quoted by Miss Brown from Langston Hughes' "A New Song".

¹³ B. G. Brawley, The Negro Genius, pp. 13-4.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 224, 246, 251, 280.

¹⁵ Sterling A. Brown, The Negro In American Fiction, pp. 155, 185-86.

with poetry, Brown compares Hughes with Countee Cullen:¹⁶

"Langston Hughes is like Cullen in productivity and wide popularity.(.....) Where Cullen is traditional in form, Hughes is experimental.(.....) Cullen is subjective, whereas Hughes is frequently objective and dramatic, concerned with the Negro masses. Cullen has most recently translated the Medea of Euripides; Hughes' most recent work is communist propoganda. Both poets have strains of pessimism, at times met stoically, but Hughes has now turned to a cause that he believes will usher in social justice."¹⁷

Probably the most recent book offering a critical evaluation of Langston Hughes is Van Deusen's The Black Man In White America, appearing in 1938.¹⁸ Although Van Deusen's discussion lacks the detail of earlier criticisms, it is valuable for the perspective viewpoint it embodies. Langston Hughes' "Goodbye Christ" is cited as indication of the Negro's growing distrust of the exploitation of religion by whites who seek to keep the black man down.¹⁹ The superb mastery of Negro folk-lore by Langston Hughes is paid tribute in the following quoted paragraph:²⁰

"No other poet has done so much to portray the common people of his race as has Langston Hughes. His people are not the happy Negroes Dunbar knew, but the drab and helpless dwellers of city tenements, struggling in the face of hard

¹⁶ Sterling A. Brown, Negro Poetry And Drama, p. 71.

¹⁷ i. e., the Communist cause.

¹⁸ John G. Van Deusen, The Black Man In White America, pp. 207, 254, 257, 261, 263, 264.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 207.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 255.

luck; sometimes cleaning "Brass Spitoons", often hungry and "Broke". The migrant, plodding along the dusty roads with all his possessions tied up in a bundle, the light-brown girl dancing in a cabaret, the "big-timer" on his "road to hell", Gin Mary standing before the judge without a friend, the "ruined girl" gazing hopelessly at the dark river, the pretty prostitute who gets higher pay than the honest girls in the white man's kitchen, the elevator boy with his hopeless outlook, the bastard black boy calling "I am your son, white man"---these are the types which stride through his stanzas. Any one of them might have uttered the line which Hughes put into the mouth of his own mother:

"An' life for me ain't been no crystal stair."
Hughes has borrowed from blues songs, from spirituals, and jazz, and mingled them all together producing a "free-verse" of his own. Is it poetry? The critics sometimes wonder."

And so, while Van Deusen "sometimes wonders", we turn back to the youthful brown-skin poet himself, of whom Carl Van Vechten said in his introduction to Hughes' first book:²¹

"I cannot recall the name of any other person whatever who, at the age of twenty-three, has enjoyed so picturesque and rambling an existence as Langston Hughes.....a complete account of his disorderly and delightfully fantastic career would make a fascinating picturesque romance....."

Hughes' experiences have indeed been colorful and varied. Van Vechten tells of them gloriously, vividly:²²

".....the sun in Dakar!.....little black girls of Burutu!.....blue, blue bay of Loanda.....(diving) under the seven-ton mahogany logs floating and bobbing at the ship's side.....vile houses of rotting women at Lagos.....desolation of the Congo.....whiskey bottles.....daily fights.....dancing and singing the Blues..."

Back in the states, Hughes sailed again---to Holland and

²¹ Langston Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 9.

²² Ibid., p. 10.

Paris. You must read Van Vechten's account to get the true flavor; read Langston Hughes' poetry to get the stark naked truth.

Philosophical History

What has been thus far shown is Hughes' personal past, his birth, his life-history as child and man, his triumphant recognition as outstanding poet. But Langston Hughes has another, a thus far, unwritten past. It belongs to Africa and to the native jungle, to the slave-ships and the sorrow-songs of the "Middle Passage", to the slave block and the plantation-whip, to booming guns and the agony of a divided nation. Hidden within that past is the memory of savage tom-toms beating the blood-dance before blazing tribal fires; there is also the poignant memory of white lust in dark slave-cabins....and the slow-dropping tears of the black women afterwards. All this is in the past of Langston Hughes. And more.

There runs through his veins the blood of John M. Langston, noble Negro senator from Virginia; he must have thrilled in childhood to the tales of his grandmother of how her husband had been one of those five Negro men, the first, to die so gloriously at Harper's Ferry with John Brown. He must have burned with indignation through Reconstruction Days with his uncle-senator. And the outrages committed in the name of white supremacy and Southern honor! Surely it was then that his truculent

spirit was born, his uncompromising rejection of the hypocritical sham of the bourgeoisie class, the high thin wail and the muted moan of his "Weary Blues".

Hughes' poetry clearly shows the rhythmic impulses found in Vachel Lindsay's better works. But there is more than imitation in Hughes' skill. Like Lindsay, he has gone to the original source of rhythm in America---the Negro masses. Like Lindsay, he has stood listening to the great heart of jazz, of spirituals and blues,---his mind burning and his fingers itching to translate its dark, quick-throbbing soul. But more than Lindsay, he has come away understanding and tenderly sympathetic. And bitter. Bitter because there was pain that did not need to be. Bitter because of shadowy Negro hopes fading to a faltering death outside the white daylight. Bitter, because it is his heritage, his past, his present,---and his future.

Hughes and Dunbar are not so far apart. Dunbar wanted to be a great American poet; but the public paid tribute to only his broken dialect. Hughes says: let the public be damned---and it brings its choicest bouquets to lie at his disdainful feet.

Probably the best description of the elements in Langston Hughes which are the heritage of the past is given by the author himself in the opening "Proem" of his first book:²³

²³ Langston Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 19.

book:23

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:

Caesar told me to keep his door-steps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:

Under my hands the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:

All the way from Africa to Georgia.
I carried my sorrow songs.
I made rag-time.

I've been a victim:

The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me now in Texas.

I am a Negro:

Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

In addition to the complete acknowledgment of the poet to the past, the foregoing poem is significant for another reason. It is the first bold avowal of race-consciousness made by a Negro poet.²⁴ It is the keynote of Hughes' conception of his poetic purpose: to sing the lives of his people as they are.

²³Langston Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 19.

²⁴This statement may arouse criticism. Countee Cullen, Lewis Alexander, Gwendolyn Bennett, Dunbar and others have all written eulogies in praise of black folk. It was Waring Cuney who wrote of a brown girl:²⁵

She does not know
Her beauty
She thinks her brown body
Has no glory.

Again and again, Langston Hughes goes back to the African jungle to find an analogy for the people of his poems. For "Midnight Man",²⁶ and the "nude young dancer"²⁷ and "Susanna Jones",²⁸ Langston Hughes has made African settings for their colorful American activities. And there are many other characters like them in Hughes.

Hughes again strums the music of the past in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers"²⁹. He dwells upon the experiences of the race from sun-filled days on the Euphrates and the Congo to the dry-baked pyramids of Egypt and the dark brown deltas of the Mississippi River. Every sorrow experienced by these, his people, is an intimate grief to Langston Hughes also. His soul has indeed grown deep---like the rivers of memory.

If she could dance
Naked,
Under palm trees
And see her image in the river
She would know...."

But Cuney is protesting, even in his praise, against the situation which keeps the brown girl from catching an image of her beauty. Dunbar consoles and covers his people with kindness. Cullen takes up an occasional cudgel in the Negro's defense; and Horne, McKay and other "protest-writers" are rabid crusaders against social injustice for the Negro. But only Hughes is able to paint him as he is, without apology, and with a minimum of passion.

²⁵Cullen, Caroling Dusk., p. 212. "No Images" by Waring Cuney.

²⁶Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 30.

²⁷Ibid., p. 33.

²⁸Ibid., p. 66.

²⁹Ibid., P. 51.

Sometimes, Hughes speaks of a wider experience than that of the race alone. Thus, in "Jazzonia",³⁰ a gorgeous brown dancing girl with bold eyes is compared to the charms of Eve and Cleopatra over men's souls. Thus also, in "Harlem Night Club."³¹ But these occasions are infrequent; and almost invariably the person or event of the past to which reference is made belongs as much to the Negro as to any other race.

Hughes is absorbedly familiar with the superstitions and beliefs of his people. These beliefs are handed down from parent to child from generation to generation. They are not phenomena peculiar to the Negro only---every race and every people has a similar heritage from its racial past. Hughes is familiar with that of the Negro; and puts it into his portraits of his people. This knowledge shows to better advantage, perhaps, in Hughes' prose---as in the portrayal of young Sandy in "Not Without Laughter"³² It shows however in all Hughes "blues" works and in some of his standard-English "Waterfront" poems, as in "Sea Calm"³³

No extended description of Langston Hughes has yet been written which did not quote, directly or otherwise, the poet's conception of the Negro's natural sphere: "Our land", says Langston Hughes.³⁴

³⁰Ibid., p. 25

³¹Ibid., p. 32

³²Hughes, "Not Without Laughter".

³³Hughes, "The Weary Blues", p 75.

"We should have a land of sun,
Of gorgeous sun,....."

But this land is not an objective reality for Hughes. It is the land of memory out of which his people sprang. It is the land of perfect bliss, of dreams of love and joy and wine and song. It is a golden-sunshine land, an Africa as carried in the twilight of the mind's memory. Not the prostrated Africa of today for us---No! We belong to America now! This is "our land". This is our future, the tomorrow which is to Langston Hughes "bright like a flame before us"³⁵ Our blood lies spilled in the Southern soil; and the industries of the North have grown fat on our labor. Yesterday lies behind us; part of the night, a dark whisper of sorrow lost upon the blowing breeze. Today this is our country, our homeland, of which Langston Hughes may sing:³⁶

"I, too, sing America.

