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The Strong Voices of Black Women and Men in the Selected Poetry of Langston Hughes

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ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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THE STRONG VOICES OF BLACK WOMEN AND MEN IN THE SELECTED

POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

Committee Chair: Georgene Bess-Montgomery, Ph.D.

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This thesis discusses Langston Hughes' poetry and details the African-American experience in a discriminatory society which was an essential theme of the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement which enriched American life. Hughes' body of work covers the entire range of the human experience, especially the experience of ordinary people. He believed that the role of the artist was to cover and illuminate every aspect of people's lives. Part of this expansive philosophy towards art included giving a voice to African-American women and men who experienced both racist and patriarchal oppression.

THE STRONG VOICES OF BLACK WOMEN AND MEN IN THE SELECTED
POETRY OF LANGSTON HUGHES

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

AMINAH ALWAZZAN

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Poems are an important form of expressive literature and have been a part of the literary culture in many societies for hundreds, even thousands of years. Poems have been used to express and voice opinions regarding various social, political, and economic issues affecting society. Thus poems have a special way of interpreting historical issues from various contexts and points of view. Among African-American writers, America's historical legacy of racial segregation is one of the most prominent topics covered in African American poetry. These writers use their literary platforms to reflect on problems that members of their community have faced for hundreds of years. A unique aspect poetry has afforded African-American writers is the power to tell their stories and experiences from their own points of view through their particular voice and cadence. Poetry and other forms of literary works have empowered African Americans to address the issues they face from a position of authority that has not been afforded to them from other platforms. This is evident in the powerful voice that many of these writers have used in their various works over the years. This thesis focuses on the powerful voice of a black man, Langston Hughes, in multiple poems about various social issues affecting African Americans across the history.

The Harlem Renaissance was a significant period because it was arguably the most productive time in African-American literature, art, and culture. Some of the finest

music, literature, and art of the 20th century were produced as a result. When World War I drew to a close, there were no real positive changes in the southern homelands of black troops. In spite of sacrificing their lives, black veterans were not given the recognition they were due. Instead, they still faced the same poor living conditions, threats of execution, and public degradation they had endured before the war. Meanwhile, the urban areas of the North and West had prospered during the war with new industries forming and employment opportunities booming. European immigration had fallen off since the war, and so there were many new employment opportunities for African Americans wanting to leave the South. The industry of the North promised a better life for African Americans in terms of economic stability and superior educational opportunities for their children. The majority of African Americans from the South relocated to New York City, and this influx of black inhabitants particularly helped to create the cultural mecca of Harlem.

Harlem's regional borders were significantly extended in 1910 when African-American real estate agents and the black churches started buying up massive pieces of land. This land afforded housing to all of the new immigrants from the South, although rent still came at an inflated rate. The influx of immigrants created some severe problems. Long-standing residents were worried that the newcomers would snatch up their jobs and a wide range of people from various backgrounds offered opportunities for cultural growth and diversity. Harlem had already been a center for political involvement, where silent marches along with loud protests took place in response to the many injustices the community faced. Marcus Garvey, a compelling leader of the Back to Africa program, had his headquarters in Harlem, along with the National Urban League (NUL) and the

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NUL sought to create pride in African Americans by highlighting their many accomplishments, both in the past and the present.

A literary scene was developing in Harlem, and many writers desired for Harlem to be a haven for the arts. There was a coordinated effort to encourage African-American writers from all over the United States to call Harlem home. Many African Americans were angered by the prevailing stereotypes the dominating white culture gave to them. These men and women believed that by creating a place where literature, art, and music could flourish, they could foster a new way of seeing African Americans. The unique and strong voices they created were soon being readily welcomed by the established white publishers.

The Harlem Renaissance flourished because writers such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston pushed for the authentic black American voice to be heard. Black Americans were creating their own narrative, one that was not co-opted or stereotyped by the dominant white culture. Alain Locke affirmed that through the talent of the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans began their group self-manifestation through their own determination. Harlem became the epicentre of a sort of African-American spirituality in which social cynicism was changed into racial pride. The black experience now became firmly rooted in the corpus of American ethnic history and stimulated a gratitude for folk roots and culture. The whole world now saw African Americans in a new light, not as rural uneducated farmers but as cosmopolitans. The Harlem Renaissance positively influenced the future generations of black musicians and authors by giving them space in the world to share their rich cultural skills.

In “The New Negro,” the opening essay of his anthology, Locke stated the goals of the Harlem Renaissance and his views on how they should be reached. He described his philosophy for the movement as “an attempt to repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective” (*The New Negro* 10). He argued that to realize this objective, a new mentality was necessary. This mentality would be formed in a psychological process, where initially more positive self-respect and self-reliance would be developed. This would ultimately lead “from social disillusionment to race pride, from the sense of social debt to the responsibilities of social contribution, and offsetting the necessary working and commonsense acceptance of restricted condition, the belief in ultimate esteem and recognition” (*The New Negro* 10). This ultimate goal of the Harlem Renaissance seems to be inclusive of all African-Americans. However, Locke’s view on culture and music in particular influenced the practical implementation of these goals.

This paper examines how Langston Hughes helped to create and foster this new vision of the African American. Through his poems and other writings, he helped America and the wider world see the authentic and strong voice of black men and women. In doing so, he helped forge a new identity for an oppressed people.

James Langston Mercer Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, the second child of Carrie Mercer and James Hughes. While still a baby, his parents divorced, and for the first thirteen years of his life, his maternal grandmother raised him in Lawrence, Kansas. Soon after, he moved to Lincoln, Illinois to live with his mother who had remarried. His mother was bitter about the failure of her first marriage and the difficult financial circumstances in which it caused. Sometimes she would turn

her anger on young Langston, telling him that he was just like his father, whom she described as “a devil on wheels” and “as mean and evil a Negro as ever lived” (BS 36).

His family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, where he started high school. By that time, he started writing and began developing the voice that made him famous. Hughes graduated from high school in 1920 and spent the following year with his father in Mexico. Hughes’ experience with poor African Americans in Midwestern states developed in him compassion for their plight and particularly an appreciation for the struggle that black women endured. During this time, his poem, “The Negro Speak of Rivers,” was published in 1921 in *Crisis* magazine. Also, in 1921, Hughes traveled back to the United States and enrolled at Columbia University. During this time, he became a major leader in the Harlem Renaissance in New York City. There was an explosion of African-American poets and writers during the 1920s and 1930s, and Hughes was quickly at the forefront. Jazz was also a marker of Harlem and an inspiration to Hughes. His poems focused on the lives of the black community, highlighting the unique challenges they faced in America at the time through Jazz music. Arguably, his two most famous poems at the time were “Harlem,” also known as “Dream Deferred,” and “I, Too, Sing America.”

In 1924, while working as a busboy in a hotel restaurant in Washington, DC, Hughes met the famous American poet, Vachel Lindsay. Hughes shared some of his poems with Lindsay who was immediately impressed. Lindsay used his connections to promote Hughes’ poetry and ultimately helped bring it to a wider audience. Hughes’ poem, “The Weary Blues,” won first prize in the *Opportunity* magazine literary

competition in 1925. At this time, Hughes received a scholarship from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.

