

Langston Hughes and His Poetry

Transcript of a video presentation by David Kresh

When the *Langston Hughes Reader* was published in 1958, the publisher felt able to call Hughes "the unchallenged spokesman of the American Negro." That Hughes was unchallenged in the role of spokesman may itself have been open to challenge--after all, Martin Luther King Jr. had already, the year before, appeared on the cover of *Time Magazine* and delivered his first major address at the Lincoln Memorial--but Hughes's importance was and remains beyond question.

Why was this? Let's look at a poem:

*I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes,
But I laugh,
And eat well,
And grow strong.
Tomorrow,
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
"Eat in the kitchen,"
Then.
Besides,
They'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,--
I, too, am America.*

This is, in part, a spokesman's poem, an assertion of a claim. The poem conveys a note of threat, as the speaker grows strong so that tomorrow "nobody'll dare." But it has many other notes, too: sensuality, intimacy, humor, self-confidence, and individual personality--it sounds like Langston Hughes. Hughes was more than a spokesman, and he was more than a poet. Only about 80 of the 500 pages of the *Langston Hughes Reader* contain poetry. The cover of the book lists the other categories included: novels, stories, plays, autobiographies, songs, blues, articles, speeches, and a pageant called "The Glory of Negro History."

Part of Hughes's importance was that, however much he may have wished to speak for the Negro, he was equally interested in speaking to the Negro. One of the principal means was in the series of stories he began publishing in the 1940s in his weekly column in the *Chicago Defender*, an African-American newspaper, stories dealing with the adventures and observations of Jesse B. Semple, known as Simple, a citizen of Harlem with a lot on his mind. In 1950, the first collection of these stories in book form, *Simple Speaks His Mind*, appeared. More collections and even a Broadway musical, *Simply Heavenly*, followed. Many people met Simple before they ever read a poem by Hughes.

The continuing interest of the Simple stories is shown by the fact that, if you turn on the local jazz radio station here in Washington on a Saturday around noon, you're likely to hear the host of the blues show reading one of the Simple stories to his audience.

Hughes was everywhere, figuratively and literally. He visited every continent except Australia and Antarctica. An example of his wide range is a small book, published in Moscow in 1934, called *A Negro Looks at Soviet Central Asia*.

Hughes held no regular teaching position or other day job. He supported himself as a writer, and he wrote everything there was to write.

Look at some of his output in the dozen years leading up to the *Langston Hughes Reader*:

In 1947, Hughes wrote the lyrics for the Broadway opera *Street Scene*, with libretto by Elmer Rice and music by

Kurt Weill; and he translated a novel by Haitian poet and novelist Jacques Roumain; and published a book of his own poems, *Fields of Wonder*.

In 1948 came a collection of translations of Cuban poet Nicolas Guillen.

In 1949, Hughes was co-editor with Arna Bontemps of *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949*, including some of Hughes's translations as well as his own poems. In its expanded 1970 version, this anthology is still useful, and has a place in the Library's Main Reading Room reference collection.

Also in 1949 came a book of his own poems, *One Way Ticket*, with illustrations by Jacob Lawrence; and an opera, *Troubled Island*, with words by Hughes and Verna Arvey and music by William Grant Still.

In 1950, *Simple Speaks His Mind*, the first collection of the Simple stories.

In 1951, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, a high point in his own poetry.

In 1952, a collection of stories, *Laughing to Keep from Crying*; and a children's book, *The First Book of Negroes*.

In 1953, another collection of Simple stories.

In 1954, another couple of children's books; and an album on the Folkways label introducing children to jazz.

In 1955, more children's books; and *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, a wonderful collection of photographs of Harlem life by Roy DeCarava with text by Hughes.

In 1956, a volume of autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*; and a *Pictorial History of the Negro in America*.

In 1957, another Simple book; the musical *Simply Heavenly*; and a collection of translations of Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral.

In 1958, *The Book of Negro Folklore*, edited with Arna Bontemps; a novel, *Tambourines to Glory*; and a recording of his own poems accompanied by jazz musicians.

And even that list leaves a few things out.

In 1925, Hughes was bussing tables in a Washington, D.C., hotel, and he slipped a few poems to the famous poet Vachel Lindsay, who was visiting the hotel. The next day, newspapers announced Lindsay's discovery of a new poet. "The Weary Blues" was one of these poems, and it became the title poem of Hughes's first book the following year.

