

Use of Dreams in Hughes's Poetry

LES RÊVES DANS LA POÉSIE DE HUGHES

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Abstract: This paper discusses about the dream themes of Hughes and the developing stages of Hughes' ideas about dreams. In Hughes's early poems, he describes the individual' dreams which are deferred. With the changes of social circumstances, in the late years of Langston Hughes, he advocates that dreams can't be deferred, human beings need to have collective, utopian and global dreams to achieve a better world.

Key words: dream, Hughes, development Collective Utopian

Résumé: L'article présente discute les thèmes de rêve dans la poésie de Hughes et le développement d'idée de Hughes sur le rêve. Dans ses premiers poèmes, Hughes décrit les rêves des individus qui sont remis. Avec le changement de la circonstance sociale, dans les dernières années de Langston Hughes, il préconise que les rêves ne peuvent être différés et que les êtres humains ont besoin de collectifs, utopiques et globaux rêves pour atteindre un monde meilleur.

Mots-Clés: rêve, Hughes, développement collectif utopique

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout his career, Langston Hughes spoke of dreams. Without a doubt, Langston Hughes saw value in the image of the dream. In the poetry of Langston Hughes, the dream is one of the most frequently discussed concepts. To some extent, we can say that Langston Hughes was obsessed with dreams. One early and dearly loved poem urges listeners to "hold fast to dreams." Two of his books of poetry incorporated the word "dream" in their titles. His 1932 book aimed at young readers was *The Dream Keeper*, and his highly celebrated 1951 jazz volume was *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Of the 879 poems in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, seventy-four make explicit reference to dreams. A number of the poem titles play with a variation on the word "dream," such as "Dream," "Dream Variations," "Dream Boogie," "Dream Boogie: Variation," "The Dream Keeper," "Dream of Freedom," "I Dream a World," and "Montage of a Dream Deferred." In this article, we would like to analyze the significance of dreams and different categories of dreams of Langston Hughes.

2. DEVELOPMENT OF HUGHES' DREAM THEORIES

2.1 Poems of personal dreams to represent many voices in the poem : dreams deferred; people are frustrated but still hopeful

"Deferred" outlines the basic dreams of various speakers. One wants to graduate from high school, even at the age of twenty; several desire better material possessions—a white enamel stove, a television, a radio; another person wants to learn French. As the title suggests, all of these basic American desires are on hold, or deferred. The interior monologues by personas reveals many problems in their lives: kids dropping out of school because of frequent moving and inadequate tuition (*dropped out six months when I was seven/then got put back when we come North/ and my boy's most grown/quit school to work*), poorly-equipped rental houses (*cold-water flat and all that/all I want is to see my furniture paid for*), racial discrimination (*I want to pass the civil service*), lack of basic living items (*I ain't never owned a decent radio yet*). Even though those simple economic needs of these American Americans are not satisfied, they are still having the value of persistence and faith in their goals: "*Maybe this year I can graduate/ maybe I can buy that white enamel*

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* Received 6 August 2007; accepted 22 September 2007

stove/I'll study French/ when I set my feet in glory/ I'll have a throne for mine."

"Mother to Son" was first published in the magazine Crisis in December of 1922 and reappeared in Langston Hughes's first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues* in 1926. In that volume and later works, Hughes explores the lives of African-Americans who struggle against poverty and discrimination but still dreaming and hoping. "Mother to Son" is a dramatic monologue, spoken by the persona of a black mother to her son. Using the metaphor of a stairway, the mother tells her son that the journey of life more closely resembles a long, trying walk up the dark, decrepit stairways of a tenement than a glide down a "crystal stair." The "crystal stair" is a metaphor for the American dream and its promise that all Americans shall have equal opportunities. The mother warns her son not to expect an easy climb or a tangible reward. Through the metaphor of ascent, however, the speaker suggests that her endurance and struggle are necessary to progress toward racial justice and to maintain spiritual hope and faith. In this poem, Hughes represents the personal, collective, and spiritual importance of struggle, endurance, and faith.

From the analysis of the two early poem, we can see that Hughes's early ideas about dreams are still hopeful and encouraging.