While studying at Lincoln, Hughes' first book, *The Weary Blues*, was published by Knopf in 1926. This book was a success and established Hughes' commitment to African Americans and his poetic style. Hughes was among the first writers to use jazz rhythms and local dialect to depict the life of urban blacks in his work. The novel, *Not Without Laughter*, was published in 1929 after Hughes graduated from Lincoln. "Let America Be America Again" was published in 1936 in *Esquire*. Later, Hughes would republish "Let America Be America Again" in a small anthology of poems called *A New Song*.

Hughes published other works during the 1950s and 1960s, including several books in his "Simple" series. These include the English translations of the poetry of Federico Garcia Lorca and Gabriela Mistral, as well as an anthology of his own poetry, and the second installment of his autobiography, *Wonder as I Wander*. On May 22, 1967, Hughes died from complications of prostate cancer.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jean Wagner stated that Hughes' poetry perceives and defines an African-American on account of "his African origins, his history, and his particular contribution to the civilizations which he had already established" (395). Wagner further pointed out that Hughes could also be considered as a modern poet who gave importance to all people suffering an affront in American society. His poem mainly focused on his ethnicity; he spoke more about his people, of the people, and for his people (395). Hughes took pride in being an Africa American .This made him a writer of negritude. Hughes' poetry was sharp in the main period of his insightfulness; however his voice was stifled as different concerns overwhelmed his imaginative yield in numerous forms. Gwendolyn Brooks said the following:

[Hughes] is a noble artist, a productive writer, and a brave dramatist and his works and deeds are entrenched in sympathy. Regardless of whether it was 'creatively right' or not, his purpose of takeoff was a reasonable pride in his race. His race pride might be art, workmanship, or a music that consolidates the best of jazz and songs. (11)

Stanley Williams, the artistic director of the Lorraine Hansberry Theatre, believed, "Hughes was nondiscriminatory, keen and determined in his work. He further argued that Hughes took time to listen to all people in jazz clubs, juke joints, bars, and

streets from the dimension of the world, and not only on the American perspective” (180). Playwright and director Charles Randolph-Wright believed Hughes to be an influence; he adored Hughes’ work and believed it to be the driving force towards awakening today’s black writers.

Kirszner and Mandell argued, “Langston Hughes has remained one of the poets most celebrated in the world and his poems are still being taught from elementary level to universities” (504). Hughes wrote during the Harlem Renaissance, the era of creativity and innovation in the black community that was full of great upheavals. Hughes’ poems stated clearly the needs of the people and the areas they needed to work for the betterment of their life. More than a poet being an American, he was fully aware the problems faced by African Americans.

This is a clear indication of universal resonance of Hughes’ work and shows how far the American would go in order to make the American Dream come true. Raymond Smith commented on Langston Hughes and argued that Hughes’ poetry covered the themes that touched on the American dream and the possibilities that accompanied it. Tension existed between the unachieved dream and realities of the African-American’s experience in the United States and this provided for the dynamic. The tension that existed between the theme and material provided the framework for irony and this characterized Hughes’ poems (370).

Donald B. Gibson noted the following in the introduction to *Modern Black Poets: A Collection of Critical Essays*:

Hughes has possibly the best reputation (around the world) that any black author has ever had. Hughes varied from the vast majority of his ancestors among black

poets, and from the individuals who tailed him too, in that he tended to his poetry to the general population, particularly to black individuals. During the twenties when most American artists were turning secret and writing vague mysterious poetry to a consistently diminishing group of onlookers of per users, Hughes was turning outward, utilizing language and topics, states of mind and thoughts natural to any individual who had the capacity essentially to peruse. Until the time of his passing, he spread his message entertainingly—however in every case truly—to gatherings of people all through the nation, having perused his poetry to more individuals than some other American writer. (66)

Langston Hughes is the most celebrated and acclaimed creator in African-American artistic corpus for his intense perception of the life of his community. His poetry is one of the touchstones of American civilization in its creativity, feeling, and open obligation to social change. Hughes is considered one of the most famous poets in America who talked about black people and their lives.

According to Wallace, Hughes is among the most honored names in the twenty-first century in both African-American and American poetry. His poetry was central to the cultural movement of Harlem Renaissance that started in 1919 and led to the emergence of new artistic and poetic talents in the black community (195). Although Hughes' work is widely read, his work has also been criticized because "His dedication to promoting the blues as a poetic form, for instance, displeased any African Americans who considered the blues an expression of the most low-down and least flattering segment of the race" (Wallace 195).

Wallace further noted that due to an anti-Christian propaganda misinterpretation of Hughes poetry, Hughes was forced to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Investigation and was later charged for communist sympathizing and anti-American activity.

Hughes understood the negative perception of his poems. In 1959 when his work was published, all of his problematic political poems were omitted. It was Hughes' faith in mankind and his expectation for a world in which individuals could live rationally and respectfully that prompted the decline in popularity in the racially confused last period of his life. Laurence Lieberman perceived that Hughes' sensibility kept pace with the times, "but he condemned his absence of an individual political stance" (941).

On the other hand, Hughes, more than other black poets or authors, recorded realistically the nuances of black life and its dissatisfactions. Although he constantly found himself in trouble with both whites and blacks, he was seen as among the first African Americans who earned a living from public lectures and writing, primarily because of the phenomenal love and acceptance he received from the majority of black people. Best said, "Hughes took the initiative of 'working out' the salvation notion in his poetic work" (432). Best also asserted that during Hughes' career, Hughes took time to write in various literary genres such as social commentary, librettos, short stories, poetry, plays, and children's books. Most of this writing had some aspect of the religious material (432). Hughes collaborated with other composers who had composed works that were overtly theological and thoroughly religious. His collaboration extended to Jan Meyerowitz from Germany where he requested him to become a librettist of his operatic writing.

Additionally, Hughes collaborated with other American composers such as William Schumer and Margaret Bonds and wrote librettos based on religious themes. According to Best, Hughes wrote eight religious poems that focused primary African-American church cultures, religious institutions in America, liturgical practices and Christian theology (63-72). Hughes' religious poems employed imagery and religious language. For example, in his poem "Good bye Christ," Hughes concluded the poem by expressing that the world is mine from now and no one can sell me to a lord. He called the world to have a more communistic approach. Hughes depicted his dissatisfaction with the abuse of religion and consent of communism in a questionable and confusing way that could be misinterpreted as a negation of Christianity (252-253).

Most of the activists, intellectuals, and prominent writers of Hughes' day were considered outspoken agnostics or atheists and had a complicated relationship with church and religion. These individuals included James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston, and Philip Randolph. In order to distance himself from the perception of atheism and being anti-religious, he wrote a statement on personal religion beliefs, but this did not save him from the allegations of being an atheist; instead, it fuelled the issue. Some of the poems that made people question his faith in the 1930s included the poems "Goodbye Christ" and "Christ in Alabama" (160-161).