I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,.....

(.....)

Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes....."

Probably the most popular of Hughes' poems are those written in the "blues" style. This poetic form is a heritage

³⁴ Ibid., p. 99.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 108.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 109.

of the past, too. It precedes even W. C. Handy, creator of the world-famous "St. Louis Blues". The early elements of blues are found in the ancient Negro Folk Rhymes as collected by Thomas W. Talley.³⁷ Sadness, disillusionment, despair and consolation are the most frequent emotions displayed in these songs. It is in this that they are most nearly akin to Negro spirituals. Sometimes excessive joy finds registry through these songs. Rage and the desire for revenge are more often expressed.

Langston Hughes is the leading exponent of the blues form today. By close and careful observation he has come to know and feel the emotions of the people to whom blues are the most natural means of expression. One of the consequences of this intimacy has been to enable Hughes to expand, re-interpret the old forms so that they are now something essentially different---a sounding board of many emotions and at the same time a classic portrait of the people who sing them, (the blues).

Much of Hughes' work is done in free-verse style. This is a form which has experienced its widest popularity in the twentieth century, and in which Hughes was a pioneering Negro poet. Special effectiveness is gained by Hughes in the use of the form; in fact, one of his earliest critics took notice of him for that reason only.³⁸ Hughes is not

³⁷ T. W. Talley, Negro Folk Rhymes, Wise and Otherwise.

³⁸ Robert T. Kerlin, Negro Poets And Their Poems, pp. 199-201.

alone in this field: Walt Whitman and Carl Sandburg are past masters of the art.

Hughes seldom makes use of the old accepted standard forms of poetry, but when he does, the form is usually the rhyming quatrain. Less infrequently he makes use of the free-verse stream-of-consciousness technique, as in "Railroad Avenue"³⁹ and "Brass Spitoons"⁴⁰. Always, only the essentials are pointed out---much more is suggested than is actually said. This brief "postscripture" technique is part of the modern revolt against lengthy poems, a revolt that finds Hughes in the forefront of the parade.

Hughes has not been a prolific writer. Many of the poems of his first book are reprinted as parts of later books. His prose bulks larger than his poetry, though the latter is probably the more important. The most outstanding quality of Hughes' verse is its living music; second, the stark reality of his portrayals. He is dedicated to the past and to the present of the Negro---and is the first Negro poet to make a bold venture in this direction. He has written a play, Milatto, which enjoyed a considerable run on Broadway, but which does not measure up to the high standards set by his verse. Probably his finest prose work is his collection of short stories under the title, The

³⁹ Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 27.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

Ways of White Folks.⁴¹ He has also wistfully embodied the same spirit in a novel. His poetry sporadically appears in national magazines.

More than others, Langston Hughes is the product of his people. His philosophy of the heritage of the past finds expression in lines like the following:⁴²

"The night is beautiful,
So the faces of my people.

The stars are beautiful,
So the eyes of my people.

Beautiful, also, is the sun.
Beautiful, also, are the souls of my people.

⁴¹ Hughes, The Ways of White Folks, see Bibliography.

⁴² -----, The Weary Blues, p. 58.

The first eight and the last nine poems in this book are written after the manner of Negro folk-songs known as blues. The blues, unlike the spirituals, have a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted. The mood of the blues is almost always sad, but when they are sung, people laugh.

The most famous example of Langston Hughes in this style

Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 58.

CHAPTER IV

THE POETIC ACCOMPLISHMENT OF LANGSTON HUGHES

Langston Hughes has been named as one of the first five of modern Negro poets. He has been pointed out as a distinctive artist, a painter with a penchant for strong reality. He has been called bitter by many; and called a satirist by many others. He is new to the field of Negro poets, being neither a Dunbar of inoffensive dialect nor a Claude McKay shouting vituperative condemnation of his people's wrongs. Wherein does Langston Hughes earn his place as a poet?

Hughes' greatest accomplishment lies in his adaptation of the "blues" form, through an extraordinary sense of musical rhythm. He superbly expresses the emotion of the people about whom he wrote. The poet has made the following comment on blues:¹

"The first eight and the last nine poems in this book are written after the manner of Negro folk-songs known as Blues. The Blues, unlike the Spirituals, have a strict poetic pattern: one long line repeated and a third line to rhyme with the first two. Sometimes the second line in repetition is slightly changed and sometimes, but very seldom, it is omitted. The mood of the Blues is almost always despondency, but when they are sung, people laugh."

The most famous creation of Langston Hughes in this style

¹Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. xiii.

is the title poem of his first book, The Weary Blues.

Blues

"The Weary Blues" is not in its essence a true "blues" form, except that it incorporates within itself bits of the melody from which it takes its name:²

"I got the Weary Blues
And I can't be satisfied.
Got the Weary Blues
And can't be satisfied---
I ain't happy no mo'
And I wish that I had died."

Most often these melodies are sung by a single vocalist to the accompaniment thumping of a guitar or banjo. Thus is Jimboy portrayed in Hughes' later novel of Negro life.³ More recently, the piano and saxophone have come to be popular instrumental companions of the moan. Today, the most popular blues-singers are women with contralto voices. Almost invariably, the theme of such songs is despair as felt by the underprivileged Negro group. Most often, the ballad is in plain harsh language. The expressed thought is frequently epigrammatic, as in "Gypsy Man":⁴

"Love, Oh, love is
Such a strange disease.
Love, Oh, love is
Such a strange disease.
When it hurts yo' heart you
Sho can't find no ease."

²Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 23.

³-----, Not Without Laughter, see Bibliography.

⁴-----, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 22.

To one who is unfamiliar with "blues" as they are sung, much of the poetic grace and all the musical rhythm is lost. Nearly all "blues" follow one or two identical tune-patterns; although individual singers often apply varying emphases and interpretations to the original. The subject matter of Blues has already been discussed. Despite their commonplace origin, Blues appeal to nearly all peoples because the emotions they express are universal:⁵

"I'm goin' down to de river
An' I ain't goin' there to swim.
Goin' down to de river,
Ain't goin' there to swim.
Ma true love's left me, an'
I'm goin' there to think about him.

Love is like whiskey,
Love is like red, red wine.
Love is like whiskey,
O, like sweet red wine.
If you wants to be happy
You got to love all de time.

I'm goin' up in a tower
Tall as a tree is tall.
Say up in a tower
Tall as a tree is tall.
Gonna think about ma man an'
Let ma fool-self fall.

Langston Hughes is a master of the blues form. Because he understands and knows the lives of these people, his songs are genuine and spontaneous.

Some attention should be drawn to the fact that most blues are in dialect. As employed by Hughes, dialect is a shifting medium of speech, depending upon the people and

⁵ Ibid., p. 81.

the circumstances of expression. In no instance solely does Hughes use the complete dialect of Dunbar; yet for his purposes his own method is just as effective. Hughes also makes extensive use of dialect in his free-verse poems. Probably the secret of his notable success in partial-dialect is that the language he uses is always the natural expression-customs of the people he portrays. That is a criterion of all good poetry.

Free Verse

Although it has received less public attention, Hughes does a far superior job in his free-verse poetry. By far the majority of his poems fall under this classification. Sometimes, Langston Hughes mixes an occasional rhyme with his free-verse; sometimes he produces a "stream-of-consciousness" effect as in "Railroad Avenue". More often he is soberly direct: making his poetry say and mean just what the situation demands.

It is a significant truth that Hughes is nearly always reflective or philosophical in his free-verse poems. The irregular cadences seem better to fit the changing processes of the thinking mind than the natural rhythms of his people. Rich imagery and careful objective analysis add to the effective charm of lines such as found in "To A Little Lover Lass, Dead".⁶

⁶Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 31.

"She
Who searched for lovers
In the night
Has gone the quiet way
Into the still
Dark land of death
Beyond the rim of day.

Now like a little lonely waif
She walks
An endless street
And gives her kiss to nothingness,
Would God his lips were sweet."

The foregoing example demonstrates many of the finest qualities of Hughes' free-verse. There is the familiar subject---this time, a "woman of the streets"---whom tragedy has stalked. There is descriptive force: her after-existence is portrayed in terms of her bodily experiences, the only type of extensions human beings can make in subjective thought. There is the unusual image called up in the concluding stanza, and there is the active philosophic touch in the final sentence. Sometimes the philosophy seems bitter, as in "Young Prostitute".⁷

"Her dark brown face
Is like a withered flower
On a broken stem.
Those kind come cheap in Harlem
So they say.

But one is never sure whether the bitterness is resident in the poem or springs from the shocked reaction for the reader at the faithfully-drawn picture.

If free-verse is Langston Hughes' medium of greatest

⁷ Ibid., p. 34.

triumph, it also affords his weaker moments. Hughes begins his "Lenox Avenue: Midnight"⁸ with a characteristically startling theme:

"The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.
The gods are laughing at us.

And then he sloppily lapses into a weaker sentimental strain quite foreign to the daring quality of the opening:

The broken heart of love,
The weary, weary heart of pain,---
Overtones,
Undertones,
To the rumble of street cars,
To the swish of rain.

The faint hint of rhythm and the inadvertent rhyme at the end perceptibly weaken the masculine dare-devil strength that the beginning promises. Fortunately, Hughes made few such slips as these.