2.2 Predictive dreams: a negative type of dreaming tendency among the African American communities

Hughes claimed that 90 percent of his work attempted "to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America." The spiritual aspects of dreaming and dream interpretation most familiar to Hughes would have come from the community he was brought up with. While Hughes as an African American whose greatest inspirations came from dreams, the Blues, and black vernacular cultural practices was certainly influenced by this tradition, he was not bound by it. Indeed, he was particularly skeptical of the popular tradition within African American communities of using predictive dreams to gamble or play numbers. This type of dreaming and bad use of dream power is what he despised. In other words, dreams could not be used to gain a fortune overnight and this way of dreaming misleads the common people thus has no positive power. In a short poem "Hope," for instance, we are told of a man who "rose up on his dying bed/and asked for fish." His wife, hearing her husband mention fish, looks the image up in her dream book, and plays it. Here, a dying man's final request is trivialized by the person he turns to for solace during his last hours when she takes his mention of fish to be a predictive dream that she can use to play and win the numbers. Although Hughes, in "The Dream-Keeper" says "bring me all of your dreams,/You dreamers," this poem demonstrates that there are

differences between the dreams brought to (or borrowed by) a dream-keeper like Hughes, and the dreams bought to a book-keeper like the one that the wife visits to place her bet. "Hope" implies that it is not enough for a dream to be common to the members of a given community for it to be wrapped in a "blue cloud-cloth" of poetic affirmation; the dream must also help foster community, which is something that the dream in "Hope" obviously does not do.

A similar cynicism toward the use of predictive dreams to play the numbers can be seen in the above Hughes' "Madam and the Number Writer." In this poem, which is part of a series that features an outspoken character named Alberta K. Johnson, Hughes once again parodies what he regards as the misuse of black dreams. The immediate conflict that the poem sets up is one between Madam's conscious intent to stop wasting her money on the numbers game, and her fervent hope that hitting the number might change her economic circumstances. The comment Madam makes before placing her bet: "I had sworn/I wouldn't play no more" speaks to the compulsive nature of her actions. The fact that she had felt the need to forswear the numbers game indicates that she has already been provided with ample evidence of its ineffectiveness in helping her to realize her dreams. Neither her awareness nor her intentions, however, are a match for her desire. And her powerlessness over gambling mirrors and reproduces her social powerlessness as a working-class, African American woman on the margins of U.S. society. Pretty soon, a case of the blind leading the blind ensues as the Numbers Writer's enthusiasm reverberates back and forth between him and the Madam in a kind of call-and-response sequence when he suggests "6-0-2/Looks like a likely/Hit for you," to which Madam replies "...Last night,I dreamed 7-0-3," and the Numbers Writer thinks "...That might/Be a hit for me". When the number turns out 3-2-6, we see the transitory alliance between the two figures disintegrate as Madam projects the libidinal energy with which she had invested her fantasy into the post-mortem future, once again swearing: "Ain't gonna play no more."

In these poems, Hughes criticized this negative type of dreaming tendency among the African American communities and pointed out this kind of predictive dreams can contribute nothing to the improvement of their conditions.

2.3 End of deferment: 1960s

The meaning of dreams during the last eight years of Hughes' life was shifted by himself a bit. One major cause of the shift was the response by Hughes and other African American intellectuals of that time to the 100th celebration or the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. In 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States outlawed slavery everywhere in the U.S.A. However, one hundred years

later, African-descended people are still seeing oppression everywhere and looked with dismay at the continuing legacy of restrictions still imposed upon Blacks. Those vision of liberty Hughes dreamed about does not materialize. Thus the United States Supreme Court had to declare in 1954 that segregated school were unconstitutional, federal troops were needed to enforce school desegregation in many well-documented cases in Southern states. Protests had to be waged on every level from simple boycotts of business to massive rallies in the capital city of the nation. In a word, the gains and opportunities were often ordered by the U.S Supreme Court, but there are no changes in the hearts and minds of average people. One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the descendants of slaves are still not regarded as being worthy of admission to some college, worthy of being permitted to eat in some restaurants, or worthy of being granted full citizenship. Surely, these realities were disappointing. The most explicit example of his work as it reflects upon one hundred years past emancipation is "Long View: Negro," first published in 1965.

*Emancipation: 1865
Sighted through the
Telescope of dreams
Loom larger,
So much larger,
So it seems,
Than truth can be.*

*But turn the telescope around Look through the
larger end-
And wonder why
What was so large
Becomes so small
Again.*

In "Long View: Negro," the speaker clearly reflects upon how little has been accomplished in the century since emancipation and expresses the frustration. We contend that while the 1951 collection spoke of dreams deferred—often private and individual dreams, by the 1960s, deferment had ended. Dreams meant something else, and deferment was no longer a viable option.

Throughout his career, the concept of "dream" meant many things in Hughes's works. The last eight years of his life were no exception. However, we can observe a shift from individual, personal dreams to more collective and even global kinds of dreams.

2.4 Get- Even Dreams to voice for racial equality

In "cultural exchange," the first movement in *Ask your Mama*, concludes with two stanzas in which the typical privileges of Southern aristocrats are reversed with people of African descent. The final section is about "dreams and nightmares" and follows the leitmotif "Hesitation Blues". The speaker outlines a shocking

dream "That the Negroes/ of the South have taken over" and that "the Colored Hour" has arrived. In this colored hour, "Martin Luther King is Governor of Georgia/ Sitting on their wide verandas/ Wealthy Negroes have white servants/ And colored children have white mammies". Thus, this first vision of a dream in the 1960s is a far cry from the desperate dreams in the 1930s or even the 1950s. The role-reversal in this "Colored Hour" is clearly triumphant in that Martin Luther King is governor of Georgia, and the mammies bear family names of the most vocal and vehement racist politician of that day: Faubus, Eastland.