Many people thought the poems meant that Hughes dismissed the existence of Christ, and they charged him with lack of patriotism, being anti-Christ, anti-religious, and communist. Hughes composed a poem titled "Personal" and published it in 1933; the poem was written after officials from the YMCA canceled a program that was sponsored by a civic league from Los Angeles because he was featured in it.

The poem titled “Personal” is considered as unique among the work of Hughes. Mary Beth Culp argued that it was the only poem where Hughes revealed his religion using his own voice and not the persona of other people (240). In many cases, Hughes and other 20th century African-American writers were not speaking in their own voices when composing religious poetry, and they used poetry to speak collectively on behalf of the black people.

Despite Hughes having been proficient in different literary genres, he primarily considered himself a poet because poetry was his passion. He suggested to Vachel Lindsay that he wanted to draft poetry for the “beautiful thing that it is” (Best 435). Best constantly argued that that poetry was beautiful and that it measured the articulation of life, and he composed poems because he liked it. Hughes developed the philosophy of poetry that suggests that words are an equivalent of a paper and the string that is used to wrap the experience of the poet; he described the philosophy in a magazine titled “A Note on Poetry.” Hughes maintained that poetry is personal and though poems vary in quality, they reveal interior to the world and exterior to the writer’s experience (435). Hughes is seen as a social poet, and his primary motive was to depict the lives and conditions of ordinary people.

Hughes performed various odd jobs before taking a job on a ship where he worked as a crew member of the “S.S. Malone” in 1923. He quit the crewman job for a short time. In Paris, he met Maria in 1923 though he never married her. He also worked as a personal assistant for a historian G. Woodson when he left Paris for Washington, DC to spend time with his mother. This work left him no time to make his art; he quit that job and found another job as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel.

Sears argued that many scholars believe Hughes was homosexual because he used homosexual codes in his poems (35). Rampersad noted that Hughes expressed his attraction to men but denied his homosexuality in the biography by concluding that he was only showing love and respect to men and women of his color (203). Other allegations of homosexuality were expressed by academics who claimed there was a collection of unpublished Hughes poems possessed by a black man alleged to be Hughes' gay lover. Fuller argued that Langston Hughes decided to associate himself with other blacks when he was composing his work, because he found more truth and thoughtful significance in doing it (348). According to Gale, the "Theme for English B" came into the existence in the later years of Hughes' career, and it complicated and re-enacted the poetic rhythms and ideas that were his main concern (125). The theme contributed to the collection of black voices which could exist in isolation. The theme had a dramatic monologue style and used a supposedly simplistic rhyme that was famous to Hughes. By using the "Theme for English B," Hughes intended to leave his readers confused about what divided and distinguished the young African-American student from his or her white professor who is socially established. Gale further argued that Hughes tried to blend different forms of black cultural expression, and he pioneered the blues tunes and jazz inscription in written form which paved the way for other future poets to include their own poems the spoken folk vernacular (125). Some contemporary critics dismiss Hughes' work as naïve or simplistic, but he has occupied a position as one of the most renowned poets in the history of America in the 20th century.

The title “Fine Clothes to the Jew” was widely criticized by the black press because it depicted Harlemites who pawned their clothes to Jewish owned pawn shops. Lindsay Patterson, Hughes’ assistant and a novelist, studied Hughes’ work and the subsequent criticism (Best 435). Those critics ranged from ignorance from white critics to grudges held by his fellow Negroes who were not pleased by his poetic achievements. Patterson believed Hughes’ art would gain the recognition it deserved.

Hughes’ grandmother was the most influential person in his life. She was the first black woman to attend college in Ohio and a widow of an abolitionist. She associated her storytelling through tales of heroism slavery family heritage. Anderson stated that Hughes was impressed by rented her living space and used all the money to make sure he was well fed and clothed. These hardships were the factors that made him venture into books (23). Hughes found a place where, unlike his suffering, people suffered in beautiful words of books. “Aunt Sue’s Stories,” one of Hughes earliest published art piece is believed to be a dedication to his grandmother Mary Langston, a proud and strong woman who shaped who he became.

Hughes’ work received criticism from the black intellectuals for its ugly depiction of blacks. Because Hughes celebrated the “common” man, many black intellectuals were dismayed. They argued that only the positive side of black life should be depicted, images that reflected successful blacks who imitated whites in their beliefs and behaviors. *Fine Clothes to the Jew* was well received by literary magazines and the white press, but African-American critics did not like it at all. The *Pittsburg Courier* ran the big headline, *LANGSTON HUGHES’ BOOK OF POEMS TRASH*; the headline in the *New York Amsterdam News* was *LANGSTON HUGHES-THE SEWER DWELLER*” (Anderson 23).

Some people referred to his work as a return to the uncivilized way; others believed it was a disgrace to Negroes. Some blacks said his book was only showing the bad side and the weaknesses of the Negroes to the whites. Although Langston Hughes had his detractors, he was also loved and celebrated as a poet and author, both during his lifetime and decades latter.

Ntozake Shange, a poet and playwright, acknowledged Hughes as her inspiration. She was inspired from a very young age by the words of Langston Hughes. Those words, made her love the language that sometimes reminded her of the suffering of her ancestors. According to Shange, Hughes wrote beautiful poetry that highlighted the beauty and strengths of a black woman (87). Many artists from the African-American community have agreed with Shange. Long after his death, Hughes is still adored and recognized as an important writer in the early years as an essayist, a writer of short stories, and a poet.

Shange noted the dignity and the respect Hughes had for everyone. She observed how Hughes treated black working people with respect. Hughes provided her with laughter and joy in language (87). Hughes composed poems about rent parties his poems read like blues off the page. Shange believed Hughes was an excellent example of an artist. It is the responsibility of today's artists to make ensure Hughes' legacy. Hughes wrote different poems to express his views.

CHAPTER III

POEMS

“Mother to Son”

Langston Hughes was a renowned poet and activist in the twentieth century. One of the most emergent themes in his work was advocacy for and strength of black people. In the poem, “Mother to Son,” the narrator uses the power of a mother’s voice to depict her strength, struggle, and influence as a black woman.

The poem is narrated by the persona of a mother to her son. The mother attempts to advise her son on how to handle life’s obstacles based on her own personal experiences in life. The concept of power is apparent in the entire poem. While she does not have the power to change her significantly poor financial situation, she channels her limited power into her conviction and self-assuredness. She does not depict herself as a victim of life’s circumstances; rather she speaks to her son about her triumphs despite the difficulties that she endured: “Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair; it’s had tacks in it; and splinters; and board torn up; and places with no carpet on the floor-bare; but all the time; I’ve been a-climbin’ on” (Hughes 2-8). The tone and words of the narrator depict power and triumph as opposed to incapacity and defeat. Most significant, the poem evidences Hughes’ perception of black women. He believes them to be a powerful force to be reckoned with.

The woman in the poem is depicted as strong and capable of overcoming life's obstacles. It is clearly the poet's intention to illustrate that black women have inconceivable strength that allows them to succeed in life or, at least, to remain resilient. The poem's narrator reflects resilience that has allowed her to rebuild her life whenever she encounters a setback: "But all the time/ I'se been a-climbin' on/ and reachin' landin's/ and turnin' corners and sometimes goin' in the dark/ where there ain't been no light" (8-13). She narrates her resiliency and tenacity. Through this, it is evident that the poet considers black women to be strong and resilient. The poet uses metaphors to illustrate the strength and resilience of the woman in the poem. For instance, he uses the metaphor of stairs with no tacks in it to signify good and bad times in the narrator's life.

