

The Poet as Teacher: The Didactic Element in Langston Hughes's Black Poetry

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Abstract

Emerging from the Horatian premise that literature should teach and delight, didactic works of literature possess an educational character alongside the dimension of aesthetic pleasure. Socially committed writers like the African American poet Langston Hughes (1902-1967) often infuse into their poems an element of didacticism. Believing that a poet is a human being who must live within his time and for his people, Hughes became the voice of black America during the 1920s. Most of his poems are racial in theme, exploring the different facets of the black American experience. Making black people his major subject, Hughes used his poems as an agent for self-discovery, cultural change and specifically black uplift. He assumes multiple voices and employs a number of technical devices to teach the black masses to take pride in their heritage and struggle for a better future. In some of his poems, Hughes councils white America to give the darker brothers the freedom, justice and opportunity they deserve as an integral part of the American society. This study utilizes the formalistic and thematic approaches to explore the didactic note in Hughes's poems about the blacks. The historical approach is also employed to shed light on the contexts that urged him to write such "message" poems.

I

The term "didactic" is generally applied to poems which contain a clear message, moral or purpose to convey to readers. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2011) defines "didactic poetry" as "that form of verse the aim of which is, less to excite the hearer by passion or move him by pathos, than to instruct his mind and improve his morals" (online, p. 1).

In antiquity poetry served an important social and educational function, and poets were traditionally viewed as teachers. Poets imparted factual information through their poems and younger generations were educated in morals by studying poetry. In their article "Theory and Context of the Didactic Poem" (1983), Robert M. Schuler and John G. Fitch state that in the ancient world of Greece, as in other pre-literate societies, verse was the medium through which knowledge and information were regularly transmitted for mnemonic purposes. When schools were established in the sixth century B. C. and education became more formalized, Schuler and Fitch continue, the poets, and above all Homer whose poetry offered education in facts and in values, formed an important part of the curriculum. And the conception of the poet as actually a teacher or potentially an educator remained the conventional view throughout antiquity (3-5).

So poetry and knowledge were closely connected in pre-historic Greek civilization. Early sages utilized the appeal of poetry and the ease with which it could be retained by memory to preserve the knowledge or

"scientific" information they possessed and to instruct their audience. Poetry used as a vehicle of instruction was written in a form of verse that could be described as epical rather lyrical. Schuler and Fitch note the close similarities in dialect, meter (hexameters), and phraseology between the two traditions of Homer, whose poetry focused on heroic narrative, and Hesiod (8th century B.C.) whose poetry conveyed technical material and information necessary for daily life (3).

Due to this similarity in form and function between the poetry of Homer and Hesiod (who share the title of the earliest known European poet), the type of instructive and informative verse to which we now give the epithet "didactic" was never distinguished as a separate genre in the beginning of literature. However, the apparent difference in subject matter justified the later separation of the two classes of poetry into two distinct types: epic and didactic. While the epics of Homer dealt with the adventures of gods and heroes, a great body of verse intended primarily for increasing the knowledge of citizens in useful branches of art and observation is attributed to Hesiod. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, poems composed by Hesiod for educational purposes were the beginnings of didactic poetry. His *Works and Days*, a poem on the arts of agriculture and the right attitudes and qualities in life, is "the type of all the poetry which has had education as its aim" (1).

The two Greek philosophers Parmenides (late 6th or early 5th century B.C.) and Empedocles (born a few years after Parmenides) recorded their teachings and philosophical views in verse form. The didactic poems as a natural medium for original philosophical-scientific thinking ceased to be composed after Empedocles. Didactic poetry did not flourish again in Greece until the 3rd century B.C.. The Hellenistic Age saw a revival of the didactic poem. Some poets expounded technical material in elegant verse while others versified existing prose tracts. Poetry as used by didactic poets of this period was a means to make scientific material more acceptable in a literary culture (Schuler and Fitch 11).

Inspired by the example of the Greek didactic poets, Roman writers composed poems that presented philosophical-scientific knowledge in the guise of exquisite literature. In the 1st century B.C., Lucretius wrote *De Rerum Natura*, on Epicurean philosophy and science; and Virgil wrote his *Georgics*, on farming. These two works are considered the most important and noblest examples of Latin poetry that possessed an educational character. In the absence of a well-defined body of ancient critical canon on didactic poetry, the works of these two preeminent practitioners of Latin didactic exerted a powerful influence on subsequent writers. The poems they produced, Schuler and Fitch observe, stimulated instructional poetry in later ages; and from these texts, especially the

Georgics, were derived critical canons of didactic poetry in the late 17th and early 18th centuries (16).

The didactic tendency endured from antiquity through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The entry on "didactic poetry" in the Encyclopedia Britannica notes that an element of didacticism is visible in Anglo Saxon and early English poetic tradition, especially in religious works. Poems written for the purpose of imparting useful information continued to appear in the 16th and 17th centuries. The 18th century saw a burgeoning of purely didactic poetry as a number of poets wrote georgics and poems on definite branches of industry and employment(2).

Around the 19th century, purely didactic poetry which is written first and foremost for educational purposes became obsolete. It was discouraged by the ideals of the Romantic Movement which emphasized the poet's own feelings and the poet's faculty of imagination as the essential elements of poetry. In an essay titled "The Criticism of Didactic Poetry," Alexander Dalzell argues that for the Romantics the epithet "didactic" in the sense of frankly educational "was often a term of abuse" (8). In his famous essay "The Poetic Principle" (1850), Edgar Allan Poe describes the view that "truth" is the ultimate object of poetry and that a poem is to be judged by the moral it inculcates as the "heresy of the Didactic" (online, p. 4). Poe argues against poetry which gives direct instruction to the detriment of "pleasurable elevation" that is derived from the contemplation of Beauty- recognized by Poe as "the real essence of the poem" (5-6).

At this point of the argument a distinction should be made between purely didactic poetry, which had become irrevocably obsolete since the close of the 18th century, and the class of didactic poetry that combines instruction with aesthetic pleasure. This latter class of didactic poetry has endured since the time when the Roman poet Horace (65-8 B.C.) gave memorable expression to the possibility of the compromise between instruction and delight in literature in his famous verse epistle *Ars Poetica*. In his *The Art of Poetry*, Horace opines that poets can reconcile the opposing goals of teaching and pleasure. Considering the purpose of literature, he claims that "the aim of poets is to give either profit or delight, or to mix the giving of pleasure with useful precepts for life." The ideal balance is achieved by "the man who has contrived to combine profit with delight [...] since he pleases his reader at the same time as he instructs him" (qtd. in Dutton, *An Introduction to Literary Criticism*, 25).

II

In modern times numerous writers have endorsed Horace's injunction that poetry should both instruct and delight. The didactic has survived as a mode of writing rather than as a genre. A mode is the perspective, or

mood, or approach which is employed in a genre of writing. Modes are identifiable in literary works but they are not exclusively tied to particular genres. "Modes," writes Fowler in *Kinds of Literature* (1982), "are more than vague intimations of 'mood'." A mode announces itself by distinct signals which may include a characteristic motif, a formula or a rhetorical quality (107). Like other literary modes (which include the ironic, the pastoral and the satiric), the didactic mode can be incorporated in any external form.