2.5 Collective, Utopian and Global Dreams

In this stage, firstly in the 1940s, primarily focused on the dreams of oppressed people, especially people of color, Hughes' poetry celebrates the capacity of dream-power to overturn established structures of race and class oppression. In the poetic vision of Langston Hughes, dreams can be deferred, but they can't be stopped; they represent the irrepressible human desire to build a world based upon an ideal of social justice. These can be seen in "Freedom's Plow," a poem Hughes first published in *Opportunity* magazine in 1943. Working against the tradition of American pragmatism and commonsense that tends to view dreams as insignificant idle fancy, "Freedom's Plow" represents dreams as the trigger for building blocks of society.

*First in the heart is the dream.
Then the mind starts seeking a way.
His eyes look out to the world....
The eyes see there materials for building,
See the difficulties, too, and the obstacles.
The hand seeks tools to cut the wood,
To till the soil, and harness the powers of the
waters.
Then the hand seeks other hands to help,
A community of hands to help—
Thus the dream becomes not one man's dream
alone,
But a community dream.
Not my dream alone, but our dream.
Not my world alone,
But your world and my world,
Belonging to all the hands who build.*

Hughes situates the dream alongside objects as mundane as "wood" and "soil," and among actions as physical as "building," "cutting," "tilling," and "harnessing," thereby making an implicit argument for the materiality of dreams. Here change can only occur through the collective agency of each of the autonomous objects that participate in the building of this new world. Hearts hold in dreams, minds seek ways, eyes can see materials and hands execute various forms of labor while also seeking the assistance of other hands. In other words, the dream exists in a horizontal relation to the other objects that make up the social body; it is one of a multitude of objects necessary for the formation

of a new social order. This is what Hughes dreams about —combining dreams of all blacks together into larger utopian visions through the collective efforts.

In the 1960s, however, in his ideas, dreams couldn't be deferred and he challenged people to take collective efforts to realize their dreams. The dominant concept in the 1960s is the collective dream, the broader dream of many people, as described in "Question and Answer." Global in its scope, it urges action, despite the efforts of unnamed forces to kick dreams asunder. "Question and Answer" challenges the weary people in every part of the world to persevere, in spite of all the obstacles they have encountered in their quest for justice and liberty. Although the cities named are only in South Africa and in the United States, the poem specifically calls upon folks "the earth around" to hear the message. The obstacles have been many, including "struggling, fighting," having "dreams kicked asunder," and even "dying". Yet, the speaker of the poem urges the freedom fighters to continue the struggle, because the world still awaits them.

Another poem that encourage readers to fight is "Dream of Freedom," a poem of only five short stanzas, first published in 1964, to mark the tenth anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision that opened the door to desegregated schools. he wrote: "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." "Dream of Freedom" personifies the dream as an embattled entity. He expresses anguish that some people try to claim for themselves the dream of freedom, not wanting to share it. However, the speaker states that selfishness about the dream of freedom will kill the dream. Stanza three and four read:

*Unless shared in common
Like sunlight and like air,
The dream will die for lack
Of substance anywhere.
The dream knows no frontier or tongue,
The dream no class or race.*

*The dream cannot be kept secure
In any one locked place.*

The poem concludes by asserting "To save the dream for one/ It must be saved for ALL." This urgency converts the idea of a dream from something pondered or hoped for to something needs to be realized by collective efforts. In this poems, the dream is more of a goal, almost a tangible reality. The dream of freedom is the ideal that must motivate others to fight.

3. SUMMARY

In Hughes's dream poems, we can find pragmatic dreams expressed in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, such as "a whit enamel stove" or "two new suits at once.", his thinkings about African Americans' use of predictive dreams, his voice for racial equality, and finally his utopian and global dreams that urge and inspire others who share these vast dreams to unite and determine to achieve these new worlds being dreamed. What is worthy mentioning is that for Hughes in the 1960s, the dreams that occupied his poems reflected the needs, the hopes, and the aspirations of a community far more global and utopian than the residents of Harlem, New York, who had been the subjects of *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Moreover, the dreams he wrote about were more than fantasies, more than imagination. These dreams were in fact vision of the future. These were not things that could perhaps be deferred. Instead, these dreams of which Hughes wrote in the closing years of his life were important aspirations. Forty years after his death, we may evaluate the world and the dreams of which Hughes spoke. Did his readers heed his call? Were the dreams realized? And if we see things that still need to be done, we must uplift the banner implanted in Hughes' poetry. We must rally other dreamers around the world to join together to see that our world becomes the place Hughes dreamed about.

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