Moreover, struggle is predominant in the poem. The poem's narrator reflects on her life's struggles: "Well, son, I'll tell you/ life for me ain't been no crystal stair" (1-2). Expressing the theme of the poem, these lines reveal the daily struggles of the mother as she seeks to inspire her son: "It had tacks in in/ and splinters/ and boards torn u/ and places with no carpet on the floor-bare" (3-6), the mother never gives up.

The poem also evidences the mother's inference. The mother speaks, and her son listens. The poet clearly believes that a black woman's voice should be heard. The narrator speaks with conviction in an attempt to influence her son to be as strong and resilient as she was despite the challenges that he may encounter in life. Her voice is compelling and influential. She uses short sentences to make her point effectively. After narrating her own life story, she attempts to influence her son to follow a similar path: "So boy, don't you turn back/don't you set down on the steps/cause you find it's kinder hard/don't you fall now; for I'se still goin' honey/ I'se still climbin'" (14-19).

The poem “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes portrays his perspective of black women. He considered them to be women of strength, resilience, and power. The woman in the poem uses her voice to tell of the struggles that she endured and as a testimony to encourage her son to overcome them. The poem shows that the voices of black women are powerful and influential.

“Widow Woman”

Among the numerous poems that were written by Langston Hughes is “Widow Woman.” “Widow Woman” is a ballad that tells the story of a woman who has just lost her husband. In the poem, the woman proclaims her sorrow over losing her husband and swears that she will never take another lover or stop mourning the death of her husband. Several elements about black men and women emerge in this poem. Marriage is a rite of passage for most cultures in the world. However, there are often profound things that occur in a marriage between two people that remain concealed from the outside world. In the poem “Widow Woman,” the narrator uses the power of her voice to highlight some of the more profound aspects of marriage.

One of the main concepts that emerge is love. The narrator uses her voice to illustrate the depth of love that she had for her husband. Her words clearly indicate that she was a devoted wife and companion: “If I live to be a thousand /I’ll never dry these tears” (17-18). The woman is so distraught over the loss of her husband that she genuinely mourns him and vows to continue to do so for as long as she lives. The concept of love resonates throughout because Hughes employs exaggeration to highlight the depth of the woman’s love for her husband. For instance, she asserts that she does not

want to be with another man and actually forbids other men from taking an interest in her: "I don't want nobody else and/ don't nobody else want me" (Hughes 19-20).

Additionally, there is melancholy in her voice as she reminisces over her husband's funeral: "When they put you in de ground and/they throw dirt in your face" (Hughes 7-8). Overall, the poet is keen to honor the marital love that the wife had for her husband while he was alive (Hughes and Rampersad 109).

Another theme in the poem is male dominance in the marriage; it is evident that her husband was in control of the household. Moreover, not only was he controlling, but he also exerted his control aggressively enough for it to make a significant impression on her. "You was a mighty lover and you ruled me many years." In fact, the name indicates that her husband's death was the only time that he ever released control and only because he had no choice: "I say put you in de ground and/ throw dirt in your face/that's one time, pretty papa/you'll surely stay in your place" (9-12). It may appear that the poet supports male dominance.

In alignment with the concept of male dominance in marriage is female suppression. As her husband exerted his absolute control over the marriage, the woman was naturally suppressed: "You was a mighty lover and you ruled me many years" (13-14). While she enjoyed her husband's love making, the narrator's use of rule strongly suggests that she resented his ruling. The poem captures both the beauty and the challenges in marriage. The wife loves her husband but resents how he ruled her.

The final concept that emerges in the poem is freedom. Notably, this is a rather controversial or confusing element as it is unexpected. The narrator's voice throughout the poem creates the impression that she was content under the rule of her husband.

Therefore, it is surprising when she mentions, almost shyly based on the small italicized words the possibility of freedom: “Yet you never can tell when a woman like me is free!” (23-24). This statement shows a different side to the woman in the poem, and gives the impression that finally she has a voice and is able to use it to advocate for herself, a freedom that she acquired only after her husband’s death. While she mourns his death, she also nurtures the forbidden thought that maybe, with his death, she may finally be free. The statement prompts the reader to reexamine the entire poem from an entirely different perspective. For instance, one of the most immediate questions is whether the reason she declares that she will never want another man and forbids other men from wanting her is that she does not want to compromise her new-found freedom by submitting to another man’s rule.

“Widow Woman” is one of the most interesting poems by Langston Hughes. It reflects the dimensions of marriage between man and woman. The elements that arise are love, male dominance, female suppression, and the desire for freedom. Ultimately, the poet illustrates that marriage can have both positive and negative aspects.

“Mama and Daughter”

“Mama and Daughter” by Langston Hughes highlights the conversation between a black mother and her adolescent daughter who is experiencing love for what is most likely her first time. In the conversation between the mother and her daughter, there is a misalignment of ideas, but there is also a sense of shared experiences. In the poem, the mother uses her voice to influence and advise her young daughter on young love based on her own personal experience.

The poem combines the concept of youth and love. The daughter tells her mother excitedly that she would like her to brush off her coat so she can go down the street to see the man she loves: “Mama, please brush off my coat/I’m going down the street/where’s you going, daughter? To see my sugar-sweet” (1-4). The poet draws a connection between youth and love and hence the concept of young love. Her mother is able to understand the fascination and intrigue of young love without sharing in it herself because she has an undesirable experience of the same. The tone that the poet uses in this poem illustrates the message that love may be a phenomenon that can only be enjoyed fully by people who are young and ignorant. With experience comes the understanding that love may not be as vibrant as young people perceive it to be; rather it is also characterized by tumultuous experiences. The poem addresses a major aspect of the society. Young people in all cultures tend to romanticize the notion of love without necessarily understanding the need to endure difficult times. The poet creates a distinction between the daughter’s ignorance and the mother’s experience in the manner of a cautionary tale.

The concept of abandonment in love is also predominant in the poem. The mother attempts to influence her daughter by narrating her own encounter with the daughters’ father. When the daughter describes her feelings of love for her beloved, her mother responds to this with cynicism: “Daughter, once upon a time/let me brush the hem/ your, father, yes he was the one! I felt like that about him/But many a long year ago/he up and went his way-“(9-14). The theme of men’s abandonment of women highlights a common problem in the society where single mothers are prevalent. Unfortunately, many men abandon their families. Hughes used this poem to address this societal problem. The

mother uses her voice to express her feelings about such abandonment by her beloved. As evidenced by her tone, the experience has borne resentment and bitterness in her, which she may inadvertently project onto her daughter: “I hope that wild young son-of-a-gun, rots in hell today” (15-16).