The didactic element in the sense of a mode of writing, or a perspective governing a literary work, has never been totally rejected by poets and critics as long as it does not supersede aesthetic value, hence pleasure, that readers derive from literature. For instance, Poe maintains that the incitements of passion or the precepts of duty or even the lessons of truth may be introduced into a poem with advantage. But the true artist will always contrive to tone them down in proper subjection to Beauty which is the real essence of the poem (6). The didactic is so pervasive in this sense in both ancient and modern poetry. Though poets and theoreticians from Aristotle on have considered poetry that is didactic in the narrow sense of the term to be abhorrent, scenes of learning implying a teaching element abound in ancient, modern as well as contemporary literature. "There is a sense in which every work of literature is didactic," remarks Alexander Dalzell in "The Criticism of Didactic Poetry" (8). Dalzell's point is that poets from Pindar and Horace to Eliot and Auden have embraced the quintessentially didactic combination of teaching and pleasure. He provides examples from the critical discourse that supported the concept of the poet as teacher and moralist. Shaw proclaimed that "all art at the fountainhead is didactic, and that nothing can produce art except the necessity of being didactic." "I have always believed," Auden wrote, "that, among the many functions of the poet, preaching is one." Even Wordsworth said that the destiny of his poems was "to teach the young and gracious of every age to see, to think and feel, and therefore to become more actively and securely virtuous" (qtd. in Dalzell 8).

III

The didactic mode or element which allows literature to delight and edify is employed in many of the poems in which the black American poet Langston Hughes (1902–1967) explores black life in America. Langston Hughes was the leading figure in the cultural and literary movement of the 1920s known as the Harlem Renaissance which reflected African American cultural expression. A section of New York City with a large African American population who migrated during the late 1800s and early 1900s from the rural South to the industrial North in search of economic and social opportunity, Harlem became the centre of this

significant movement of the 20th century. The Harlem Renaissance movement encompassed music, art and literature; and included such writers as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer and Arna Bontemps who explored in their writings the African American experience and cultural heritage and expressed displeasure with the oppression of blacks. In *Modern American Literature* (2012), Catherine Morley explains that the Harlem Renaissance was not so much a 'School' as the collective work of a group of individual African American writers linked by "a common black experience and the desire for self-definition and self-expression" (196).

After the publication of his first poems, Langston Hughes became the voice of black America during the 1920s. Hughes was not only "the unofficial poet laureate of Harlem," but also "one of the most important figures in twentieth-century black American writing" (Morley 197). His long career as a professional writer spanned the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties as well as the Black Arts movement of the sixties. In the preface to *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives* (1993), Henry Gates points out that Hughes was the most prolific black poet of his era (ix). Although he is best known for his poetry (he wrote sixteen books of poems), his works also include plays, fiction, autobiographical sketches, movie screenplays, translations, essays, and histories dealing with the spectrum of African American life.

Debates regarding the relationship between race and poetry in tandem with the tension between the political message or social utility and the intrinsic quality of art represented a central issue that shaped the poetic output of the Harlem Renaissance writers. "For the black artist," observes Morley, "difficult decisions would have to be made: which should come first, politics or poetry?" (195). Some viewed their poetry as a means for articulating the black American experience and as an agent for social change, while others believed that they should transcend their racial background and write about more universal experiences. These poetic themes were not exclusive of one another. However, so much of the writing of the Harlem Renaissance was "given over to the unique experience of being an African American," and was deployed to "forge an intellectual link between the black writer or artist and the white reader or viewer" (Morley 195).

In his manifesto essay "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," first published in *The Nation* in June 1926, Hughes examines an important facet of the conflict suffered by the young black American artist, namely the "desire to turn away spiritually from his race," and "to be as little Negro and as much American as possible." Hughes considers this urge towards whiteness to be "the mountain standing in the way of any true

Negro art in America." This conflict has its roots in the process of socialization during which the children in the Negro middle class families are taught to be ashamed of their own people and to see the "word white" as "a symbol of all virtues." The situation is different among "the low-down folks" who "still hold their own individuality in the face of American standardization." Praising and siding with this class of blacks, Hughes claims that "perhaps these common people will give to the world its truly great Negro artist, the one who is not afraid to be himself." This is a lesson he early learned and was bent on teaching throughout his writing career. Finally, Hughes voices his lifelong commitment to produce a racial art: "Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment, derived from the life I know." He also charges his fellow black artists with the responsibility of writing ethnically-conscious art: "We Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame" (rpt. in Cook, *Poetry in Theory* 139-43).

Hughes wrote on racial as well as non-racial themes. However, topics pertaining to race relations in America are pervasive in his poetry. Due to a legacy of two centuries of slavery and another of segregation, it was impossible for Hughes to turn away from the subject of race. He focused many of his poems on the position of blacks in America and he became the spokesperson of the black masses. Characterizing himself as a social poet in his essay "My Adventures as a Social Poet" (1947), Hughes explains why he could not limit the subject matter of his poems to "roses and moonlight":

I was born poor – and colored – and almost all the prettiest roses I have seen have been in rich white people's yards – not in mine. That is why I cannot write exclusively about roses and moonlight – for sometimes in the moonlight my brothers see a fiery cross and a circle of klansmen's hoods. Sometimes in the moonlight a dark body swings from a lynching tree – but for his funeral there are no roses. (212)

Racial tensions exacerbated throughout the 1920s and Hughes is referring in the above quote to lynchings of blacks (mob-directed hangings, usually racially motivated) that increased dramatically in the 1920s. In fact Racism has been a major issue in the American society since the European colonization of North America beginning in the 17th century. Many Africans were captured or kidnapped from their homelands in Africa and were brought to America as slaves. Slavery was practiced through the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries. Although African American slaves helped build the economic foundation of the New Nation, they fell victim to acts of cruelty which ranged from

whipping to lynching. The inhuman system of slavery served economic purposes; as African slavery provided free or more profitable labor and added political power to slave-holding states in the South. Moreover, slavery was responsible for the subsequent conceptualization of Africans as subhuman. In "Three Centuries of Discrimination," the African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois writes: "Once slavery began to be the source of vast income for men and nations, there followed frantic search for moral and racial justifications. Such excuses were found and men did not inquire too carefully into either their logic or truth" (5). During the 18th and 19th centuries, European scientists developed a system of classification that was applied to humans and recognized whites as superior and blacks as inferior.

Though the Civil War (1861–1865) abolished slavery, American blacks continued to suffer from prolonged policies of discrimination. When slavery was formally abolished in 1865, blacks were granted some civil rights like voting and utilizing public education. However, by the end of the Reconstruction era in the mid-1870s, violent white supremacists came to power and imposed discriminatory laws against blacks and deprived them of voting rights. The new century saw clashes between white and black rioters; and it also witnessed a hardening of institutionalized racism and legal discrimination. Racial differentials were pervasive and permeated every aspect of the blacks' life – education, housing, income, employment etc. They were even denied entry to many places of public entertainment supported by their taxes. For black Americans, color of skin was effectively a barrier to status.

Problems emerging from race relations persisted throughout the first half of the 20th century. When blacks migrated north to escape violence in the South and to seek job opportunities at factories that opened up during World War I, they encountered racism as they competed with whites for jobs. Race antipathy stimulated rioting in several cities. Many fatalities occurred during the Red Summer Race Riots of 1919 which were ignited by the post-war social tension related to the demobilization of both white and colored veterans of World War I and the competition for jobs between them. The Harlem Riot of 1935, characterized by struggles between Negro masses and police forces, and sparked by rumors of the beating of a teenage shoplifter, symbolized the death of the hopefulness and optimism which fueled the Harlem Renaissance movement.