*Droning a drowsy syncopated tune,
Rocking back and forth to a mellow croon,
I heard a Negro play.*

*Down on Lenox Avenue the other night
By the pale dull pallor of an old gas light
He did a lazy sway. . . .
He did a lazy sway. . . .*

*To the tune o' those Weary Blues.
With his ebony hands on each ivory key
He made that poor piano moan with melody.
O Blues!*

*Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool
He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool.
Sweet Blues!*

*Coming from a black man's soul.
O Blues!*

*In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone
I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan--
"Ain't got nobody in all this world,
Ain't got nobody but ma self.
I's gwine to quit ma frownin'
And put ma troubles on the shelf."*

*Thump, thump, thump, went his foot on the floor.
He played a few chords then he sang some more--
"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."*

*And far into the night he crooned that tune.
The stars went out and so did the moon.
The singer stopped playing and went to bed
While the Weary Blues echoed through his head.
He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.*

Think of it. Here was a young man in his early twenties. Here was a musical form that hadn't been around much longer than he had. W. C. Handy first heard the blues in 1903, the year after Hughes was born. Bessie Smith, the Empress of the Blues, made her first recording in 1923. And Hughes was able to create this wonderful poem. Although he's writing about the blues, he reserves his use of the classic 3-line blues stanza ("I got the Weary Blues / And I can't be satisfied") almost until the end of the poem, and leads up to it with a skillful variety of structures: rhymed couplets in four-beat lines, interspersed 3-beat lines recalling the ballad stanza, interpolated cries ("O Blues!"), 2/3 of a classic blues stanza, then the thing itself, followed by a rhymed couplet and a rhymed triplet to end the poem. And look at the syncopated handling of rhythm: you have to be alert to read a couplet like "Swaying to and fro on his rickety stool / He played that sad raggy tune like a musical fool / Sweet blues!" And what is this drowsy, dreamlike scene, which connects at the end to the night sky, sleep, rock, and death? And who is the "I" who observes the scene? Not for nothing did Hughes proclaim his kinship with the great father of American poetry, Walt Whitman.

Montage of a Dream Deferred in 1951 was a book-length suite of related poems presenting a panorama of Harlem life, using the sounds and methods of contemporary African-American music and a group of repeating motifs, and displaying the many tones Hughes was master of. From the opening section, "Boogie Segue to Bop," here's the first poem, "Dream Boogie."

*Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard
The boogie-woogie rumble
Of a dream deferred?*

*Listen closely:
You'll hear their feet
Beating out and beating out a --*

*You think
It's a happy beat?*

*Listen to it closely:
Ain't you heard
something underneath
like a --*

What did I say?

*Sure,
I'm happy!
Take it away!*

*Hey, pop!
Re-bop!
Mop!*

Y-e-a-h!

From the "Lenox Avenue Mural" section, the poem called "Harlem":
What happens to a dream deferred?

*Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore--
And then run?*

*Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over--
like a syrupy sweet?*

*Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.*

Or does it explode?

And the final poem in the book, called "Island," ending with the two lines that opened the book many pages earlier:

*Between two rivers,
North of the park,
Like darker rivers
The streets are dark.
Black and white,
Gold and brown--
Chocolate-custard
Pie of a town.
Dream within a dream,
Our dream deferred.
Good morning, daddy!
Ain't you heard?*

These are spokesman poems, but just before that final "Island," at the climax of his suite, Hughes turns aside for a moment and lets an ordinary Harlemit, maybe a younger version of Jesse B. Semple, be heard in this poem called "Letter":

*Dear Mama,
Time I pay rent and get my food
and laundry I don't have much left
but here is five dollars for you
to show you I still appreciate you.
My girl-friend send her love and say
she hopes to lay eyes on you sometime in life.
Mama, it has been raining cats and dogs up
here. Well, that is all so I will close.
Your son baby
Respectably as ever,
Joe*

Along the way to those final poems, there are many quick and longer sketches of Harlem, including "Dead in There":

*Sometimes
A night funeral
Going by
Carries home
A re-bop daddy.
Hearse and flowers
Guarantee
He'll never hype
Another paddy.
It's hard to believe,
But dead in there,
He'll never lay a
Hype nowhere!
He's my ace-boy,
Gone away.
Wake up and live!
He used to say.*

Squares

Who couldn't dig him,

Plant him now--

Out where it makes

No diff' no how.

There is the famous Hughes "Motto":

I play it cool

And dig all jive

That's the reason

I stay alive.

My motto,

As I live and learn,

is:

Dig And Be Dug

In Return.

And there are a couple of what, for us New Yorkers, pass as nature poems. This one is "Dive":

Lenox Avenue

by daylight

runs to dive in the Park

but faster ...

faster ...

after dark.

And this one is "Wonder":

Early blue evening.

Lights ain't come on yet.

Looky yonder!

They come on now!

And now, here's Langston Hughes.

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