Moreover, the poet demonstrates the nature of the relationship between the mother and her daughter (Bloom 78). The two have such an open relationship that makes it possible for the mother to influence her daughter and for the daughter to discuss delicate matters with her mother. This is evident in the fact that the daughter holds no reservations about telling her mother about her beloved. Rather than attempt to meet the young man in secret as is typical of most young people, the daughter openly tells her mother where she is going and even asks her to help her look presentable for him: “He is that young man, mama; I can’t get off my mind” (7-8). The kind of relationship that exists between the mother and her daughter makes it possible for the mother to narrate tales of her own experience as a young woman. The poet’s tone is clearly encouraging of this openness as is evident in the agreeableness that exists in the entire conversation.

Additionally, the mother in the poem uses her voice not only to express herself but to caution her daughter indirectly. Through this, the poet attempts to illustrate how the power of a black woman’s voice can be used to exert influence in the lives of her children. The mother does not attempt to censure her child for having a lover, nor does she restrict her from going to see him. On the contrary, she actually helps her to get prepared to meet him while simultaneously insinuating that she needs to be more cautious as a young woman in love. Her approach to counseling is commendable as she justifies her position with a tale of her own experience with her daughter’s father. She repeats to

her daughter that her father was also young when he abandoned her: “He was young yesterday” (Hughes18).

“Mother and Daughter” focuses on the relationship between a mother and her daughter. Hughes attempts to illustrate that the type of relationship that a mother creates with her daughter will determine the level of influence that she has on her life. The mother is able to express herself on the themes of young love and abandonment while influencing her young daughter to exert caution in matters of love.

“Only Woman Blues”

“Only Woman Blues” is one of the “Blues” poems written by Langston Hughes. It tells the story of a black woman with whom a black man was wholly besotted. Notably, this is despite the fact that the woman often mistreated him. The narrator of the poem is a black man, and he narrates how he was unable to resist her allure although she was toxic for him. The central theme of this poem is the power dynamic that exists in a romantic relationship between woman and man who is unaccustomed to such mistreatment from a woman. The poem, “Only Woman” Blues, highlights the power dynamics that can exist between man and woman in a romantic relationship.

A predominant theme that emerges in this poem is the power that a woman can wield over a man in a romantic relationship. This is such a fascinating element of the poem, the society, at the time, was extremely male-dominated; however, the narrator simply cannot believe that he is in love with a woman who has found a way to make him the submissive party in the relationship: “She could make me holler like a sissie/bark like a dog” (7-8). The narrator’s tone is so disbelieving of his situation that it adds to the

humor of the scenario. Another notable factor is that the poet presents this context with a quality of admiration. It prompts the reader to admire the nature of the woman while simultaneously admonishing the toxicity that she adds to her relationship. The poet highlights the power that a black woman can wield if she chooses to exert it.

An additional emergent theme is the power that a black beauty can wield (Kutzinski 56). The woman in the poem is able to get away with mistreating her male partner for so long because she is beautiful. The narrator describes her in a tone filled with adoration and exaltation of her awesome beauty: “She had long black hair/big black eyes/ glory! Hallelujah!/ Forgive them lies!/She’s de onl/woman’s gonna mistreat me” (13-18). Based on this description, it is evident that the poet considers the woman to be very beautiful. The words in the poem almost excuse the woman for her toxicity simply because she possesses tremendous physical beauty: “I want to tell you ‘bout that woman/my used-to-be-/she was de meanest woman/I ever did see/but she’s de only/ woman that could mistreat me” (1-6).

Furthermore, another important concept to note is male dominance or lack thereof. Throughout the poem, it is evident that the woman holds the reins in the relationship. The poet illustrates through the narrator’s words that when a man is stripped of his power in a relationship, he automatically becomes resistant. The narrator cannot abide the fact that the woman holds such power over him. His tone of voice shows that he absolutely abhors his situation. He is unaccustomed to being treated in such a manner in a world where women are often the ones facing such subjugation: “She could make me holler like a sissie/bark like a dog” (7-8). As a result, while he is spellbound by her, he

still vows that he will never allow another woman to take his power away: “She’s de only; woman’s gonna mistreat me” (17-18).

An additional concept that is represented in the poem is the power or willingness to leave a toxic relationship regardless of one’s feelings for another individual. One undisputed factor is that the poet paints the woman in the poem as mean and controlling. Notably, this is ironic in a world where men are often the ones who subjugate women. It takes a long time for the narrator to garner the strength and courage to leave the relationship. When finally the woman decides to leave him, he is content to let her go. Both the man and woman in this poem are able to remove themselves from a situation that is not ideal for either party: “When she left/I said, go, hot damn! You de last and only/woman’s gonna mistreat me” (21-24).

Conclusively, Hughes presents a scenario whereby the woman is dominant and the man is relatively submissive. Although he is not comfortable with her dominance, he is unable unwilling to leave her. He vows not to let another women treat him that way, yet continue to let her.

“The Negro Mother”

“The Negro Mother” is one of the most evocative poems by Langston Hughes. Essentially, it is a poem that is designed and bound to evoke several emotions in black men and women. In the poem, a black woman narrates her experiences with slavery and addresses it to future generations in her lineage. The poem reflects the power of the voices of black women and men. In “The Negro Mother,” the narrator uses her voice to

provide an account of her experience of oppression, her strength, and her resilience as an enslaved person from Africa as well as her hope for freedom for her posterity.

Primarily, the theme of the poem is the enslavement of black men and women. Speaking metaphorically of the experiences of enslaved African, the narrator connects her enslavement with her ancestress: "I am the child they stole from the sand/three hundred years ago in Africa's land" (7-8). The first act of oppression that the narrator suffered was being forcefully taken away from her homeland and plunged into a foreign world where she was forced to be a slave for the White people: "I am the one who labored as a slave/ beaten and mistreated for the work that I gave/children sold away from me, husband sold, too; no safety, no love, no respect was I due" (Hughes 13-16). The woman's voice and words clearly express the cruelty of slavery. It was an institution that separated families wantonly. The power of the narrator's voice is reflected as she expresses fully slavery's horrid oppression in a manner that the reader can understand have empathy.

An additional concept is the slavery the resilience black people. Prior to slavery, black people lived as free men and women. The transition from such absolute freedom to slavery is bound to break anyone's spirit. However, Hughes gives the narrator a voice and allows her to show her strength and resilience as she did not allow her spirit to crumble under the cruelty of slavery. The narrator says, "I am the dark girl who crossed the wide sea/ carrying in my body the seed of the free" (9-10). This statement clearly shows that the woman drew her strength and resilience from her people: "Sometimes, the valley was filled with tears/but I kept trudging on through the lonely years/sometimes, the road was

hot with sun; but I had to keep on till my work was on; I had to keep on! No stopping for me” (25-29).

Hope is also a major concept in the poem (Hughes and Rampersad 23). It forms the core of the narrator’s narration and directs her tone throughout the poem. The tone of the poem is not forlorn even when the woman narrates her oppression. She is quick to redirect back to the hope that she felt during all her years of suffering. Her hope for her children to be free and to lead better lives than she did; “But God put a song and a prayer in my mouth/ God put a dream like steel in my soul” (18-19). Even in her hard times, the woman had hope in her heart that someday things would change for the better: “I nourished the dream that nothing could smother” (31).