Hughes was not sheltered from the embattled situations of the lives of black Americans. "Unfortunately, having been born poor – and also colored – in Missouri, I was stuck in the mud from the beginning," Hughes wrote of himself in "My Adventures as a Social Poet". Then he declares empathy with the down-trodden blacks in America: "And

certainly, racially speaking, my own problems of adjustment to American life were the same as those of millions of other segregated Negroes" (205). Taking up the mantle of the poet amid such situations affecting the American society in general and the black community in particular, Hughes could aptly rely on the age-old role of the poet as teacher to guide blacks in their struggle for self-discovery and self-improvement, as well as to help America change for a better democracy. His commitment to issues of the black community as seen within the context of the American democratic tradition remained unchanged throughout his poetic career.

Two kinds of poetry emerged in the 1920s: the black vernacular poetry, utilizing African American dialect and blues / jazz as structural devices and focusing on black folk subject matter; and "message" poetry, which concentrated on the position of the black man in white America (Smith 58). These two poetic tendencies remained predominant throughout Hughes's poetic career. However, some changes in the tone of Hughes's poetic voice can be detected through the period from the appearance of his first volume of poetry *The Weary Blues* in 1926 to the publication of *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951) and *Ask Your Mama* (1961) – considered to be his most important achievement in poetry since his work of the twenties. In the introduction to *The Complete Poems of Langston Hughes*, Rampersad and Roessel observe that Hughes's work of the twenties expresses black folk perspective. Responding to the Great Depression of the 1930s, he began to emphasize the need for radical political action. In the forties and sixties, Hughes did not stop writing about the Negroes and the black American condition, but the concern with his primary audience (the black masses) was intermingled with other older themes and non-racial subjects (4).

IV

Hughes began by preparing his audience to be receptive of the social and protest poetry he would author. Relying on irony in his poem "Formula" (*Collected Poems* 74), Hughes challenges the view of poetry as mainly the realm of beauty and lyricism. "Formula" (1926) is a poem about poetry which was published in the same year as his manifesto essay "The Negro Artist." While in the essay he squarely declares his view that the black artist should address issues pertaining to the blacks' troubled situations, in "Formula" he evades a straightforward statement of his view regarding the major subject matter of his poetry. The poem is made up of four quatrains. The first stanza says: "Poetry should treat / Of lofty things / soaring thoughts / And birds with wings." With slight variation, the final stanza relays the same view: "Poetry! / Treats of lofty things: / Soaring thoughts / And birds with wings." The two stanzas express a view of poetry according to which poets write mostly about things and issues

which are, to use Hughes's own wording, "really related to another world, to ivory towers, to your head in the clouds, feet floating off the earth" ("My Adventures as a social Poet" 205). To represent this kind of poetry, Hughes uses images that suggest flight and escape from earthly troubles. The variations in the last stanza emphatically assert the prevalence of such type of poetry. Placed in the middle of the poem are the following stanzas:

The Muse of Poetry
Should not know
That roses
In manure grow.
The Muse of Poetry
Should not care
That earthly pain
Is everywhere.

Hughes adopts an ironic stance to ingeniously instruct his audience that there is no single correct perspective. Implying a gap between expectation and reality, irony is used by writers to convey a sense of the complexity of life. The effect of irony, as Peck and Coyle point out, "is one of detachment, with the reader being placed in a superior position of judgment able to see the full play of events and made aware of the complex nature of life where all views are partial or faulty" (160-61). Hughes involves his audience in the process of judgment instead of imposing one single view of what poets should write about. The contested formula dictates the kind of poetry which turns a blind eye to the pain that permeates human life and the rabid conditions encountered with courage and perseverance by some human beings. The poem's two middle stanzas are verbally ironic in that they feature the type of poetry rejected by Hughes. With regard to his audience, the situational irony employed suggests the complexity of life's experiences and conveys a sense of the inadequacy of the poetry that shoves aside the seamy sides of life.

That Hughes saw himself as a mentor for his audience is further asserted by his musings in a poem to which he gave the title "Teacher" (1926). In "Teacher" (Collected Poems 67), he identifies his ideals and depicts the persona he assumes in most of his poems. Preoccupied with his mission as a poet-teacher, Hughes declares: "Ideals are like the stars, / Always above our reach. / Humbly I tried to learn, / More humbly did I teach." The poet seems to be striving towards the Miltonic figure of the poet who intends to use his God-given talent to serve humanity. Recognizing the enormity of the mission he has chosen for himself, he approaches his ideal objectives with a sense of modesty. Seeing himself as a poet-

teacher, Hughes projects a personal image that will incline his audience to give credence to him and to the insights his poems might provide: "On all honest virtues / I sought to keep firm hold. / I wanted to be a good man / Though I pinched my soul." Going through a period of poetic inactivity during which "No lights gleam," the poet expresses the apprehension that he might lack the stamina to fulfill his self-imposed mission: "And I tremble lest the darkness teach / Me that nothing matters." The poem is infused with a profound sense of the poet's moral as well as social responsibilities.

Hughes wanted to use his art as a medium for self-discovery, cultural change and black uplift. To accomplish his mission, he wrote a number of poems with a view to helping reconnect the blacks with their historical roots, uncover the power and the glory of the black community, eradicate racist misrepresentations of the black race and finally guide the African Americans along the path towards liberty and full citizenship in the American society. Although the motif black-is-beautiful is recurrent in many of his poems about and for the blacks, Hughes avoids romanticizing black identity as the poems usually focus on instructing the black masses in ways of self-betterment. Hughes also relied on rhetorical devices that would communicate his messages and impart the lessons he wanted to teach his people in influential and memorable manners. Furthermore, he addressed the black folks (his primary audience) through a multiplicity of voices representing the variety of African American life and symbolizing the black race at large.

In his black poems, Hughes usually suppresses his personal identity and assumes representative identities that epitomize the trials and tribulations the blacks have encountered throughout history as well as their hopes for the future. The poem "Negro" (Collected Poems 24), exemplifies this strategy. Published in 1922, "Negro" appeared at a time of heightening racial tension and criminal acts against the blacks. The poet appropriates the first person singular and unashamedly identifies himself as a Negro to provide a historical account of African Americans in different periods of time and in remarkable historical settings. The poem opens and concludes with this same stanza: "I am a Negro: / Black as the night is black, / Black like the depths of my Africa." The poet-teacher redefines blackness and attempts to cure his fellow blacks of self-hatred. The similes he employs associate blackness with solemnity, antiquity, rootedness, and unfathomed potentialities. The poem's remaining four stanzas are encased between these two identical stanzas expressing pride in being black.

Believing that bigotry thrives on denigrating stereotypes and self-distrust is crippling, Hughes addresses both blacks and whites in his poem "Negro". The poet helps the blacks to rediscover their physical as

well as their spiritual strength by briefly describing blacks' history which is made up of so many years of facing up and lasting contributions. All the four middle stanzas begin with a repetition of the present perfect utterance "I've been," suggesting the continuity of black suffering and black gifts not only to the American society but to the whole world as well. Blacks have been victimized since the time of Caesar and they continued to experience victimization in the 19th and 20th centuries.

I've been a slave:
Caesar told me to keep his door-step clean.
I brushed the boots of Washington.
[.....]
I've been a victim:
The Belgians cut off my hands in the Congo.
They lynch me still in Mississippi.

Blacks endured enslavement in the past and after emancipation they worked menial jobs due to job discrimination which had a huge negative impact on their economic status. Hughes reflects on this dilemma in his essay "My America" (1943): "All over America, however, against the Negro there has been an economic color line of such severity that since the Civil War we have been kept most effectively, as a racial group, in the lowest economic brackets" (335).