Another type of criticism of Hughes' free versé stems from the inconstant hesitancy of theme-development in "As I Grew Older", a protest against the growing realization of racial discrimination and prejudice.⁹ Unless repetition has a dramatic or poetic value, it adds nothing to a poem. As in music, variations of melody (in this instance, thought patterns) should be a deliberate touch calculated to lend beauty or give emphasis to the piece. The following extraction illustrates the fault:

⁸Ibid., p. 39.

⁹Ibid., p. 55.

"And then the wall rose,
Rose slowly,
Slowly,
Between me and my dream.
Rose slowly, slowly,
Dimming,
Hiding,
The light of my dream.
Rose until it touched the sky---
The wall."

There is no lack of strength in the original idea. But the development of the idea is hampered by a lack of directness. These faults stand out when compared with an adjoining poem which exhibits Langston Hughes' integral skill and magnificent descriptive power at its apex:¹⁰

"The lazy, laughing South
With blood on its mouth,
Beautiful, like a woman,
Seductive as a dark-eyed whore,
Passionate, cruel,
Honey-lipped, syphilitic---
That is the South.

There is no indication here of lack of direction. Langston Hughes says what he means---and says it with vivid competency, as when he draws the picture of:

"The child-minded South
Scratching in the dead fire's ashes
For a Negro's bones."

Hughes is a master of unusual pictorial power. Literature holds few examples of so significant, though harsh, description as is found in "Carribbean Sunset"¹¹

"God having a hemorrhage,
Blood coughed across the sky,
Staining the dark sea red,
That is sunset in the Carribbean."

¹⁰Ibid., p. 54.

One of the chief features of free verse is the advantage of facility in epigrammatic expression. Hughes makes happy use of this adaptability in "Suicide's Note".¹²

"The calm,
Cool face of the river
Asked me for a kiss.

Despite himself, Hughes exhibits a strain of sentimentalism breaking through at unexpected times. Sentimentalism is not to be mistaken for softness, however. The quality which Hughes' sentimentality reflects is more nearly akin to the dramatic impulse in description and interpretation. This adds to, rather than subtracts from, the effectiveness of the language. A splendid example is provided in "Sick Room".¹²

"How quiet
It is in this sick room
Where on the bed
A silent woman lies between two lovers---
Life and Death,
And all three covered with a sheet of pain.

The final line in this poem is not simply description:--- it is emotional evaluation, it is the cryptic remark. And it sets the other lines apart, giving them individuality and character. It is not softness, but it is sentiment.

Descriptive Power.--- Many of Hughes' free verse efforts are simple descriptions---as an artist would paint a picture of sheer mountain beauty---but there is sometimes resident

¹¹Ibid., p. 76.

¹²Ibid., p. 87.

within them imputable qualities of passion or bitterness, just as the onlooker on nature sees purpose---malignant or benign---in the innumerable phenomena of the universe. There is no evidence that the author did or did not intend that the pertinent interpretation be drawn; but a review of Hughes' outspoken opinions convinces that he was aware that the judgment was inherent in the lines when he constructed them. Poems of this type include "Soledad", "To The Dark Mercedes of EL PALACIO de AMOR", "Mexican Market Woman", "After Many Springs", "Young Bride", "The Dream-Keeper", and a dedicatory poem, "To F. S."

Dunbar Tradition.- The nearest approach Hughes makes to Dunbar is found in "Mother to Son", a kindly reminiscent old piece full of motherly concern and traditional Negro optimism. It is ironical that this most radical departure from Hughes' usual style should be among the poet's most popular and familiar verse. And yet, this poem is not too much different, either---for it exhibits Hughes' amazingly accurate ability to translate in terms of native speech the eloquent experiences of his people. "Mother to Son" is milder in temper than some other admonitory works of Hughes; and perhaps this quality gives it greater acceptability. Whatever the cause of its popularity, "Mother to Son" is highly deserving of esteem, and is likely to outlive its

¹³Ibid., p. 88.

more startling contemporaries.

In all Hughes' poetry there is no other work falling quite within the class of "Railroad Avenue". Written in the "Stream-of-consciousness" technique, it represents probably the most bitter-by-implication piece of the poet. The poem is more than a protest against race: it is protest against life as well. And it constitutes one of the surest first indications of Hughes' veering from conventional paths---, but it is more exciting for that fact. The easy toleration of Hughes' earlier poems is missing here---but there is nor raillery or shouting against Fate. There is something much more terrible: a quiet grim realization of the inexorable trap these people (and all peoples) live within. The entire poem is reproduced hereinafter:¹⁴

"Dusk dark
On Railroad Avenue.
Lights in the fish joints,
Lights in the pool rooms.
A box-car some train
Has forgotten
In the middle of the
Block.
A player piano,
A victrola.
942
Was the number.
A boy
Lounging on a corner.
A passing girl
With purple powdered skin.
Laughter
Suddenly
Like a taut drum.
Laughter
Suddenly
Neither truth nor lie.

¹⁴Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 27.

Hardening the dusk dark evening.
Laughter
Shaking the lights in the fish joints,
Rolling white balls in the pool rooms,
And leaving untouched the box-car
Some train has forgotten.

Again, the frightening innuendos of interpretation may be claimed to reside in the reader rather than in the poetry; but it seems obvious here that much more is intended than a description of a night-scene. Anew a note of hardness and sadness seems evident in the poet. Life is a box-car left stranded in the middle of the unfathomable universe. It was Thomas Hardy who struck a similar pessimistic note:

Has some Vast Imbecility,
Mighty to build and blend,
But impotent to tend,---
Framed us in jest and left us now to hazardry?

Hughes does not say that this is the meaning to be extracted from the poem. That would not be great art.

One of the most often quoted free-verse poems in similar vein is "Brass Spitoons". Some writers think this poem is emblematic of Hughes' adventurous outlook gained from his multiple travel experiences. Like "Railroad Avenue", it is in the "stream-of-consciousness technique, although it is much more subjective than the other. "Brass Spitoons" tells the story of a young Negro man with the onerous task of cleaning hotel spitoons and trying to salvage a satisfaction out of life in his own crudely-conceived way. A philosophic conflict much like that found in "Railroad Avenue" is handled by Hughes in lighter vein: the young man

finds a rationalization for the mix-up of babies, gin, church, and easy women, in a resigned pride that he keeps his spitoons shining clean of the slime which each day renews his labor.

In free-verse that approaches the continuity of prose paragraphs, Langston Hughes tells the tragic story of "Ruby Brown", young Negro maid whose thwarted ambitions lead her to become the prostitute of white men. Because Hughes does not throw a cloak of shameful hypocrisy around his characters, the pseudo-respectable ways of some white-folks stands the more clearly revealed. Moralists may protest that a choice of a life of sin is always a personal issue: Hughes intends to show the mandatory influences of circumstances---and because he is complete in his portrayals, he sees that:¹⁵

.....the white men
(.....)
Habitues of the high shuttered houses,
Pay more money to her now
Than they ever did before,
When she worked in their kitchens.

Religious Poetry.- The exact reason why may be a matter for conjecture; but Hughes has more difficulty in convincing when his topic subjects are religious. His most successful effort in this line is entitled "Fire", a chant much like the traditional Negro jump-songs. It may have no significance to the present discussion, but it

¹⁵Ibid., p. 30.

will be noted that the poem is built around a lack of faith and does not attempt the high exuberance of most Ballads of faith. Because of its spectacular qualities the poem is quoted here in its entirety.¹⁶

"Fire,
Fire, Lord!
Fire gonna burn ma soul.

I ain't been good,
I ain't been clean,
I been stinkin', low-down, mean.

Fire,
Fire, Lord!
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

Tell me, brother,
Do you believe
If you wanta go to heaben
Got to moan an' grieve?

Fire,
Fire, Lord!
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

I been stealin',
Been telling lies,
Had more women
Than Pharoah had wives.

Fire,
Fire, Lord!
Fire gonna burn ma soul!
I means Fire, Lord!
Fire gonna burn ma soul!

One might say that the poem is almost irreligious---so pronounced is the skepticism expressed in the fourth stanza. But to one familiar with the fervor of the old-time Negro church, this is a faithful presentation of a normal religious expression.¹⁷

¹⁶Ibid., p. 50.

Probably the one other instance where Hughes achieves a truly masterful and authentic religious scene is found in "Feet of Jesus":¹⁸

"At de feet o' Jesus,
Sorrow like a sea.
Lordy, let yo' mercy
Come driftin' down on me.

At de feet of Jesus,
At yo' feet I stand
O, ma little Jesus,
Please reach out yo' hand."¹⁹

Beale Street Love.— Returning to the depiction of Beale Street Love, Hughes is once again superbly in the element of his best poetic effort. He is able to project his understanding into the lines of the sophisticated peasants, producing a philosophic genuineness not likely to be surpassed in the same field. Consider, for example, the title poem:²⁰

"Love
Is a brown man's fist
With hard knuckles
Crushing the lips,
Blackening the eyes,---
Hit me again,
Says Clorinda.

¹⁷Elmer T. Clark, The Negro And His Religion, pp. 43, 44. Quoting from those pages:

"The colored man is naturally religious and readily responds to Christian effort. His strong emotional temperament, however, frequently causes his worship to degenerate into a frenzied orgy of shouting, moaning, and bodily gyrations. In his ignorance he is often made the slave of gross superstitions, and it is by no means unusual to find marked survivals of voodooism."

¹⁸Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 47.

¹⁹An inferior revised version of the poem found in the Dream-Keeper, p. 51.

Probably the most-voiced criticism of Hughes by his own people is that his characterizations are always one-sidedly from the lowest Negro elements. There is some validity to this argument.