Freedom is a prominent theme throughout the poem. When people are enslaved, all they can hope for is freedom. This rings true for the narrator. She hopes for freedom, not for herself, but for her people, someday: “Stand like free men supporting my trust/ believe in the right, let none push you back” (42-43). The narrator uses the power of her voice to express her desire for freedom. In many ways, her statements inspire conflicting emotions in the reader, whereas one is encouraged by the narrator’s hope for freedom for future generations of black men and women; one also has to recognize the melancholy of such a situation as the narrator has resigned herself to spending her life as a slave with no hope of freedom for herself.

One of the most prevalent concepts is posterity: “Now through my children, young and free/I realize the blessings denied to me” (21-22). The woman uses her voice to remind her descendants of their powerful heritage in order to equip them with the will to survival that is born of years of strength and endurance of their ancestors: “For I will

be with you till no white brother /dares keep down the children of the Negro mother” (51-52). This is one of the most powerful endings of any of Hughes’ poems.

“The Negro Mother,” is a powerful poem that addresses a dreadful subject of slavery. The narrator, an enslaved woman, addresses her words to her descendants, urging them to remember their history and draw strength from it. Her hope is that her children will find freedom and never lose it again in future.

“Madam’s Past History”

“Madam’s Past History” narrates the story of Alberta K. Johnson, who refers to herself as Madam. She narrates her economic struggles during the depression. Based on the words and tone of the poem, the poet clearly has considerable reverence for Madam Alberta K. In “Madam’s Past History,” the narrator uses her power of voice to highlight how she endure and overcomes her struggles during the depression as a black businesswoman.

Economic struggles during the depression were rampant. Many people suffered greatly in the twentieth century as a result. The narrator uses her voice to tell of her own struggles as black businesswoman in the era of the depression. Prior to the depression, she owned a hair-dressing parlor. However, the depression had a severe impact on her business: “I had a/hair-dressing parlour/before; the depression put /the prices lower” (Hughes 5-9). As black woman during that period, she lost her business as the poor state of the economy made it unsustainable. This was her first economic struggle. Thereafter, she started another business, a barbecue stand. However, this too was lost. “Then I had/ barbecue stand/till I got mixed up/with a no-good man” (10-13). The poet narrates

Madam's economic struggles in a flat and emotionless tone; it is simply a statement of facts for a black woman during the depression in the twentieth century.

Amidst all the struggles that Madam experienced as a businesswoman, her endurance and resilience are evident in her voice and manner of speaking. The narrator demonstrates that she is a resilient person who has endured great hardship as a black woman and as a businesswoman. Notably, while she narrates her story, the depression is still ongoing, and she is still trying to survive it in the best possible way. Her voice is strong and evokes a feeling of admiration and puzzlement in the reader. The narrator seems undeterred by all her failed attempts to get back on her feet even while the depression is underway. She makes attempts repeatedly to find a way out and even seems confident that she will survive the daunting times. The poet depicts her persona as stoic and undaunted: "I said/don't worry 'bout me/just like the song/You WPA folks take care of yourself /and I'll get along" (19-23).

Through the poem, the poet highlights the relationship between the system and a black businesswoman. Madam is a black businesswoman who had endured some difficult times due to the depression. After numerous attempts to restore her business and her former economic status to one that is sustainable, she resorts to seek out the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Notably, the WPA was established by President Roosevelt's administration as part of relief programs to help people during the Great Depression (Opdycke 98). Basically, the WPA was meant to help people who were struggling and required assistance during the tumultuous economic period. As depicted in the poem, however, the system was not as kind to a black woman during that time period. When Madam asks the WPA for assistance, it declines to help her because she had

insurance: “Cause I had a insurance; the WPA; said, we can’t use you; wealthy that way” (15-18). Despite the fact that Alberta is clearly struggling to make ends meet, the WPA refuses to help her simply because having insurance during the depression was considered a sign of wealth or, at least, sustainability. They failed to consider the fact that two of her businesses had collapsed due to the Great Depression. In this manner, the poet attempts to illustrate that the system tends to be inconsiderate of a black woman’s needs.

Additionally, the self-respect and pride mark the undertone of the entire poem. Alberta begins by introducing herself as Madam. To her, Madam is a symbol of respect and success. She has lost her businesses, but she still considers herself to be a respectable businesswoman: “The Madam stands for business; I’m smart that way” (3-4). Evidently, Alberta holds herself in high regard. She is a black woman who has managed to acquire a certain status in society and is determined to retain it despite the difficult financial times. In fact, the depression has lessened her financial capacity to a point whereby she no longer has a sustainable business to her name. However, she perceives herself with self-respect and refuses to be addressed otherwise: “I do cooking/ day’s work, too/ Alberta K. Johnson/ Madam to you” (24-27). She now cooks and works regular day jobs and still insists that she should be called *Madam*. Alberta is a proud woman who knows that her hard times will not last and that she will find a way to reassume her previous status as a successful businesswoman.

“Madam’s Past History” is a poem about a struggling black businesswoman during the Great Depression. Despite her dire circumstances, the woman uses the power of her voice to speak with dignity and pride. Her insistence on referring to herself as *Madam* is a symbol of her own self-perception as a capable woman.

“Workin’ Man”

“Workin’ Man” depicts the story of a black working man who is very unhappy with the circumstances of his life. The man believes himself to be hard working as he works all day doing hard labor. However, his situation at home is entirely displeasing as his wife does not treat him with the love and care that he believes he deserves. In “Workin’ Man,” the narrator uses the power of his voice to express his dissatisfaction and discontentment with his wife, his work, and his life in general.

The narrator in the poem expresses his dissatisfaction with his life. The tone of voice that the narrator uses is melancholic and depressing. He is clearly unhappy in a general sense. Based on his words, everything in his life is unpleasant, and he finds no solace in any aspect of it: “I work all day/wid a pick an’ a shovel. comes home at night/it ain’t nothing but a hovel” (1-4). The narrator spends his entire day doing manual labor, which is demanding and tiresome, and hence, unpleasant. Later, he spends his nights in a hovel, a small, dirty, squalid place. Basically, the narrator’s days and nights are filled with displeasure. He has nothing to look forward to either at work or at home. Through his words, his dissatisfaction and discontentment with his life are apparent. In this context, the poet uses the narrator to illustrate the life of a typical working black man. The poet is obviously displeased with the fact that the man’s home is in such disarray and considers it unjust that after doing hard labor all day, he cannot find solace at the end of his day (Wallace 111).