Hughes juxtaposes past as well as present atrocities committed by whites against blacks. An example of such horrific acts of violence occurred in the Congo in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. As the note to the poem explains, a labor tax was imposed by the Belgians on the Congolese. Villagers who could not pay the tax were executed and soldiers were required to produce the right hands of the murdered villagers. But the procurement of severed hands became an end in itself, repeatedly leaving thousands of maimed victims (Collected Poems 620). And in the New World, virulent American hate-groups, like the Ku Klux Klansmen, lynched many blacks in cold blood. The message the poet is trying to communicate is that blacks are resilient; they have survived inhuman treatment at the hands of whites throughout history.

Whites portray blacks as subhuman. Hughes counters these misrepresentations by teaching his people and the whole world that blacks do have culture and their contributions to the human civilization are enduring. The self-confident Negro says that he has been "a worker" and "a singer." Under his hand "the Pyramids arose," and he "made mortar for the Woolworth Building" in America. Blues, Spirituals, and jazz are Negro gifts to American music. "All the way from Africa to Georgia," the Negro carried his "sorrow songs," and "made ragtime." Hughes's didactic note is also directed at white supremacists who

concocted the fallacy of white superiority and black inferiority and used it as an excuse to rule, dominate, and victimize non-whites. The account he gives of Negro history dismantles the ideology underlying racism and racial discrimination. By foregrounding the material as well as cultural contributions of the black race and their persistence despite the anguish they suffered at the hands of the white man, Hughes attempts a reversal of values and promotes a new ideology centered on the belief that black is powerful and beautiful.

Hughes's awareness of the type of audience he is addressing shapes his choice of poetic form. "Negro" bears resemblance to popular ballads – the narrative species of folk songs. The poem shares with the folk ballad the dramatic structure (as each stanza narrates part of black history), the heroic mode, simplicity of language, the narrative element and the incremental repetitions (in which a line or stanza is repeated with an addition that advances the story). Popular ballads preserved folk narratives from oblivion and the lesson Hughes is trying to teach the whole world is worth remembering.

Metaphors are carriers of feelings, ideas and attitudes. As effective metaphors enhance the reader's understanding and appreciation of what is being described, Hughes draws on metaphors laden with forceful connotations to deliver his messages in rather subtle ways. Metaphors of darkness and light are utilized as controlling metaphors in "Shadows" (1923) to communicate the discrepancy between the actual lived conditions of the blacks in America and the status the poet is urging them to aspire to and realize. In "Shadows" (Collected Poems 34) Hughes assumes a collective identity emphasizing an emotional bond with his dark-skinned brothers and creates a sense of unity and community which underscores the power of the group:

We run,
We run,
We cannot stand these shadows!
Give us the sun.
We were not made
For shade,
For heavy shade,
And narrow space of stifling air
That these white things have made.
We run,
Oh, God,
We run
We must break through these shadows,
We must find the sun.

Denoting the blocking of light, shade and shadows are used here as metaphors for white political dominance with its concomitant discrimination, deprivation, and marginalization of the black community. The sun – the prime source of light – is emblematic of the freedom, justice, equality, and opportunity the blacks should struggle to achieve. Both 'shade' and 'shadows' are associated with darkness; but while shade is fixed, shadows are changeable and movable. White political dominance, metaphorically represented by 'shade', is encroaching and overwhelming; and the varying manifestations of the controlling power of whites over blacks, represented by 'shadows', are haunting and ever present.

The form of the poem contributes to the message Hughes is attempting to communicate. The poem is split into two stanzas, suggesting the duality of both the message and addressee. The first stanza is addressed to the dominant whites, telling them that blacks are no longer capable of enduring the injustice practiced against them. Using the imperative to convey a sense of being fed up with the present conditions, the poet voices his black community's urgent demand for change. The second stanza marks a shift of tone and addressee. Assuming oneness with his fellow blacks, the poet attempts to change their ideology of acquiescence to white domination into a new attitude of challenge and resistance. The length of the middle lines and the diction used concretize the sense of unease, suffocation, and coercion experienced by the blacks.

When feelings become more comprehensible through forceful connotative language, the subject becomes ready for action and change – and this is the point Hughes is aiming at. The poem's two concluding lines wrap up his exhortation for his fellow blacks who must break the shackles imposed upon them by "white things" – a phrase which metaphorically suggests a reversal of values by implying the fragility and vulnerability of whites who claim to be superior and dominant. Expressing the necessity and urgency of taking action, "Shadows" is an incentive to blacks to struggle for realizing their aspirations.

Schuler and Fitch attribute the success of the didactic verse of Lucretius (the first and greatest didactic Latin poet known to us) to the vividness of his language with its metaphors, his emotional commitment to his theme which stimulates the reader as any good teacher will do as well as his constant awareness of his audience which urges him to shape each argument so as to make the greatest possible impact on that audience (16-17). Such features apply to Hughes's poems in which he speaks for the blacks and to the blacks. Hughes's sense of responsibility towards his people leads him not only to subordinate his individual self to his racial self but also, as Raymond Smith points out, to transform "personal

experiences into archetypal racial memories" (49). "As I Grew Older" (1925) exemplifies Hughes's ability to turn personal experiences into common experience representative of black America and also to seize every opportunity to enlighten his people and guide them on the path to equality and social mobility.

Metaphors of darkness and light utilized by Hughes in "Shadows" to represent the domination of blacks by whites reappear in "As I Grew Older" (Collected Poems 93-94). In this poem, Hughes repeats his call for his people to break the bonds of repression and continue their struggle for equality. At the beginning of the poem the poet recalls a dream he used to have "a long time ago." When he was young, he was unaware of the cruelties of the world and his dream was shining "Bright like a sun." The dream did not cease to exist, but the poet says: "I have almost forgotten my dream." He has not completely relinquished his dream, but he expresses dejection over his inability to realize it.

With the passage of time, "the wall rose, / Rose slowly" separating the poet from his dream and dimming the light of the sun-dream. This wall continued to rise "until it touched the sky." The nature of this dream is not explicitly stated— hence it could be emblematic of all unrealized dreams of black Americans. But "the wall" that rose between the poet and his dream is preceded by the definite article 'the' throughout the poem: dreams of African Americans may vary, but the obstacle which hinders the realization of those dreams is one. The poet defines its nature, saying:

The wall.
Shadow.
I am black.

Occupying the centre of the poem, these lines separate the poem's two sections and they typographically represent the wall separating the black American persona from his dream. The poet's blackness is the reason for his inability to fulfill his dream; it is the wall that throws the shadows which dim the light of the dream. The poem then becomes an allegory for the status of black Americans at the beginning of the 20th century. Addressing his dark hands, the poet uses the imperative mode to command action:

My hands!
My dark hands!
Break through the wall!
Find my dream!
Help to shatter this darkness,
To smash this night,
To break this shadow
Into a thousand lights of sun.

The dark hands metonymically represent black Americans who are called upon to restore their dreams by shattering the injustice placed on them. However, acceptance of blackness as a physical reality is the preliminary stage towards the achievement of dreams. Smith comments: "In order for the poet to transcend his temporal despair, he must accept the condition of his blackness completely and unequivocally. The poem thus ends, not in despair, but rather in a quest for self-liberation, dependent on the affirmation 'I am black!' "(51). Blacks should not be ashamed of their blackness which could be the source of their strength; they should hold onto their dreams and continue their fight for equality – this is the message Hughes is repeatedly asserting.