Hughes does indeed repeatedly portray the Negro of whiskey-bouts, chippie-chasing, loud-mouthed, swearing, fighting, shouting nights and labor-filled days. Those types march across his pages illuminated against the naked light of Hughes' deep-seeing, and stripped of the soft sentimentality so often wrapped around the Negro's vices. Though these portrayals may injure the feelings of Negro readers and amuse white ones, still Hughes may take some satisfaction that his crusading purpose is accomplished.

One of Hughes most sensational poems is in mixed free-verse and rhyme. It is called "Mulatto", and it tells the oft-recurring story of white men lusting for Negro women. Reading critics most often think of this poem when pouring libations on Hughes' protesting bitterness. Probably in no other poem is Hughes more severely critical of white hypocriay: white men who publicly condemn and persecute the women that they slip around at night to sleep with:²¹

"I am your son, white man!

Georgia dusk

And the turpentine woods.

One of the pillars of the temple fell.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 68.

You are my son!
Like hell!

The moon over the turpentine woods.
The Southern night
Full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.

Juicy bodies
Of nigger wenches
Blue black
Against black fences.

O, you little bastard boy,
What's a body but a toy?

The scent of pine-wood stings the soft night air.

What's the body of your mother?

Silver moonlight everywhere.

What's the body of your mother?

Sharp pine scent in the evening air.

A nigger night,
A nigger joy,
A little yellow
Bastard boy.

Naw, you ain't my brother.

Niggers ain't my brother.

Not ever.

Niggers ain't my brother.

The Southern night is full of stars,
Great big yellow stars.

O, sweet as earth,
Dusk dark bodies
Give sweet birth

To little yellow bastard boys.

Git on back there in the night,
You ain't white.

The bright stars scatter everywhere.

Pine wood scent in the evening air.

A nigger night,
A nigger joy.

I am your son, white man!

A little yellow
Bastard boy.

Proof of Hughes' increasing bitterness becomes more readily

²¹Ibid., p. 71.

apparent in the foregoing poem than in any previous work. Additional evidence toward the same conclusion may be found in "Magnolia Flowers"²² and "Red Silk Stockings".²³ At the same time Hughes moves closer in sympathy to the plight of his people. Because the tendency is to gloss over the faults of the folks we love, Langston Hughes may lose something in vividness and piquancy.

Rhymed Poetry

Thus far, little direct reference has been made to rhymed poetry, although Hughes makes nearly as extensive use of this standard poetic device as he does of free-verse. The natural music of his art finds enhancement in the lilting rhythms that this medium makes possible. So adroitly does Hughes combine words and emphases that their singing melody seems to leap audibly from the printed line. "Negro Dancers" illustrates this point:²⁴

"Me an' ma baby's got
Two mo' ways,
Two mo' ways to do de Charleston!
Da, da,
Da, da, da!
Two mo' ways to do de Charleston!"

By varying the line-length and shortening the intervals between emphases, Hughes achieves this high-stepping ecstasy

²² Ibid., p. 70.

²³ Ibid., p. 73.

²⁴ Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 26.

in "To Midnight Nan at Leroy's":²⁵

"Strut and wiggle,
Shameless gal.
Wouldn't no good fellow
Be your pal.

Hear dat music....
Jungle night.
Hear dat music....
And the moon was white.

Sing yo' blues song,
Pretty baby.
You want lovin'
And you don't mean maybe.

Jungle lover....
Night black boy....
Two against the moon
And the moon was joy.

Strut and wiggle,
Shameless Nan.
Wouldn't no good fellow
Be your man.

No little part of Hughes' effectiveness lies in the euphonic qualities of the words he selects. In the preceding example, words such as "strut", "wiggle", "dat", "baby", etc., carry connotations of high contributive worth to the poem.

Sometimes, Hughes resorts to more overt techniques to produce rhythmic effects, as in "Harlem Night Club", the jazz band's playing is orthographically represented by gradations from small to capital letters as in a blaring effect:²⁶

"Jazz-band, jazz-band,
Play, play, PLAY!"

²⁵ Ibid., p. 30.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

One of the more pleasant rhythms which Hughes constructed, "Song For A Banjo Dance" gains charm in swift-flowing lines repeated with but slight deviations and varied with picturesquely short dancing lines between. The tragic element is suppressed to a minimum, as suits the rapid tempo of the theme, to produce a poem as lively as its title.

One of the most impressive standard-English rhymed verses Hughes has done apart and separate from race-themes, is found in his early "Winter Moon":²⁷

"How thin and sharp is the moon tonight!
How thin and sharp and ghostly white
Is the curved slim crook of the moon tonight!"

Surprise, as embodied in the summarizing completeness of the final rhyming line, makes the already-uniquely depicted theme even more effective. It is a public loss that Hughes did not attempt more variations along the same line.

"Sea Calm" employs a rhyming technique which other twentieth-century writers have also used to advantage.²⁸ Six lines which present two essential thoughts, and which seem to be free-verse at first glance, break down under closer scrutiny into two rhyming phrases coincident with the previously-observed thoughts. The artistic deception is helped by the judicious integrity of each individual line:

²⁷ Ibid., p. 44.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 86.

Sea Calm

How still,
How strangely still
The water is today.
It is not good
For water
To be so still that way.

A similar device is used less advantageously in "Sea Charm"²⁹ an obviously closely-related poem,---and with some greater success in "Poem"³⁰, a dream of the future.

Hughes high lyric ability finds expression in no finer stanzas than "Song For A Dark Girl":³¹

"Way Down South In Dixie
(Break the heart of me)
They hung my black young lover
To a cross-roads tree.

Way Down South In Dixie
(Bruised body high in air)
I asked the white Lord Jesus
What was the use of prayer.

Way Down South In Dixie
(Break the heart of me)
Love is a naked shadow
On a gnarled and naked tree."

An almost unnoticed jibe at the sunny South of Dixie song and ballad is given voice in the capitalized take-off on the famous "Dixieland" piece. Hughes achieves another high point in lyric tragedy in the final stanza of "Black Gal".³²

²⁹Ibid., p. 80.

³⁰Ibid., p. 108.

³¹Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 75.

³²Ibid., p. 66.

of his "Minstrel Man" ³³ employs again the effective hidden-rhyme technique of "Sea Calm" and "Sea Charm". In this instance, however, the stanza is an alternating four-line rhyming piece which subjectively divides an a, b, a, b, rhyme scheme to appear a,--, b,--, a,--, b,-- (the dashes representing broken line-patterns). Again, the harmony of the division is assured by the natural completeness of each divided line.

The two books of Langston Hughes, The Weary Blues, and Fine Clothes To The Jew, which make up the bulk of the poet's great work, have been the basis of discussion in this chapter. The Weary Blues is an early volume and shows at times the still-developing hand of the author. Fine Clothes To The Jew is more mature, bitter, and full of poetic excellences. Rather than break the discussion down into artificially divided parts, the method of this chapter has been to follow through each type of poetry from one book to the other, pointing out the gradual development.

In summary, Hughes' poetic accomplishment seems to rest upon his popular "blues", but I have tried to show that his real achievement is in the field of free verse. His most successful subject is race, and satire is his best style. Second in importance is the lyric quality of his rhymed verse; again most successful when his subject is race. He is particularly skilled in the vivid depiction

³³Hughes, The Dream-Keeper, p. 38.

of human character as it is, and uses as an aid the "natural language" of the people of his poems. This may be dialect, or it may be many of the variations from the standard English.

Hughes is less successful in the handling of religious themes, although there are notable exceptions. He seems to grow more bitterly intense from his early poems; and his novel shows his satiric tendencies developed to a high point. One valid criticism of Hughes seems to be that he portrays only the lower Negro element in its moments of greatest depravity; and there seems to be some justice to the complaint. But Hughes is proud of his people as he is conscious of their defects. His attitude may be summed up in his "Laughs"³⁴, a description of Negroes as he knows them:

Dream singers,
Story tellers,
Dancers,
Loud laughs in the hands of Fate.

³⁴Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 77.

CHAPTER V

LANGSTON HUGHES AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Social Position of the Negro

There is a reported story that a celebrated white poet in reviewing the works of Negro writers admitted that here and there a name stood out---Dunbar, McKay, W. E. B. DuBois---but, turning to a literary friend, he protested: "But they are all so radical." Whereupon the friend, with the wisdom born of many years, replied: "Truly sir, it is impossible to be a Negro and not a radical at the same time."

While this statement is by no means to be allowed to stand uncontested, there is much of truth in the outspoken view. Negroes enjoy the least of social benefits and suffer most from whatever deficiencies are visited upon the nation as a whole. Negroes are denied en masse even the common privileges of good health and wholesome living in many instances; and their lack of political rights is a notorious American custom. Even in his most humble social aspirations the Negro is hampered, restricted and prohibited from certain publicly-accepted benefits for no other reason than the color of his skin. He may not live in the upper-class neighborhoods, no matter how much money or culture he has. The Negro may not sit with whites in theatres, nor eat with them in cafes, nor live with them in hotels, nor play with them in public parks and playgrounds, nor learn with them

in schools, nor worship with them in churches, nor fight with them in the army and navy, nor suffer with them in hospitals, nor even lie dead with them in graveyards. Is it any wonder that the Negro should emphasize social justice.

Langston Hughes stands in the forefront along with the race leaders who seek social justice. His poetry bristles with that unspoken need; his prose, novels, plays, and short stories drive home the point time after time with a whisperingly bitter obligato running thread-thin through every page and paragraph. Hughes is not a rapid advocate of open rebellion; yet he has been numbered among those who believe in Communist ideals. He has lost status and reputation because of his firm beliefs; and latterly, he has all but completely lost a voice among his own countrymen.