Additionally, the voice of his wife is the biggest disappointment of his life. He uses such colorful language to describe her to the audience. His tone of voice is filled

with disgust and disappointment for the woman he married. It is evident through his words that he blames her for the fact that he is discontented with his life: “I calls for ma woman/when I opens de door/she’s out in de street,/ain’t nothin’ but a ‘hore” (Hughes 5-8). The narrator has a clear idea of what a wife should be and considers his wife to be a complete failure. His words indicate that she may be a promiscuous woman who would rather spend time with other men than with her own husband. The man in this poem believes that when he returns home from a hard day at work, his wife should be in the house waiting for him: “I does her good/an’ I treats her fine/but she don’t gimme lovin’/cause she ain’t de right kind” (9-12). His tone is filled with bitterness in this context. He believes that he fulfills his obligations to her as her husband and cannot seem to understand why she refuses to love him in return. He later resigns to the notion that he selected the wrong woman for a wife. Based on the tone of the poem, the narrator’s greatest sadness is reflected when he talks about his wife. This shows that the poet’s notion of marriage is that it should provide solace from the hardships of life. It prompts the reader to contemplate whether the narrator would be happier with his life if only his wife were more loving.

The final source of discontentment and dissatisfaction in the narrator’s life is his work. The man in the poem paints an undesirable picture whereby he works all day “wid a pick an’ a shovel” (2). This is a highly objectionable job. In fact, by normal standards, it is the kind of job that one would do only if there was no other alternative. Through this, it is evident that the man in this poem lives in abject poverty: “I’m a hard workin’ man/an’ I sho pays double /cause I tries to be good/an’ gits nothin’ but trouble” (13-16). The narrator’s words express his perception of work whereby he believes that the harder one

works the more one should be rewarded. However, his distaste comes from the fact that no matter how hard he works, he ends up in worse conditions than before. He says that no matter how good he tries to be, he is often rewarded with trouble when he expects his rewards to be just as good. Through this, it is evident that the narrator finds his work inadequate and unsuited for him as it does not reward him as well as he feels he deserves to be rewarded.

“Workin’ Man” is one of the poems by Hughes that expresses utter desolation. The narrator’s voice depicts the hopelessness that he feels. Through his words, his discontentment and dissatisfaction with his life and life choices manifest clearly.

“Ballad of Sam Solomon”

“Ballad of Sam Solomon” is a poem about suffrage. Essentially, the poem narrates the story of a black man who actively fought for his right to cast a vote on Election Day. In the poem, Sam Solomon faces opposition from his white counterparts who forbid him to vote. Nevertheless, he rallies other black men and proceeds to vote on the due date. Numerous themes emerge in the poem with regards to Hughes’ attempt to depict the power of a united Black community. In the “Ballad of Sam Solomon,” a black man uses his voice to campaign for his right to vote and mobilizes his fellow black men and women to participate in the election process.

The central theme of the poem is suffrage, the right to vote in a political election. In the poem, the right to vote is associated with a form of empowerment whereby the black community seeks it and the white community strives to prevent them from acquiring it. Sam Solomon is the most outstanding character in the poem because his

persistence in pursuing such empowerment. He believes in his right to vote and refuses to be deterred from participating in the political elections: “Sam said, It’s time to go/ to the polls election day/and make your choice known/cause the vote is not restricted/ to white folks alone” (8-12). Sam Solomon, despite being black, feels entitled to the same form of empowerment that his white counterparts enjoy as a result of voting. The power of a black man’s voice manifests strongly in this poem as voting in a political election is a way of speaking up. The ability to choose one’s leaders empowers a person and gives them a voice.

An additional is black suppression. Throughout the narrative, it is evident that the black minority is suppressed in the given context (De Santis107). Despite the fact that blacks are all free people, they are afraid to cast their votes in a political election. The poet references the Ku Klux Klan, a longstanding group that has advocated for white supremacy since its conception. When Sam Solomon makes his intentions to vote in the elections known, he faces opposition and is threatened with retribution from the Klan: “The crackers said, Sam/if you carry this through/ain’t no telling what; we’ll do to you” (Hughes 25-28). Sam Solomon takes a stand and is determined to reclaim participate in the elections. He uses his voice to quell the threats. Additionally, Sam reflects back to a time period when black people were not allowed to vote; “The fact we never voted/in the past/is something that surely/ain’t due to last” (13-16).

The concepts of courage and resilience manifest in the voice and nature of Sam Solomon. The poet depicts Sam Solomon as a black man who is no longer content being a second-class citizen in his own country. Through this, Sam Solomon represents all the black people who had been denied their rights and forced to live in oppression. They

were determined to reclaim their power and have a voice in the elections. Sam shows courage and resilience when he mobilizes his fellow black people who were too afraid to vote: “Negroes never voted/Sam said, it’s time to go/ to the polls election day/and make your choice known” (7-10). Sam Solomon is an outstanding black man who has found his voice amidst all the obstacles. He uses his voice to help his community to find their own as well: “They called out the Klan/they had a parade/but Sam Solomon was not afraid/on Election Day/he led his colored delegation/ to take their rightful part/in the voting of a nation” (41-48).

Democracy and freedom also emerge in the poem. Democracy and freedom are two concepts that are aligned. Elections represent democracy. Through democracy, every citizen is given a voice. The poet attempts to empower the black community to exercise its democratic right by voting on Election Day. Hughes uses this poem to remind the black community that they are people, too, and hence deserve to elect their leaders. Sam Solomon is the vessel that Hughes opts to use to illustrate this message. Sam reminds the black people that they are free now, and it is time to act like free men by partaking in the elections: “Sam Solomon said/go get out your Klan/but you must’ve forgotten/a Negro is a MAN” (53-56).

The “Ballad of Sam Solomon” is Hughes’ way of empowering the black community. Sam Solomon urges his fellow black men to vote on Election Day despite the obstacles that they encounter from their white counterparts. He reminds them that they have a voice, and that they should use it to elect a leader.

“Man”

“Man” is a short poem by Langston Hughes. The narrator is a young black man who is learning to perceive life as a young adult as opposed to a young boy. Through the narrator’s voice, his journey from boyhood to manhood is depicted, and the various changes that occur in his perception are presented. The narrator uses his voice to illustrate the simplicity of boyhood thinking and the manner in which this is drastically challenged by adulthood.

The concept of idealism arises in the narrator’s voice. The narrator presents the reader with a brief outlook of the notions that he nursed as a child. They were simple and straightforward and depicted an idealistic notion of the world. Through this poem, the poet illustrates that children have tendencies to view the world with clear eyes that are yet to be tainted by certain undesirable life experiences: “I thought that friendship lay/in the grip of hand to hand” (3-4). In these lines, the narrator presents a boy’s understanding of friendship. As an adult, however, one knows that friendship is so much more than “the grip of hand to hand.” There are elements such as loyalty and trust that build up a friendship. Similarly, the narrator also states; “I thought that love must be/ her body close to mine” (5-6). From a realistic perspective, an adult would understand that this is the most simplistic understanding depiction of romantic love. For a romantic relationship to work, it must transcend the physical and incorporate such things as commitment, respect, and honesty. As a boy, however, the narrator states that he did not understand this. He only believed in the simplest manner in which things could exist.