Asked in an interview conducted by "Poets.org" about the impact of Hughes's work on future generations of readers, Afaa Michael Weaver said: "Hughes's charm will carry him another hundred years as most of us readers are still in awe of the courage of the man to make a literary life in a time when blacks were being lynched regularly." Weaver elaborates on reasons why Hughes's work would endure: "But the simplicity of his work may strike a deeper chord than we now realize. Mnemonics favors repetition and simplicity in phrasing" (Poets.org guide to Langston Hughes, online 6). Teachers have a tendency towards repetition and simplicity of diction as they want to ensure that their messages are delivered quickly and easily. This reliance on repetition and simplicity is evident in Hughes's poetry. In the introduction to *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes* (2004), Steven Tracy poses a number of rhetorical questions which highlight the benefits of Hughes's Aesthetic (the plain, the simple, the vernacular) that is devoid of prolixity, obscurity and befuddlement:

Cannot direct, straightforward, honest language teach and delight and move to action? Cannot that language, in fact, instruct and enlighten a broader audience than the ornamental and abstruse? And might not that language contain more, philosophically and artistically behind its simple façade, behind its impression of artlessness? Can it not too reassemble and reintegrate the fragments of existence into a new and meaningful world that encompasses elements previously ignored or violently suppressed by a dominant culture bent on justifying its sociopolitical ascendancy? Plain style does not mean no style; plain style does not mean no substance. (4-5)

Therefore, the easy accessibility of Hughes's style allows him to delight and instruct a broader audience; helps him to bridge literary and social gaps, which divided the African American lower and upper classes; and facilitates unobstructed communication of messages directed at both

black and white audience. Tracy further asserts that the clear necessity under slavery for a strong moral and creative voice to champion the sociopolitical and spiritual autonomy of the Negro group in America influenced Hughes stylistic choices (10).

Teaching is better conveyed with a light touch. "Whenever you instruct, be brief [...] when the mind is full, every word in excess is wasted," writes Horace in *The Art of Poetry* (qtd. in Schuler and Fitch 20). Hughes's emancipatory expression is concisely written. The words or groups of words which are repeated in some poems are not superfluties; they are intended to enhance the emotional intensity of his messages and move blacks to action. Hughes's literary fight back could sometimes be epigrammatic as in the following four-line poem titled "History" (1934):

The past has been a mint
Of blood and sorrow.
That must not be
True of tomorrow. (Collected Poems 179)

The poem is made up of only two sentences, summarizing the story of the black American community. The juxtaposition of "blood" and "sorrow" suggests both physical as well spiritual victimization of blacks, and the use of the present perfect shows that they continue to experience victimization at the present time. The sentence period is the only punctuation mark used in the poem. It is used twice: the first one suggests that oppression of blacks must come to a full stop; the second implies that the struggle for emancipation is a must, and compromises will no longer be acceptable. The laconically expressed message will resonate among the poet's people and remind them of the need to change the status quo.

"It is probable that all the very greatest poetry teaches in subtle ways, without being expressly didactic; and much expressly didactic poetry ranks high in poetic excellence: that is, it accomplishes its teaching without ceasing to be poetry," writes Laurence Perrine in *Sound and Sense* (1963) (218). Hughes's 'message' poems about/for his people convey the instructive, exhortative and educational note without descending into sentimentality, rhetoric or pure didacticism. In spite of the simplicity of diction which ensures that the poetry is not beyond the ability of the black masses to understand, there is no lack of fresh poetic language, rich imagery and genuine feelings in Hughes's poems which affect both the minds and the hearts of the black audience.

Hughes is intent on utilizing the power of art to effect change. Imagery and rhetorical devices assist the poet-teacher to accomplish this purpose while maintaining the aesthetic element. Images that suggest the ideas of marching forward, facing up against all odds, looking upward at the sky, the stars and the sun; and metaphors of ascent and flight from bars and

shattering barriers abound in Hughes's black poems. Moreover, Hughes relies on styles of address (like apostrophe and the imperative mode), and poetic forms (like the dramatic monologue) which are laden with emotional intensity while remaining faithful to the complexity of the black American experience.

The didactic element is crystal clear in "Mother to Son" (1922) and "The Negro Mother" (1931). The two poems are dramatic monologues uttered by a Negro mother who attempts to inculcate into her son(s) – the implied audience in the two monologues – the spirit of patience, endurance, and determination that characterized the black race in America through the centuries. Mothers are educators by nature; and the fact that their injunction is always imbued with profound feelings of love and care makes their sons more receptive to advice. Cloaked in this mother figure, Hughes dramatizes his exhortation to his fellow blacks while evading overt didacticism.

In "Mother to Son" (Collected Poems 30), Hughes utilizes the black vernacular in order to evoke a sense of folk wisdom and appeal to the black masses. Addressing her silent son, who stands for the younger generation of the black race, the mother says: "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair." Through the use of an extended metaphor, the mother compares her journey through life to the labored ascent of a wooden staircase that "had tacks in it, / And splinters, / And boards torn up, / And places with no carpet on the floor- / Bare." In spite of poverty – metaphorically represented by the bareness of the staircase – and the adversities the Negro mother encountered through life, she persevered and kept "climbin' on." Her advice to her son is to move along and face up to life's challenges:

So boy, don't you turn back.

Don't you set down on the steps

'Cause you finds it's kinder hard

Don't you fall now –

The reliance on anaphora throughout the poem and the use of the form of the dramatic monologue are significant. The repetition of a certain word or phrase at the beginning of successive lines, anaphora emphasizes ideas and stirs emotions. As for the dramatic monologue, the unintentional revelation of the speaker's character and temperament is the principle that controls the selection or organization of what he/she says in the poem. The two techniques help the poet to highlight virtues of the black race worth cultivating – namely, courage, attainment and unconquerable determination.

"[B]lack people have been saddled with epithets," wrote Carmichael and Hamilton in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967)

(37). Knowing that poor self-image blocks people's progress, Hughes is attempting a redefinition of black self-image. He is challenging the negative stereotypes of blacks created and perpetuated by whites as a means of subjugating the black race. Carmichael and Hamilton argue that the exercise of political power involves the psychological control over people's minds; and this control "includes the attempt by the oppressor to have his definitions, his historical descriptions, accepted by the oppressed" (35). This is true of the position of blacks in America; they further explain:

Thus black people came to be depicted as "lazy," "apathetic," "dumb," "shiftless," "good timers." Just as red men had to be recorded as "savages" to justify the white man's theft of their land, so black men had to be vilified in order to justify their continued oppression. Those who have the right to define are the masters of the situation. (36)

Hughes encourages a new consciousness among African Americans based on a positive image of blacks as beautiful, valiant, intelligent and determined people. No longer doubtful of their abilities, blacks can effectively fight for freedom and equality.

The process of reconstructing black consciousness continues in "The Negro Mother" (Collected Poems 155-56). While recounting the story of her life to all the "dark children in the world out there," the mother tells the story of all black women in America since the epoch of slavery. The differentials between "Mother to Son" and "The Negro Mother" are worth mentioning. Hughes shifts from the black dialect and free verse of "Mother to Son" to Standard English and rhyming couplets that give the poem a song-like quality in "The Negro Mother". The history of the black race in America is worth preserving in memorable poetic form – hence the use of rhyming lines of approximately regular length. Though the Negro mother addresses her message to the black youth, the message is also intended for the whites in America who deny blacks the full enjoyment of their rights. To ensure a large audience, Hughes opts for Standard English in "Negro Mother".