Justification of the Chapter

Before further study of Langston Hughes' social outlook, it may be well to bring out the pertinence of the study to his poetic accomplishment. Poetry is more than a literary creation: it is a social contribution springing from and adhering to the lives of the people who give it birth. It has for its purpose more than a simple vicarious enjoyment: its aim is to instruct, praise, flatter, memorialize, describe, criticize, approve, reject, deliberate, propound, influence, avert, amuse, enrage, resist, encourage, condemn,

and perpetuate the ideals and ideas which surround the peoples of the community, state, and world. Many a writer has had social aims which did not find expression in his writings; some few others have found it advisable to conceal their real beliefs for fear of an oppressive public opinion. But the great majority of writers accurately reflect in their writings the aims and beliefs they most earnestly desire and advocate. Langston Hughes is a leader among this latter group. His most important ideal is social justice for his people.

In his early writings Hughes did not exhibit a social purpose equal to his later tendencies. He was merely proud of his people---of their vivid colorful lives and emotions, of their naturalness in joy, in work, in sorrow, and even in their sins. Because his habit is to see and portray honestly every detail of the lives of these people, Hughes found himself putting in the disappointment, squalor, misery and heartaches which came of an outside volition and which drove these simple folk to despair, to drink, to diseased vices and death. With an almost imperceptible change, Hughes became more than photographer, more than retouching artist: he became a champion of a down-trodden people. It must be a bitter realization that this same staunch defense of his people has led Hughes to a position where he has lost the ear and even the sympathy of more of them than he ever gained by spreading their vices before the public gaze.

W. E. B. DuBois has written the creed of social justice to which Langston Hughes would most probably subscribe, in its forward-looking features at least:¹

"I believe in God, who made of one blood all nations that on earth do dwell. I believe that all men, black and brown and white, are brothers, varying through time and opportunity, in form and fitness and feature, but differing in no essential particular, and alike in soul and the possibility of infinite development.

"Especially do I believe in the Negro Race: in the beauty of genius, the sweetness of its soul, and its strength in that meekness which shall yet inherit this turbulent earth.

"I believe in Pride of race and lineage and self: in pride of lineage so great as to despise no man's father; in pride of race so chivalrous as neither to offer bastardy to the weak nor beg wedlock of the strong, knowing that men may be brothers in Christ, even though they be not brothers-in-law.

"I believe in Service---humble, reverent service, from the blackening of boots to the whitening of souls; for Work is Heaven, Idleness Hell, and Wage is the 'Well done!' of the Master, who summoned all them that labor and are heavy laden, making no distinction between the black sweating cotton-hands of Georgia and the first families of Virginia, since all distinction not based on deed is devilish and not divine.

"I believe in the Devil and his angels, who wantonly work to narrow the opportunity of struggling human beings, especially if they be black; who spit in the faces of the fallen, strike them that cannot strike again, believe the worst and work to prove it, hating the image which their Maker stamped upon a brother's soul."

Langston Hughes would probably have little patience with the puritannical concept of labor as expressed in the Creed, but it serves without alteration in most other particulars.

Hughes primary conception of social evil is that hypocrisy which puts artificial monetary values, (and social and political values too) upon underprivileged human beings. Thus, in "Young Prostitute",² he attacks the social inadequacy

¹W. E. B. DuBois, Darkwater, p. 3. from the "Credo".

²Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 34.

which forces women to sell their bodies nightly for a few pennies for bread and liquor to make them forget. An economic trap closes on these young girls, blasting their flower of youth with the virus of disease, sorrow, pestilence and poverty---and finally Death encloses them with his rough embrace of pity. In "Cross"³, Hughes presents the problem of the illegitimate child of a white man and colored woman:

"My old man's a white old man
And my old mother's black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.

If ever I cursed my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I'm sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.

My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I'm gonna die,
Being neither white nor black.

Quite apart from the hypocritical social condemnation of a mixed union, Hughes has here assailed both white and Negro partiality against persons differing from themselves in personal appearance and heredity. The reprobate old white gatherer of femine charm has his mis-alliance and goes back to his sedate white institutions to live and die in honor and respect: the black old mother continues to suffer the scorn and disdainful injustice of the whites without making provisions for the successful entry of her son into either white or Negro social groups. The final realization that neither parent was quite free to accept the proper responsibilities of parenthood tempers the mulatto's censure of

of both parents, and at the same time redirects a searching blast at the larger social institutions which (1) bound the white father to deny and disown his Negro son, and (2) forced the Negro mother to bring jeopardy into the boy's life along with poverty and the shame of unacceptability into either social group. It is not necessary to depend upon conjecture for these conclusions, for Hughes has written a powerful short story dealing with the same theme.⁴

"The Jester" deals with a social error which not specifically race alone: the happy carefree disposition with which the Negro has been nationally characterized, is in reality but the mask wide-grinning of sorrow, his misery and secret tears. Because he is denied entry into other fields of endeavor, the Negro must make a spectacle of himself as dancer, juggler, jester, clown, fool, for the pleasure of arrogancy's darlings. But this is an early poem and the crusading spirit of Hughes still slumbers. It slumbers on in "The South"⁵ and in "As I Grew Older",⁶ two poems of mild protest which are less understandable because of the calm acceptance of the vividly portrayed

³ Ibid., p. 52.

⁴ Hughes, The Ways Of White Folks, p. 200. "Father To Son".

⁵ Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 54.

⁶ Ibid., p. 55.

injustices they embody. In both poems Hughes pictures himself as a child eager to be loved and appreciated for his worth; then, rejected and rebuffed, he puzzlingly queries a solution in patience and humble meekness. This is not to be true of Hughes' later portrayals. He is to flail violently against the bars which form the cage of his "circus of civilization".⁷ He is to grow impatient of his back-door seat in the kitchen of America's omnigenous blessings---a seat where he may "sing America if he wills", but no white man will listen to his voice. In poetry, prose and drama he is to lash out with subtle invective against that injustice with such cutting bitterness as to arouse the grudging praise of those it excoriates.

A critical review of Langston Hughes' poetry in the Independent, quoted on the fly leaf of Hughes' second book,⁹ sums up Hughes' social position thus:

"Dim racial consciousness of Africa, the sharp memory of revolt against the scheme of things today---the delirious 'escape' from life provided by Harlem, by music, by syncopation and blues, by dancing, by raw drink and wild love---all these elements are woven through his poems.... He has the fine qualities of force, passion, directness, and sensitive perception."

There is an implied criticism in Hughes' description of social maladjustment, as in the casual love and midnight "whoopie" of background environment in many of his poems.

⁷ Ibid., p. 100.

⁸ Ibid., p. 109.

⁹ Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew.

But it is doubtful if the poet meant more than to bring out the characteristics of these people as illuminated against the screen of their actual living conditions. Hughes is no long-nosed, shifty-eyed reformer; on the contrary he seems to derive a wholesome zest from living dangerously as his adventurous carriage of his life attests. But he does demand a man's right to choose his own liabilities, and to triumph when by strength and wisdom he has conquered.

Langston Hughes touches lightly on the operation of moral codes as expressed in legal statute and common law. In this he treats his characters with the most human naturalness: they regard such laws with subordinate contempt until such time as by default of prudence and caution the individual loses his initiative to the machine of public justice---then, the offender resignedly submits himself to whatever fate his incautiousness has brought. A typical example is the "Ballad of Gin Mary", a liquor-ridden female who says of herself:¹⁰

"Seems like bad licker,
Judge, won't let me be...."

And with a slightly different emphasis in the song on the "Death of Do Dirty".¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 35.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 36.

"...They called him Do Dirty
Cause he was black
An' had cut his gal
An' shot a man in de back.

Ma friend o' mine.

But when I was hungry,
Had nothing to eat
He brought me corn bread
An' a stew of meat.

Good friend o' mine.

An' when de cops got me
An' put me in jail
If Dirty had de money
He'd go ma bail.

O, ma friend o' mine.

That night he got kilt
I was standin' in de street.
Somebody comes by
An' says yo' boy is gettin' beat.

Ma friend o' mine.

But when I got there
An' seen de ambulance
A guy was sayin'
He ain't got a chance.

Best friend o' mine.

An' de ones that kilt him,---
Damn their souls,---
I'm gonna fill 'em up full o'
Bullet holes.

Ma friend o' mine."

Hughes, like most Negroes, is probably well aware of the hostile program of persecution adopted toward persons of color by the police in many metropolitan centers. In consequence, the attitude of these people toward the machinations of law is one of distrust, abhorrence, and

resentment. This is more clearly brought out in Hughes' prose than in his verse. An interpretable hint in the same vein is found in the third quoted stanza of the preceding poem.

"Evil is its own reward", has been the assertion of many a writer before Hughes; and the apparent corollary, "there is no reward for good deeds other than the deed itself". The importance of this enunciated principle reaveals itself in Hughes' portrayal of social evil and social justice. In "Prayer"¹², Hughes questions in his most sincere manner:

"I ask you this:
Which way to go?
I ask you this:
Which sin to bear?
Which crown to put
Upon my hair?"

Social Discrimination

Most whites are not aware of the deep social clefts among Negroes which sometimes exist between lighter and darker persons. Conscious most of their mutual rejection from the Caucasian group, many hundreds of thousands of near-whites and half-whites are today classified as Negroes, and live with brown, tan, and darker peoples---united through their common oppression. Wherever that social oppression is lifted or relaxed, these people of variant colors become conscious of their differences---and, patterning their

¹²Ibid., p. 48.

actions in this respect (as in many others) after the whites, both Negro groups ascribe to themselves superior virtues and advanced social prestige. The effect of such a schism is wide-spread social strife among lighter and darker Negroes. It is important to remember, however, that the more severe avenues of discrimination are closed to these competing groups by the dominant whites, who are still exercising prohibitive social repression over both groups.