Apart from idealism, the contrast between adulthood and childhood is manifest in the poem. Whereas childhood is characterized by idealism, adulthood depicts realism. As

a young adult, the narrator is forced to challenge all his previously-held notions. Adulthood forces him to question everything that he once believed and to incorporate new meanings to different things. There is a drastic change in the tone between the first stanza and the second stanza of the poem. The first stanza presents the ideas of a child, which are mostly utopian. The second stanza infers that the child has grown up and as a man no longer holds the same beliefs about things such as friendship and love: "But I was a boy then/I didn't understand /the things a young lad/learns so soon /when he's/a man" (10-15). The intention of the poet is to draw a definite line between the things that a boy experiences as a child and the actual realities of what a man goes through. The notions of a child are not founded on real evidence; rather they are based on one's preferences or wishes. However, the ideas that one holds in manhood are born of actual life experience. The narrator says that he soon learnt that he had been wrong when he became a man (Wallace 89). Hughes attempts to illustrate that as a man, one is forced to abandon all childhood notions when faced with evidence of the reality of life.

In all this, the concept of disenchantment arises. There is a definite melancholic and considerably cynical tone throughout the poem. The narrator, being a man, begins by informing the reader that all the idealistic notions that he had as a child were wrong: "I was a boy then/I did not understand" (Hughes 1-2). Thereafter, he presents a utopian perspective of life where everything is simple. Automatically, this prepares the reader or listener for a major disappointment. Moreover, the fact that the narrator constantly repeats the statement that he was a boy and, therefore, did not understand adds more cynicism and melancholy to the poem. As the narrator proceeds to the second stanza whereby he is now an adult, it is evident that his tone is filled with disappointment. A

reader would presume that the narrator would have preferred to continue nurturing his childhood notions if only life had allowed him to do so: “But I was a boy then/I didn’t understand /the things a young lad /learns so soon/when he’s/a man” (10-15). These statements prompt the reader to counteract all the notions that the narrator presents in the first stanza as a child. For instance, that love is more than just having her body close or that friendship is more “the grip of hand to hand.”

Conclusively, Hughes uses the poem to depict the life of a boy as he grows into a man. As a man, a boy is forced to face the harsh realities of life and abandon all idealistic tendencies and notions. According to the poem, whereas life is simple for a young boy, the complexities of life soon manifest as one grows into a man.

“The Black Man Speaks”

“The Black Man Speaks” is one of the most impactful poems by Langston Hughes. It was written to oppose Jim Crow. The narrator in the poem is a black man who is suffering under Jim Crow. The narrator is clearly incredulous as he does not comprehend why the system has to run the way that it does, with him on the losing side. The narrator uses his voice as a black man to speak up against the atrocities of Jim Crow and campaign for a better life for the black community.

Jim Crow is the central theme of the poem. Jim Crow refers to any of the legislations that were enforced between 1877 and the 1950s in support of racial segregation. In the history of America and black Americans, Jim Crow was oppressive to the black community as it meant that black people were only accorded rights and freedoms that would be given to second-rate citizens. The poem is set in a time period

where Jim Crow is still practiced. The narrator is a black man living in this era and hence, endures all the negative aspects of Jim Crow: “Down South you make me ride/in a Jim Crow car/from Los Angeles to London/you spread your color bar” (13-16). This statement illustrates the wide-reaching effect of Jim Crow. It also indicates how divisive Jim Crow was to America as a nation. The narrator uses his voice to condemn Jim Crow. His tone is disapproving and ranges from incredulity to anger to cajoling.

The concept of democracy emerges in the poem; In the poem's first stanza, the narrator expresses his exasperation of the Jim Crow suppression of democracy: “I swear to the Lord/I still can't see/why Democracy means /everybody but me” (1-4). Paints a picture of a community that has been denied their basic human rights although democracy was meant for all Americans, the black Americans were treated like second-rate citizens and denied their rights. The narrator expresses his disbelief and disappointment. He seems to find it difficult to accept the denial of his democratic rights because to him skin color distinction is not a justifiable reason. This reflects the poet's position on the matter. As a black man living in America, Hughes cannot understand why his community was the only one denied their democratic rights despite the fact that they were Americans.

In alignment with democracy, the concept of freedom is one of the most prominent themes in the poem. The narrator mentions freedom on numerous occasions: “I swear to my soul/I can't understand /why Freedom don't apply /to the black man” (5-8). Despite being free, blacks were still being denied certain basic human freedoms. Hughes uses this narrator to express that he simply cannot understand why this was the case: “Is Jim Crow Freedom the best/I can expect from you?” (19-20). In this statement,

the narrator almost angrily asks whether this is the most optimal arrangement that the system can provide a black man living in America. To him, Jim Crow is inhumane and should not be considered as freedom and yet, it is the only kind of freedom that seems to be available for a black man.

Black oppression is a prevalent theme in the poem. The black man in the poem is clearly feeling oppressed by Jim Crow (Hoffman13). As an American, the poet cannot comprehend the basis of such treatment: "I swear, by gum/I really don't know/why in the name of Liberty/you treat me so" (9-12). Ultimately, the narrator attempts to provide a solution to the problem. He voices utter dissatisfaction with the current system and advocates for a better system that would accord freedom and democracy to a black man: "If we're fighting to create/ a free world tomorrow/why not end right now/Old Jim Crow's sorrow?" (25-29). According to the narrator, the first step to resolving the situation would be to end Jim Crow. He associates Jim Crow with sorrow for the black community. Hughes gives the black man in the poem a voice that enables him to challenge an unjust system. The undertone of the poem is that the narrator wants an explanation for the oppression of Jim Crow or an immediate termination of these oppressive laws.

"The Black Man Speaks" was one of Hughes' most aggressive poems. He challenged a system of racial segregation through this poem. The narrator in the poem used the power of his voice to stand up for himself and demand freedom and democracy for his community.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

The poetry of Langston Hughes provides an eloquent expression of the aspirations of African-American women and men. When Hughes wrote his poetry, Jim Crow was the law of the land in the American South, and African Americans faced discrimination in housing and schools in the North. When Hughes wrote his poetry, there were African Americans still alive who had direct experience with slavery. The American South exploited African Americans, enslaving them for over three hundred years. After the Civil War and the end of Reconstruction, African Americans were denied legal equality. Southern states created laws designed to make African Americans second class citizens. African Americans were unable to vote, were forced to use separate facilities, and were denied access to white schools. The goal was to create a racial hierarchy in which whites were superior, and African Americans were inferior. African Americans resisted their marginalization. There were two strategies of resistance. One strategy, advocated by Booker T. Washington, held that African Americans could achieve dignity through becoming economically independent through hard work and entrepreneurship. W.E.B. Dubois believed that African Americans could only achieve their full dignity by fighting for political and cultural equality. Women and men were an integral part of the process of fighting against institutionalized racism in the Deep South. Langston's Hughes's poetry embodies the dignity and independence of spirit of African-American women which

played a large part in the ending of discriminatory practices in the Deep South. History showcases the strength of African-American women which is expressed in the actions of women like Rosa Parks, who fought for equality.

Langston Hughes' poetry details the African-American experience in a discriminatory society and was an essential voice in the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural and artistic movement which enriched American life. Hughes' body of work covers the entire range of the human experience, from every day to the extraordinary, from the details of private life to the political. Hughes believed that the role of the artist was to cover and illuminate every aspect of life. Part of this expansive philosophy towards art included giving a voice to African-American women and men, who experienced both racist and patriarchal oppression.

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