Addressing black children, the Negro mother enumerates the sacrifices she made so that "the race might live and grow." The instructive tone is manifest from the beginning: life for blacks is not merely a question of survival but a matter of ongoing growth. The Negro mother is "the child they stole from the sand / Three hundred years ago in Africa's land;" she is the "the dark girl who crossed the wide sea" carrying in her body "the seed of the free;" and she is "the woman who worked in the field / Bringing the cotton and the corn to yield." Despite the "work" she "gave" and in addition to the absence of "safety," "love,"

and "respect" from her life, she was "Beaten and mistreated." But throughout this "long dark way," she harbored in her soul "a dream steel." First and foremost, it is the dream of freedom which she hopes her children will enjoy: "Now, through my children, young and free, / I realize the blessings denied to me." The message is double: exhorting blacks to pursue the dream of freedom and reminding whites to grant their darker brothers the rights they deserve on account of their material and cultural contributions to the American society. Apostrophizing her children, the Negro mother says:

But march ever forward, breaking down bars.
Look ever upward at the sun and the stars.
Oh, my dark children may my dreams and my prayers
Impel you forever up the great stairs –
For I will be with you till no white brother
Dares keep down the children of the Negro mother.

The language of patience expressed in "Mother to Son" (1922) gave way to a tone of daring and challenge in "The Negro Mother" (1931). A decade went by and race persists as a handicapping factor in black life. The poem acts as an incentive both to the oppressed and the oppressor to start working out racial issues.

Hughes's poem "Dreams" (1923) is made up of two quatrains which begin with the same line:

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow. (Collected Poems 32)

The poem is not explicitly directed at a black audience; it is a call for people in general to hold onto dreams with unyielding firmness. However, given Hughes's commitment to write about black American experience, the poem could be read as a command for the poet's people to grab at their dreams. Relying on anaphora, the poet reaffirms his call for his people to pursue their dreams.

The two stanzas suggest the poet's awareness of the difficulties of black American life which might obstruct dream actualizations. But the possibility of dream fulfillment is stronger in the first stanza; this is suggested by the shift from "if" in stanza one to "when" in stanza two. Utilizing an image of flight in the first stanza, which suggests that dreams

are likely to be attained, the poet has his audience look at the sky. The image of the flying bird connects the precious dreams that should be protected to hopes for liberty and freedom. The prospect of dream fulfillment is slim in the second stanza where imagery shifts from sky to earth; and an image of double barrenness (the field is both barren and frozen) is used to describe a life void of dreams.

The dream motif is recurrent in Hughes's poetry. In addition to "Dreams," this motif reappears in other poems such as "Dream Variation" (1924), "The Dream Keeper" (1925), "Dreamer" (1927), "I Dream a World" (1945) and "Dream of Freedom" (1964). In these 'dream' poems, Hughes urges his people to have the boldness to dream and instructs them to struggle for realization of their dreams. However, these poems display his mixed feelings of hope for dream fulfillment and fear from inability to attain dreams. Assuming the mantle of the poet as a representative of his people, the dreams Hughes describes are either left undefined or described in terms that connect them to the collective hopes of the blacks; so they are expansive enough to include both individual and communal dreams.

"Dream Variation" (Collected Poems 40) is a subtle comparison between the poet's dream and the reality he lives in. The first stanza defines the dream thus: "To fling my arms wide / In some place of the sun, / To whirl and to dance / Till the white day is done." The poet dreams of a world free from "white shadows," but he instills into the minds and hearts of his people the need for continuous movement and action to put an end for the oppression placed upon blacks by whites. The other facet of the dream is to "rest at cool evening / Beneath a tall tree." The imagery connotes the claims of blacks either to enjoy at nighttime the fruits of their daytime toil or to celebrate their triumph after the end of white dominance. The second stanza repeats the lines of the first stanza with some variations in diction. In addition to omitting the line that reads "That is my dream," The poet continues to "Dance / Whirl! Whirl!" during daytime and when "The quick day is done," he will have "Rest at pale evening" beneath a "Tall, slim tree." The pale evening and the slim tree are emblematic of the actual lived conditions the poet is enthusing blacks to revolt against.

In "The Dream Keeper" (Collected Poems 45), Hughes makes it clear that the dreams he is asking his people to cherish and pursue with endurance are not restricted to material possessions. "Heart melodies" is the descriptive phrase the poet uses to characterize such dreams, thereby placing them in a realm of ideals and raising his black audience up to thoughts of a fuller and richer life. The poet asks all dreamers to entrust him with their dreams; so that he "may wrap them / In a blue cloud-cloth / Away from the too-rough fingers / Of the world." Dreams are both fragile

and of very precious value, so they should be protected from dangers arising from the world. Among such forces that imperil dreams are the disappointment stemming from dream deferment and the sense of alienation springing from the inability of others to understand the dreamer's dream.

The persona in "Dreamer" (Collected Poems 111) ponders over his dreams for long. He makes of them "a bronze vase," and "a wide round fountain / With a beautiful statue in its center." Finally he takes his dreams and makes of them "a song with a broken heart." He asks an unnamed silent listener whether he can understand his dreams, and sometimes the answer is negative. Attempting to instill in his black audience the spirit of persistence and determination, the persona says that no matter what happens he will "continue to dream."

A tone of mistrust hovers over Hughes's visualizations of the prospects of the American Dream for African Americans. As George E. Kent has observed, "Hughes brings in aspects of the Dream at will, but so many bitter notes accompany it that he can hardly be said to put much confidence in it" (19).

Hughes started introducing facets of the American Dream in his poetry of the 1920s, a decade before the term became popular. Aware of the power of dreams to correct social injustice, Hughes asserts the rightful claim of his people to share the American Dream and attempts to warn white America against the exclusion of blacks from this Dream. In the introduction to *The American Dream in the 21st century* (2011), John White and Sandra Hanson trace the history of the term 'American Dream' to the year 1914 when journalist Walter Lippmann first used it in a book titled *Drift and Mastery* in which he urged readers to find a new 'Dream' for the 20th century that would correct the course of American politics. The term was popularized by historian James Truslow Adams in 1931 in his book *The Epic of America* (2-3). The American Dream is associated with economic security, but it is also linked to the ideals of freedom, opportunity and equality. James Truslow Adams explains that it involves something more than the acquisition of wealth and fame:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of their birth [...]. It has been a dream of being able to grow to fullest development as man and woman unhampered by the barriers which had slowly been erected in older civilization, unrepressed by social orders which had developed for the benefits of classes rather

than for the simple human being of any and every class. (qtd. in White and Hanson 3)

Although slavery was abolished in 1865, the African Americans' dream of complete liberty and equal opportunity remained unrealized. They continued to be treated as second-class citizens and fell victim to de facto discrimination in the Northern States and de jure segregation in the Southern and Border States after the enforcement of the Jim Crow laws which operated between 1877 and the mid-1960s. These laws separated blacks from whites in schools and public transportation. The separation principle, which viewed blacks as subhuman, was then extended to other public places like parks, theatres, restaurants, hotels, beaches, hospitals and even public areas. Thus, for much of American history, black Americans were excluded from the promise of the American Dream.