Langston Hughes has caught this element of social strife among Negroes on both sides of the picture. In "Black Gal", he depicts the emotional disaster occasioned by a yellow girl competing with a darker girl for the love of the brown-skin Albert. The "Black Gal" complains:¹³

"I's always been a workin' girl,
I treated Albert fine.
Ain't cut him wid no razor,
Ain't never been unkind.

Yet it seems like always
Men takes all they can from me
Then they goes an' finds a yaller gal
An' lets me be."

Langston Hughes' casual treatment of this theme is hardly more accentuated than in "Evil Woman"¹⁴

"I can't have no woman's
Got such low-down ways,
Cause a blue-gummed woman¹⁵
Ain't de style now days."

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁵ Among Negroes, many exceptionally black persons are familiarly referred to as "evil". This is an example of

But in prose Hughes is more specific, as in "A Good Job Gone" when he makes Mr. Lloyd's Negro boy say of his boss's colored mistress:¹⁶

"She wasn't a bit hinky¹⁷ like so many folks when they're light-complexioned and up in the money."

Again, in "Passing", Hughes powerfully presents the problem of color as a social problem among Negroes as well as whites. Jack, a near-white son of a Negro mother and a white father, "passes" for white---and secretively writes to his mother:¹⁸

"But I don't mind being "white", Ma, and it was mighty generous of you to urge me to go ahead and make use of my light skin and good hair. It got me this job, Ma, where I still get \$65 a week in spite of the depression. And I'm in line for promotion to the chief office secretary, if Mr. Weeks goes to Washington. When I look at the colored boy porter who sweeps out the office, I think that's what I might be doing if I wasn't light-skinned enough to get by. No matter how smart that boy'd get to be, they wouldn't hire him for a clerk in the office, not if they knew it. Only for a porter. That's why I sometimes get a kick out of putting something over on the boss who never dreams he's got a colored secretary."

And the, the social clash as it occurs among Negroes themselves, even in the same family:¹⁸

"I hope Charlie and Gladys don't feel bad about me. It's funny I was the only one of the kids light enough to pass. Charlie's darker than you, even, Ma. I know he sort of resented it in school when the teacher used to take me for white, before they knew we were brothers. I

curiously transferred white standards, and carries with it no connotation of rebuke, except in moments of stress. The reference to "blue-gummed" woman is synonomous for just such a person.

¹⁶ Hughes, Ways of White Folks, p. 58.

¹⁷ The term "hinky" is a familiar expression used by Negroes to express snobbishness, discriminatory social practices by Negroes imitating the oppressiveness of whites.

used to feel bad about it, too, then. But now I'm glad you backed me up, and told me to go ahead and get all I could out of life. That's what I'm going to do, Ma. I'm going to marry white and live white, and if any of my kids are born dark I'll swear they aren't mine. I won't get caught in the morass of color again. Not me. I'm free, Ma, free!"

So with heart-aching bitterness, Langston Hughes paints most vividly in prose that which he only hints at in his poetry---the tremendous clash of color among Negroes as well as between Negroes and whites---and in the same description, reveals the unjust social cleavages which are the causes and the result of the clash. But Hughes seems a pessimist, at times even a fatalist; and he suggests no possibly workable solution nor indicates a hope that such a solution can ever be found. And perhaps he is right.

In Not Without Laughter, Hughes' first and only novel, the differences which sometimes crop out over color among Negroes is made increasingly apparent. Ancient Aunt Hager, notably dark woman of color, says of her mulatto son-in-law, Jimboy Rodgers:¹⁹

"First place I don't like his name," she would say in private. "Who ever heard of a nigger named Jimboy, anyhow? Next place, I ain't never seen a yaller dude yet that meant a dark woman not good---and Anjee is dark!"

Before leaving this topic, it may be well to point out that as a general rule, light-skinned Negroes are proud of their color; and darker-skinned Negroes often make it a point

¹⁸Hughes, op. cit., pp. 50, 51.

¹⁹-----, Not Without Laughter, p. 18.

that their marriages will be such that the children will be brown instead of black. The most likely explanation of this phenomena of social adjustment seems to be that Negroes have in transfer accepted the standards of white in regard to color. As one sage old Negro woman put it: "De blackah de man is, de hardah he work is."²⁰

"Hughes' most recent work is Communist propoganda", says one writer in analyzing the poet.²¹ This has been enough in the eyes of many, to damn Langston Hughes for all time. In these days of public fright at "isms" and revolutionary fanatics there is little wonder that this should be so. From the same source,²¹ we find the writer admitting..."Hughes has now turned to a cause that he believes will usher in social justice."

It is not difficult to see the paths that led Hughes into the philosophy that stems from Moscow. Nominally at least, Communism appeals to the Negro with the ideals of mass equality and impartial administration of justice by an all-provident state. Instead of oppression, poverty, social rejection and political disfranchisement, the Negro is for the first time offered the lure of pure unsullied citizenship participated-in by every man regardless of race

²⁰This is not always true. Many white people prefer darker Negroes, presumably because the greater emphasizeable differences helps to maintain and contribute to the white man's sense of superiority. Many mulattoes have the hardest time of all Negroes.

²¹Sterling A. Brown, Negro Poetry And Drama, p. 71.

or color. It does not matter that these lures are merely the techniques of securing adherents to greatly swell the numbers clinging to the hope of the cause---nor does the proverbial "East is east" philosophy seem to coincide with "White is white, and Black is black". What seems to matter most is that here is a way of living for his people, Langston Hughes' people, which offers them remedies for all the ills they now endure.

The communist rejection of religion as a national factor does seem to worry Hughes. In the past he has seen his people repeatedly duped on the opiate of religious frenzy while less-spiritual, more-businesslike white men deprived the Negro of privilege and social benefits which were his rightful due. The church is at once the church's Negro members' greatest blessing and his most frightful curse. The church afforded the Negro his first real medium for organization and education: it keeps him servile and a docile acquiescent under the changing ideologies of the present advancing era. But Hughes has no quarrel with the church, nor is he personally of an atheistic temperament. It is only that:²²

"The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.
The gods are laughing at us.

And that life is made to fit the tempo of dancing feet and

²²Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 39.

surging hearts:²³

And today?
For joy.
And tomorrow?
For joy.
And the green sea
For strength.
And the brown land
For laughter.
And nothing hereafter.

Probably the most severe indictment of warped American social justice is made by Langston Hughes in "Mulatto".²⁴ Only in a system such as ours could white and Negro relations be debased to such a universal extent. Only in such a situation as this could this bitter plaint arise:²⁴

Juicy bodies
Of nigger wenches
Blue black
Against black fences
O, you little bastard boy
What's a body but a toy?

Motherhood degraded to satisfy selfish lust over those who cannot help themselves. And the little yellow bastard children trying to realize a little happiness from life are told:²⁴

"Git on back there in the night,
You ain't white."

Summary

In summary, Langston Hughes is an ardent believer in social justice for the Negro. As represented by commensurate

²³ Ibid., p. 77.

²⁴ Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 71.

opportunities, environment, and social rewards. With W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes believes in pride of race and lineage, in the triumph of genius and compensation for the industrious. He condemns the social hypocrisy which forces any class of people, black or white, to submit themselves to the indignities of poverty, prostitution, and diseased misery. He challenges the social view which puts a false monetary value on precious human qualities endowed on all men by a supremely generous Creator; and he deplores the rejection of that intermediate race--- the mulattoes and near-whites---by both Negro and white social groups. He clearly sees the effect on social order of official intolerance of race by police, politicians and those of economic power. He has, in consequence, turned to Communism seeking a righteous adjustment for his people for their many ills.

The religious aspect of this view has been questioned by many alert thinkers who point out that some of the major principles of the Christian religion accepted as faith---such as the Resurrection, the Holy Trinity, the Mass, and the Eucharist, etc.,---are untenable in logic. But these thinkers fail to see that a man need not accept logic for his guide to what he accepts as faith, preferring

CHAPTER VI

LANGSTON HUGHES' PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION

Justification Of The Chapter

At various times Langston Hughes has been called fatalist, stoic, pessimist, Red, and a host of other descriptive terms identifying his way of thought. The truth is a problem whose solution has not yet been discovered. Using as a basis of judgment the revealed thought of his poetry and prose, the present study endeavors to search out the motivating causes and relationships between Hughes' philosophy and his literary efforts.

Philosophy and religion are with great thinkers indistinguishable; for a man cannot believe one thing in faith and another conflicting thing in logic.¹ As a matter of fact, the chief delineating feature between the two is not in the quality of thought, but in the realms in which they are allowed to operate. When the scope of their fields becomes all-inclusive, then religion and philosophy become indistinguishable.

Langston Hughes is one in whom these areas of thought

¹The reliability of this view has been questioned by many alert thinkers who point out that some of the major premeditated principles of the Christian religion accepted on faith,---such as Immaculate Conception, the Holy Trinity, the Ressurrection and Ascension, etc.,---are untenable in logic. But these thinkers fail to see that a man need not accept logic any more than he must accept faith, preferring

have been integrated; but we have no evidence that he has as yet rationalized his position. There is little indication of any factor in his early life that may be positively proclaimed as decisive elements conditioning his philosophy. It is known that he spent his early childhood with his grandmother in Lawrence, Kansas, and that she was an ex-slave as well as the wife of one of the Negro martyrs with John Brown.² This fact may have been doubly important in shaping Hughes' intense hatred of social hypocrisy and sham as it operated to the detriment of the Negro people.³ It is also known that Langston Hughes spent early years with his father in old Mexico, that he travelled extensively in Europe, Africa, the South Seas, and the many little isles where his ship touched.⁵ He has seen much of life under varying circumstances and in widely varying roles; it is enough that he has not been spoiled by the glamour of his existence. Certainly at

to believe in a supernatural (or a super-logical) explanation of the conflict. The truth prevails that philosophy and religion may not hold contradictory positions on the same point in a man who thinks.

² See Chapter III, on Hughes' early childhood biography.

³ Lawrence was the home-town of John Brown, and it was there he recruited his 21 men for the famous assault on Harper's Ferry. Lawrence was the center of the fight occasioned by the Kansas-Nebraska Bill and the consequent bitter dispute as to whether Kansas should be a free or slave-state.⁴ At that time Lawrence was the state capital, and it was there that the contest became most fierce.

⁴ J. C. Ridpath, History of the United States, pp. 373-78.

least, his philosophic outlook on life must have broadened and deepened until he could say:⁶

"My soul has grown deep like the rivers."

Philosophic Outlook

Returning to New York on November 10, 1924,⁷ Hughes launched his literary career. He has since written and published three books of verse,⁸ four plays,⁹ one novel,¹⁰ one book of short stories,¹¹ one story in collaboration with Arna Bontemps,¹² and stray bits of prose and poetry for leading magazines and periodicals. According to his own report, many of these latter writings have not appeared in book form.^{12a}

All this has been the product of, and the expounding medium for Hughes' philosophy as it has grown and expanded with his changing experiences. Readers who are acquainted

⁵Hughes, The Weary Blues, in Carl Van Vechten's introduction.

⁶Ibid., p. 51.

⁷Ibid., Carl Van Vechten's introduction, p. 11.

⁸See Bibliography.

⁹Most successful play, Mulatto. Others include Troubled Island, Little Ham and Joy To My Soul, and Don't You Want To Be Free.

¹⁰See Bibliography.

¹¹See Bibliography.

¹²Popo and Fifina, a child's book about Haiti. (1930)

^{12a}Personal letter from Langston Hughes.

with his present philosophic position and oppose it, will find comfort in the assurance that the next ten years will find as much difference evolving from his approach as the past ten years have brought.

Langston Hughes believes first and foremost in the Negro race. He is proud of his people, proud of their accomplishment as slaves, proud of their stalwart African heritage, proud of their bitter struggling in the face of stifling hordes of oppression. His is not an ignorant pride: he knows his race's vices and shortcomings as well as he knows their glorious achievements. He triumphantly exults:¹³

"I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa.

I've been a slave:
Caesar told me to keep his doorsteps clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.

I've been a worker:
Under my hands the pyramids arose.
I made mortar for the Woolworth Building.

I've been a singer:
All the way from Africa to Georgia
I carried my sorrow-songs.
I made rag-time.

I've been a victim:
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me now in Texas.

I am a Negro:
Black as the night is black,
Black like the depths of my Africa."

¹³Hughes, The Weary Blues, "Proem", p. 19.

Langston Hughes saw clearly the varied traits of his people---of both high and low station.¹⁴ He chose to shape his portrayals around the lives of the peasant Negroes, slum-dwellers and city-cramped souls. He saw hope, faith and happiness being crowded out of their lives---he saw the strange genies of raw liquor and rank diseases rising to lay waste and strangle the feeble spark of resistance still resilient within them. He saw his people bewildered and leaderless, hesitating and going glad-heartedly on, in the face of soul-killing obstacles. Going ahead, not with the air of the conqueror, nor yet with the humble persistence of the martyr---but going ahead because the paths of the past were forever closed to them. And he began to sing them, the unconscious artisans, unconscious heroes, unconscious martyrs, saints and villains. His reflective vial powers caught and deeply probed the significance of a young girl singing vulgar songs in a midnight Harlem jazz-club:¹⁵

"One who sings "chansons vulgaires"
In a Harlem cellar
Where the jazz-band plays
From dark to dawn
Would not understand
Should you tell her
That she is like a nymph
For some wild faun.¹⁶

¹⁴See for reference, Langston Hughes, Not Without Laughter, (characterization of Aunt Tempy, as high colored-folks.)

¹⁵Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 28.

¹⁶Cf. ante. Waring Cuney's "No Images". In Cullen's anthology.

The momentous happenings which will startle the world tomorrow are being quietly worked out today by unknowing pawns in the hands of an unknown, unknowing Fate:¹⁷

"White girls' eyes
Call gay black boys.
Black boys' lips
Grin jungle joys.

Dark brown girls
In blond men's arms.
Jazz-band, jazz-band,--
Sing Eve's charms!

White ones, brown ones,
What do you know
About tomorrow
Where all paths go?

The imponderability of fate is as great a philosophic mystery as is Death itself to Hughes. He speaks of:

.....the still
Dark land of death
Beyond the rim of day.¹⁸

in much the same traditional manner of mystery with which we all regard dying. But there is more than calm acceptance in Hughes. His philosophic approach contains some of the elements found in Schopenhauer and Thomas Hardy---he sees man as a futile struggler against overwhelming odds. There are two notable supporting instances which offer this view: "Lenox Avenue: Midnight"¹⁹ and "Railroad Avenue"²⁰. In the first, Hughes says:

¹⁷Hughes, The Weary Blues, p. 32.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 31.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 39.

"The rhythm of life
Is a jazz rhythm,
Honey.
The gods are laughing at us."

And in the other:

"A box-car some train
Has forgotten
In the middle of the
Block.

And again in "Young Sailor", an almost autobiographical description:²¹

"He carries
His own strength
And his own laughter,
His own today
And his own hereafter,---"

Life is to Langston Hughes at once a challenge and a mystery, of which childhood is the most alluring part. As the Soul grows in experience and tragedy, it bloodies its hands and heart against the roughly-cemented walls of prejudice, misunderstanding, and selfishness. The dreams of childhood are broke n in the grappling fingers of the world.²² God, who was once a benevolently strong parent full of gentle peace,²³ becomes no more than a figure-head nominally directing an entirely mechanical and heartlessly cruel world. Death which was once no more than a long deep

²⁰Hughes, Fine Cl@thes To The Jew, p. 27.

²¹-----, Weary Blues, p. 77.

²²Ibid., p. 94.

²³Ibid., p. 80.

sleep,²⁴ is dressed now in the macabre robes of devastation and bloody pain. Man's personal triumph is that he is still able to laugh and sing and dance under the impending shadow of impenetrable doom.

Hughes is not a rank pessimist. There are instances when he is more than descriptive; when he is prophetic as well. In such a moment Hughes optimistically declares:²⁵

"We have tomorrow
Bright before us
Like a flame.

Yesterday
A night-gone thing.
A sun-down name.

And dawn today
Broad arch above the road we came.

It is difficult to say just how much Hughes believes in the spirit of the blues he writes. The philosophy of the blues is without exception in tragic vein. The dominant tone which runs throughout is one of defeatism and resignation. The people of the blues drink gin to make themselves forget the miseries of their daily lives; they sing, dance and love desperately---as though trying to wring out by the violence of their efforts some happiness from the bitter vetch which is their daily existence. They moan:²⁶

"I'm so bad I
Don't even want to be good.

²⁴Ibid., p. 95.

²⁵Ibid., p. 108.

²⁶Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 21.

So bad, bad, bad I
Don't even want to be good.
I'm goin' to de devil an'
I wouldn't go to heaben if I could."

And in "Po' Boy Blues"²⁷

"Weary, weary,
Weary early in de morn
Weary, weary,
Early, early in de morn.
I's so weary
I wish I'd never been born."

And the whole philosophical attitude of Hughes and his people finds summary in two lines:²⁸

"To keep from cryin'
I opens ma mouth and laughs."

The extreme futility of any normal attempt at living by these people whose reactions are neither normal nor at all predictable, finds expression in the shocked horror with which a mulatto girl is regarded when she cries, instead of laughs, at tragedy:²⁹

"My God, I says,
You can't live that way!
Babe, you can't
Live that way."

Some fear of many of the characters of Hughes' poetry drives them to commit suicide.³⁰ But the supposition is admissable that it is the dramatic nature of the thought which prompts the act, rather than the wild prospect of the problems themselves. The Negro is traditionally careless of trouble,

²⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 31.

³⁰ See for reference, "Suicide", "Closing Time", "Ruined Gal", and "Suicide's Note".

and though he may be changing, he has not yet reached that opposite extreme.

Inevitably, Hughes has come to a position of protest against the unequal division of wealth and opportunities in America. Believing as he does in the innate nobleness of the Negro and the acceptability of performance, he can rationalize no other stand than that the Negro deserves to win all that which his natural talents can command. "Elevator Boy"³¹ and "Porter"³² tell similar stories of Negro workingmen being stifled by the menial aspect of their jobs and restricted futures. "Sport"³³ describes in magnificent detail of free-verse the aching void of life without music, jazz-dancing and gin. Hughes is almost Epicurean³⁴ in his approach:

"Wont be nothin' left
When de worms git through
An' you's a long time
Dead
When you's dead, too.
So,
Beat dat drum, boy!"³⁵

It has already been pointed out that Hughes is least powerful when writing of religious topics. This lack springs very probably from the nature of his sincere subject which hardly adapts itself to the casual ironies of Hughes' most familiar style. This difference makes itself evident not so

³¹Ibid., p. 38.