In fact, Hughes's dream poems are also meant to deliver a message to white America which promised wealth, liberty, and upward mobility based on hard work and power of mind for all Americans as well as immigrants of different nationalities. Hughes is confronting white America with the fact that it has betrayed its own ideals because black Americans were not seen or treated equitably and were denied access to social/economic betterment because of their skin color.

The poem titled "Deferred" (Collected Poems 413-14), from Hughes's collection *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951), juxtaposes different shots from "Contemporary Harlem" showing different types of unfulfilled dreams and thwarted hopes. The deferred dreams range from expectations for personal development (such as getting through high school at twenty, studying French and taking up Bach) to economic needs (such as buying a white enamel stove after eighteen years of dreaming about it, paying for furniture and being able to afford two new suits at once, a television set and a radio). The poem concludes with the following question, supposedly directed at the white-skinned brothers of America: "Buddy, have you heard?" The tone suggests anger and disillusionment and is intended to make America pay heed to the hopes and needs of the poet's people.

When it comes to the "Dream of Freedom" (1964), the tone becomes more assertive, even threatening:

This dream today embattled,
With its back against the wall –
To save the dream for one
It must be saved for ALL –
Our dream of freedom! (Collected Poems 542)

If the dream of freedom is to be "kept secure," it must be "shared in common" regardless of "class or race." Those who deny others the right

for freedom and "who claim / This dream for theirs alone" commit a "sin" for which they "must atone." Hughes is admonishing the American society against the exclusion of non-whites from the dream of freedom.

A literary technique that ridicules ideas, behaviors or institutions for the purpose of improving society, satire can be used as an apt means of education and correcting injustices as it forces readers to see something in a more critical light. In "Goodbye Christ" (1932), Hughes is outrageously critical of the American churches which justified slavery, stood on the side of capitalist exploiters and paved the way for religious profiteers who manipulated religion for their own purposes. "Goodbye Christ" (Collected Poems 166) was misinterpreted as an anti-Christian poem and a declaration of Hughes's commitment to communist beliefs. Apostrophizing Christ, the poet says: "Goodbye / Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova, / Beat it on away from here now." The poet asks Christ to make room for "a new guy with no religion at all," or for a "communist" leader or for the "Worker ME." Emphasizing his power and significance as a representative of the black working class, the poet says: "I said ME!" Communist idioms feature largely in Hughes's poetry of the 1930s, and they form an integral part of the proletarian literature written in response to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Hughes's remarks on the poem in his "My Adventure as a Social Poet" clarify its meaning:

This poem was one of my least successful efforts at poetic communication, in that many persons have interpreted it as an anti-Christian poem. I intend it to be just the opposite. Satirical, even ironic, in style, I meant it to be a poem against those whom I felt were misusing religion for worldly or profitable purposes. (209-10)

The real object of denunciation in the poem is not Christ but religious exploiters who played a significant role in perpetuating the oppression against blacks. The poet addresses Christ, saying: "The popes and the preachers've / Made too much money from it [the Bible]. / They've sold you to too many / kings, generals, robbers – and killers."

"The church, influenced by wealth and respectability, was predominantly on the side of the slave owner," writes Du Bois in the course of his comments on the fight of the slave-holders against the freedom of the black laboring class ("Three Centuries of Discrimination" 8). Du Bois also argues that the color caste system has repeatedly led white America – which claims to be the greatest modern attempt at democratic government – not only to deny its political ideals but also to make its religion to a great extent hypocritical; for the "churches which excused slavery as calling the heathen to God, refused to recognize the freedom of converts or admit them to equal communion" (4-5).

The American churches did not support blacks in their quest for freedom and failed to play a positive role during the Great Depression. In "Concerning 'Goodbye Christ': Langston Hughes, Political Poetry and African American Religion" (2013), Wallace Best considers Hughes's poem as part of the culture of critique among both lay persons and some clergymen who implicated American churches for social inaction during the Great Depression and for their alliance with capitalism which provided fertile ground for profiteering by materialistic religious exploiters (online, religionandpolitics.org, n.p.).

Failings of churchmen with regard to issues relating to his people lead Hughes to say: "Go ahead on now, / You're getting in the way of things, Lord. / And please take Saint Ghandi with you when you go." As the leader of the Indian independence movement and advocate of non-violent resistance to the British, Ghandi is an iconic symbol of peaceful resistance. In the concluding stanza, the poet declares that he will no longer be exploited: "nobody's gonna sell ME." The poem is intended to raise awareness among the blacks regarding the role played by religious racketeers in the oppression and subjugation of the black race. Uncovering the ills of a society is an important step towards obliterating them. Using the satiric mode, Hughes attempted to achieve this purpose. He motivates blacks to resist victimization and warns whites against a black revolution which might not be peaceful.

Hughes's poems addressed to white America are not always revolutionary or overtly radical. While affirming his race and expressing pride in his blackness, Hughes also asserts his nationality as an American and reiterates the demand for racial equality. "Hughes often sought to dispel the distinction between American and Negro by affirming his nationality in no uncertain terms," (Smith 57). Black individuals in America often experienced an inner conflict of selves resulting from their double consciousness as blacks as well as Americans. The African American intellectual Du Bois discusses this notion of 'twoness' in his seminal work *The Souls of Black folk* (1903) as an example of the psychological consequences of slavery and racism: "One ever feels his twoness, - an American, a negro; two souls, two thoughts, [...] two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (qtd. in Morley 98). The role of the bard whose song expresses both his identification with the black community and his affinity with the wider American community reconciles the two facets of Hughes hyphenated identity and urges white America to reconsider its oppression of black Americans. Smith considers Hughes's appropriation of the persona of the 'singer' as an attempt to resolve the dilemma of divided consciousness (122). The African American poet can effectively play the

role of intermediary between, as well as mentor for, black and white Americans.

In his article "My America" (1943), Hughes speaks of America as his homeland: "This is my land America. Naturally, I love it – it is home – and I am vitally concerned about its mores, its democracy, and its wellbeing" (334). He is concerned over the dichotomy between ideals and reality in America which is a land where the best of all democracies has been achieved for some people and at the same time a country where Jim Crowism persists. Further in the article, Hughes reveals his hopes for America at large: "America is a land in transition. And we know it is within our power to help in its further change toward a finer and better democracy than any citizen has known before" (336).

In his poems "I, Too" (1925), "Dark Youth of the U. S. A." (1931) and "Let America Be America Again" (1936), Hughes adopts a non-combative, integrationist stance while exhorting white America to acknowledge blacks as a definitive part of the American society who deserve treatment as full human beings. In "I, Too" (Collected Poems 46), the poet identifies himself as the "darker brother" who suffered unjust treatment at the hands of his white brothers despite being an American; the poem's opening and closing lines read respectively: "I, too, sing America," and "I, too, am American." The poet instructs both blacks and whites. He is enthusing his fellow blacks to "laugh," "eat well," and "grow strong" so that they can grab their due rights; and urging whites to recognize the worth of their dark-skinned brothers and acknowledge the injustices they inflicted on them. Raising blacks' hopes, the poet concludes: "They [white Americans]'ll see how beautiful I am / And be ashamed."

In "Dark Youth of the U. S. A." (Collected Poems 156-57), Hughes continues his attempt to awaken white American readers to a fresh perception of reality. The poem's speaker is "a dark child" resolute in his determination to "mould a place" for the black race in America. Attempting to bring truth and enlightenment to white audiences, the Negro boy reaffirms his American identity ("American am I, none can deny") and asserts the right of the "dark youth" to "a free life beneath our [America's] great sky." Through the voice of the Negro boy, Hughes urges white America to discard the inequalities which have a debilitating effect on the American society. Freedom from discrimination would usher in a new period of prosperity for all the segments of society:

So I climb toward tomorrow, out of past sorrow,
Treading the modern way
With the White and the Black whom nothing holds
back –

The American Youth of today.