³²Ibid., p. 39.

³³Ibid., p. 40.

³⁴Epicurus, early Greek philosopher, believed the aim of life should be complete satisfaction.

much in the tempo of its emotional acceleration as in the vital role it plays in the lives of the people. If Negroes are the world's greatest jazz-dancers, they are also the world's greatest religionists. Though the fields are not nearly so separated as might be imagined,³⁶ an identical treatment of both themes is foredoomed to failure.

Religious Outlook

It can be safely said that Hughes' belief is in a God much like that conventional Deity of his forefathers. No other proof is so strong as "Prayer",³⁷ a poem whose text has been already quoted elsewhere in this paper. Hughes' sincerity cannot be questioned---it is one of those rare moments of insight when the soul pauses to take inside stock of itself. Again, in "Sinner",³⁸ Hughes voices a religious philosophy which must have needed more explanation than mere description.

Much of the objectionable strength in Hughes' religious portrayals is a part of the innate quality of the picture rather than the poet's own view. Hughes speaks of leaving God back in the era of white oppression and cypress-swamp

³⁵ Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 41.

³⁶ The similarity between Negro jazz and Spirituals has been often noted. Both are characterized by an excessive emotional and fervently expressed beliefs.

³⁷ Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 48.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

revivals.³⁹ He damns the hopeful soul of the black mother who bore a girl to fall from the paths of virtue, and he later repents his acrimonious opinion of a black mother and white father. He shockingly violates the prudent respectability of age-venerated outlooks, and then as swiftly sets the stage for new standards of right and wrong. As a result, Hughes has been misunderstood and misread by many persons. For it is not so much the point as it is the picture that Hughes wants to put across.

"Magnolia Flowers" breathes something of the essential Hughes:⁴⁰

"The quiet fading out of life
In a corner full of ugliness:

describing the search for spiritual beauty among the worldly vices of the people:

I went lookin' for magnolia flowers in the
dark
And there was only this corner
Full of ugliness.

Ugliness of sin and degraded misery flourishing where beauty ought to grow. Dreams bumping against the harsh realities coming out of dark corners:

'Scuse me,
I didn't mean to stump ma toe on you, lady.

And the truculent soul goes off muttering against the ignoble aspect of what might be glorious, or groping on to

³⁹ Van Deusen, The Black Man In White America.

⁴⁰ Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 70.

try to find the high beauty of life, or voicing a plea for things as they should be:

There ought to be magnolias
Somewhere in this dusk.

In "Song For A Dark Girl",⁴¹ Hughes tells the story of a colored maiden whose young black lover was lynched in the South. Embittered and despairing, she is made to say:

"I asked the white Lord Jesus
What was the use of prayer."

The indictment seems a severe one on several counts. First, it questions the omnipotence of a God who would permit such an outrage to take place, unless he, too, were white and in sympathy with the lynch-mad whites. Or, secondly, it criticizes the conventional belief that prayer is an effective counter-stroke to vicious action. Or, thirdly, it is the severest indictment of white religion as it permits colored believers to be destroyed. Hughes might well have said in closing:

Faith is a naked shadow
On a gnarled and naked tree.

The philosophy in "Parisian Beggar Woman" is typical of Langston Hughes:⁴²

"Once you were beautiful.
Now, in the street,
No one remembers
Your lips were sweet.

⁴⁰ Hughes, Fine Clothes To The Jew, p. 70.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 75.

Oh, withered old woman
Of rue Fontaine
Nobody but Death
Will kiss you again.

But perhaps the real Hughes is hidden behind his satiric mask, just as the minstrel man hides his soul with a grin:⁴³

"Because my mouth
Is wide with laughter
And my throat
Is deep with song

You do not think
I suffer after
I have held my pain
So long?

And the lonely soul of the Negro struggling for a place in the sun, must:⁴⁴

"Face the wall with the dark colored gate,
Beat with bare, brown fists---
And wait."

Wait? For what? For the millenium? For the world Revolution? For their own stout-hearted vision of the future when the "darker brother" will:⁴⁵

".....sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me
'Eat in the kitchen',
Then."

⁴²Hughes, The Dream-Keeper, p. 24.

⁴³Ibid., p. 38.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 41.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 76.

CHAPTER VII

THE NEGRO TRADITION

It is only fair, in summing up the poetic accomplishment of Langston Hughes, to consider him in the light of what direction his missionary zeal on behalf of his people has taken. The object of this chapter is, then, to present in essay fashion the complete picture against which Langston Hughes' poetry should be projected. Such a picture may be rightfully termed: "The Negro Tradition".

When the first indentured Negro servants were made slaves by an act of the Virginia assembly,¹ the native whites took steps to insure their superiority over the enslaved group. One of the techniques first made use of was the re-awakened race myth. This theory of the inequality of the races is by no means new. At various times both white and black peoples have been slaves of dominant racial groups, usually however, as the result of a war or criminal behavior. It was historically necessary here, therefore, to justify slavery on moral grounds. The principle excuse for enslaving the Negro was that his repeated attempts to escape made his eventual liberation a grave financial loss. It appears, then, that the Negro's primary faults lay in being black and in wanting to be free.

¹See Chapter I, "The Heritage".

The Christian church early worried over the problem of Negro slavery. According to theological doctrine, all men were the sons of God and therefore brethren. Slavery could hardly be justified on such a basis. But a happy solution was found when the Negro was adjudged to be less than a man, more an animal or beast of burden to be bred and domesticated as any other piece of livestock property.

It was not difficult to advance the theory that Negroes were not human. Ragged and diseased and starved, they lived like animals from day to day, grubbing for food, breeding indiscriminately, and reacting only to the whip. Such, at least, was the picture of the Negro perpetuated by the early writers and recognized by the colonial law-makers. The nation witnessed the spectacle of learned scholars devoting weighty tomes to the proof of the sub-human position of the Negro peoples.

After the Civil War and freedom, there were many whites who feared outrightly that the black men were a pack of vicious wolves let loose upon Southern civilization. This attitude caught quick reflection in the civil laws of the South designed to rob the Negro of every freedom gained for him through Emancipation and the new Amendments. Even more destructive were the insidious social restrictions invoked to the detriment of the Negro in nearly every State in the Union.

Slowly, the Negro has won back many of his rights of

manhood---but there remains much of the old philosophy today. The avenues to economic and social progress are still largely closed to the Negro. Even the means of education to fit himself for intelligent civic participation is often denied to the Negro. Every Negro man, woman, and child today struggles under a cross of Color as burdensome as that the Saviour bore to Golgotha. Every idealist writing in the cause of Negro freedom must first struggle with this problem of race oppression, afterwards with the artistry of his calling.

It was inevitable that Langston Hughes should come into quick conflict against the walls of prejudice. Like every other stereotype, racial hatred is dependent upon the unthinking acceptance of unexamined data by large masses of people. Hughes endeavors, first, to examine the situation as it is; and second, he compels people to think actively about it. The result has been salutary.

The traditional place of the Negro in American life is that of servant. He cleared the plantations and planted cotton, hoed weeds, built roads, felled trees, laid rails, cooked, washed, served in a thousand differing menial capacities. The Negro is today the principal American entertainer and clown, chauffeur, maid, bell-boy, shoeshiner, steel worker, cook, handyman, etc., The traditional air of the Negro is one of humility. He must suffer in silence and with patience, seeing his family starved and all

manner of indignities heaped upon himself.

The traditional economic position of the Negro is poverty. Only the smallest, lowest-paid and most-dangerous jobs are freely open to him. He must live to himself in the less desirable sections of town. He must live well on a mere pittance---but not too well, for fear of offending his jealous oppressors. The traditional political aspect of the Negro is one of neglect, mass-deception and bribery. In many places, he has been denied the right to vote or has been placed under such severe restrictions that it is highly inadvisable.

The traditional social aspect of the Negro is carefree optimism wallowing on a sea of filth and disease. Colored people are believed to be sex-fanatics, syphilitics, and filled with tubercular germs, unceasingly dirty and irredeemably stupid. It is avouched that the Negro's only intelligence lies on the imitative level.

The traditional religious aspect of the Negro is one of frenzy. Wild mass-orgies of shouting and singing hallelujah in almost pagan celebration of a munificent Deity were thought to comprise the entire spiritual outlook of these people. Puzzled by a faith which they blindly accepted but did not understand, Negroes are supposed ^{to be} too passionate and excitable to worship God: they worship their music and their religious outbursts instead.

These many things and more made up and continue in the

present to influence the stereotyped national idea of the Negro. Instead of twelve to fourteen million rapidly-rising citizens of worth and merit, America thinks still of the slouch-hatted and shiftless guzzlers-of-whiskey, refugees-from-labor, loud-laughing, idiot-acting character which never had an existence outside the scheming imaginations of politicians who determined to give the Negro no place at all.

The Negro race is not a super-race. It is not an inferior race, either. Negro peoples have the same high ambitions, achieve equally high goals, suffer identical misfortunes, hope with equal fervor with all other peoples. They want social freedom. They are willing to work for it the hard way---the American way.

Langston Hughes turned to Communism because he believed it might offer a way to help his people. There should be no apology for this, neither a condemnation of his poetic accomplishment. He is still without peer among those of the modern era who seek to write the Negro character into literature.

Langston Hughes appears to present only the degraded inferior Negro---what he is really doing is a subtle attack on the national concepts of such people and their plight. What he is really doing is creating a folk-lore around one of the genuinely American groups in the country. What Langston Hughes really seeks to do is to blend artistic

portrayal with an intelligent reshaping of that which is as it should not be. How far will he be successful in the future? Only the future can tell.

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