The gap between American sociopolitical ideals and American social reality yields a less optimistic and angrier tone in "Let America Be America Again" (Collected poems 189-91). The poem is both instructive and reformative as it uncovers the hypocrisies and inequalities in American culture which is becoming increasingly capitalist, and demands the American society to rethink its mores and practices regarding non-white communities. The motif "America never was America to me" unifies the poem's different sections which prove the poet's assertion that: (There's never been equality for me / Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.") Hughes goes beyond his role as the spokesperson of the black community and becomes in this poem the advocate of expanding American democracy to include all minorities and marginalized classes such as "the poor white," "the Negro," "the red man" and "the immigrant". Democracy and freedom must be real and complete not only for white Americans but also for non-white Americans who helped build the New Nation; this is the poem's message:

O, let America be America again –
The land that never has been yet –
And yet must be – the land where every man is free.
The land that's mine – the poor man's, Indian's, Negro's, ME –
Who made America,

World War II era provided African Americans significant opportunities to argue effectively against racial discrimination and to press leaders of the United States for full citizenship. Though they have been victims of racism throughout American history, African Americans supported their government during World War II and contributed greatly to the war effort. In "Patriotism Crosses the Color Line: African Americans in World War II," Clarence Taylor states that when the war erupted 2.5 million black men registered for the draft while black women enlisted in large numbers in the Women's Auxiliary Army Corps. In spite of their struggles and sacrifices, blacks who served in the army faced harsh discrimination and were relegated to segregated units. Faced with these racial practices, many African Americans noted the similarities between the way Jews were treated in Germany and the way blacks were treated in America (online 1). James Smethurst observes that the Civil Rights movement – led by Communists, Socialists and other sorts of Leftists during World War II – spent much time emphasizing to great effect the contradictions inherent in supporting white supremacy while fighting Nazism ("The Adventures of a Social Poet: Langston Hughes from the Popular Front to Black Power" 147).

Inspired by president Roosevelt's major address to the American people in 1941 about the need for Four Freedoms – of speech, of worship, from want, and from fear – as well as by America's involvement in war on the Axis Powers (Japan, Germany and Italy), Hughes's poem "How About It, Dixie" (1942) urges America to practice at home the democracy and freedom it preaches and fights for outside its land. The two opening stanzas allude to Roosevelt's public address about freedom and the gap between the stated ideals of the United States and its practices. To obliterate such glaring contradictions, Hughes advises The American leaders to grant blacks the right to enjoy the Four Freedoms: "If you believe / In the Four Freedoms, too, / Then share 'em with me - / Don't keep 'em all for you" (Collected Poems 291).

Hughes brings America face to face with the discrepancy between its fight for liberty and democracy abroad and its persecution of blacks at home. For American blacks, Smethurst notes, the system of Jim Crow and the American ideology of white superiority were obviously and uncomfortably close to the tenets of Nazi Germany and to notions of Aryan superiority (147). Hughes versifies these ideas, saying:

Looks like by now
Folks ought to know
It's hard to beat Hitler
Protecting Jim Crow

Freedom's not just
To be won Over There.
It means Freedom at home, too –
Now – right here! (Collected Poems 291)

To win the war, America should become a unified country free from racial inequality.

Hughes's "Message to the President" (Collected Poems 590-92) was also written during World War II. It is a versified letter to the president of the United States in which America is advised to exculpate itself from duplicity. As poems of direct address, epistolary poems can be intimate and colloquial or measured and formal. To ensure that his message would be taken seriously, Hughes maintains a tone of formality. When he talks about freedom in his radio speeches, the president overlooks "folks who're black." The poet wants to hear the president say: "No more segregation in the U.S.A.". America seems to understand so little about its black citizens; it is the job of the poet-teacher to provide enlightenment. Blacks are Americans and they demand the self same rights as other Americans. Such demands are justifiable, Hughes says:

We're one-tenth of the nation,

Mr. President, fourteen million strong.
If you help to keep us down,
You're wrong.
We work and pay our taxes.
Our patriotism's good.
We try to live like
Decent Americans should.

Hughes assumes the recognizable conventions of a letter in the poem "Will V- Day Be Me- Day?" (1944). As its subtitle indicates, the poem is "A Negro Fighting Man's Letter to America." The writer of the letter is a "Tan-skinned" soldier who "wears a U. S. uniform" and fights to defend America. "On every battle line" he fights side by side with white American soldiers and faces death the same as they do everywhere. On account of his unquestionable patriotism and loyalty to America, the Negro soldier asks his fellow Americans to shatter color barriers and discard the erroneous views about Negro unworthiness. He says: "When I've helped this world to save, / Shall I still be color's slave? / Or will Victory change / Your antiquated views?" Hughes poses a number of questions that underscore the irony of the status of blacks in America and prove the falsity of the notions on which racism is premised. His repetitive quest to bring truth and enlightenment is intended to accelerate social change.

"In general, Hughes's subjects are politically incapacitated by a weariness of social oppression," wrote Anthony Dawahare in his article "Langston Hughes's Radical Poetry" (26). During the 1930s, Hughes wrote radical poems that mobilize masses, particularly the working class, into revolutionary action. Examples include "Good Morning Revolution" (1932), "A New Song" (1933), and "Song of the Revolution" (1933). His radical poems are not particularly addressed to the blacks, nor do they express a nationalist ideology. They embrace, as Dawahare points out, "an internationalist perspective" and aim "dialectically to preserve and transcend the categories of 'race' and 'nation' in order to overcome the fragmentation of global working class struggles" (21-22). The call that reverberates through these radical poems is exemplified in his poem "A New Song" which agitates the world workers to action: "Revolt! Arise! / The Black / And White World / Shall be one! / The Worker's World!" (Collected Poems 170-72).

Hughes is a fighter in the realm of art and culture. Skepticism towards politics leads him to channel energy to art. Towards the end of his life, Hughes wrote: "For the poet, politics in any country in the world had better be disguised as poetry [...]. Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection" (qtd. in Rampersad and

Roessel 6). Without the support of cultural change, political efforts could be undermined. The recrudescence of racial tension during post-World War I era is testimony to this fact. At the beginning of the 20th century and during the two decades following the end of Reconstruction, blacks also saw the erosion of the rights they had achieved through the various acts of the Reconstruction government in the South. Therefore, Hughes resorts to art as he believes in its power to bring about change and transform social reality. "Song is a strong thing," asserts Hughes in his poem "Spirituals" (1927) (Collected Poems 102).

Hughes used his art to raise awareness about racial issues and to gain equal citizenship for blacks in the United States. Resurrecting the ancient role of the poet as teacher and crossing boundaries between poetry and politics, Hughes relied on his art to encourage blacks to tend their dream of freedom and social mobility as well as to reconstruct a new black consciousness free of self-disparagement and proud of the race's heritage. His poems addressed to white America are intended to help Americans come to a new understanding of their dark-skinned brothers. These poems show the full humanity of blacks and their parity with whites. Attempting to correct injustices, the poems reveal the impact of a long history of racism on blacks and disprove the pseudo-scientific theories underlying racial discrimination. To fulfill his self-imposed mission, Hughes combined the arts and graces of teachers with the forms and techniques accessible to poets.

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